

Relational Ontology, Lesser Evils, and the African Limited God View

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Abstract

Are the existence of God and evil logically compatible? Philosophers have been dwelling on this question since the era of Ancient Greek philosophy. Most responses to this philosophical problem have come from a Western viewpoint. This article aims to answer this question by considering an African cosmological and ethical groundwork. Working conceptually within this cosmology and ethic, we argue that if the evil in the world is understood as a lesser evil, then a good God can plausibly allow evil to happen. This is the case because God preventing evil will lead to a worse state of affairs which will result in a worse world. Allowing a lesser evil is the best possible outcome. We assert that this view offers a better theory than the theodicy defended by some mainstream Western philosophers according to which a greater good is achieved through evil.

1. Introduction

In this article, we articulate and interrogate the limited God view in African philosophy of religion that denies God the omni-properties of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence, in conversation with trends in contemporary Western analytic philosophy of religion. The limited God view has recently gained traction among African philosophers who argue that not only is it the authentic stance of African Traditional Religion (ATR) and traditional African worldview, but it also overcomes the problem of evil that has, for the most part, driven debates in Western philosophy of religion. However, very few works explore the implications of the limited God view for the problem of evil in a cross-cultural context.

In this article, we address this gap in the literature and offer an African-inspired solution to the problem of evil. We contend that the evil that exists in the world is a lesser evil, which is why God is morally justified to allow it. The point is not to find a causal connection between God, interconnectedness, and lesser evils. Rather, we aim to develop a moral account of the world's evils with better moral reasons than its competitors. This view differs from some widely held sentiments in previous work in at least two ways. Firstly, with regard to Western philosophy of religion, previous literature has explained the problem of evil with the assertion that

God is trying to achieve a greater good by permitting evil, whereas we resolve the problem of evil by demonstrating that God is preventing greater evils (Adams and Adams, 1991; Swinburne, 1998; Plantinga, 1974). Secondly, regarding African philosophy of religion, approaches to the problem of evil have noted, generally speaking, that the limited God view cancels out the problem of evil; contrastingly, we think the problem of evil still holds, but we offer a solution grounded on African relational ontology. Our view defends the claim that the evils that now exist are *lesser evils* which God has the power to prevent but does not do so to prevent the actualisation of a worse world. God's choice for a lesser evil is a moral choice that does not reflect his lack of power. More precisely, while God is limited, he is not powerless, and the existence of evil is not due to a lack of ability to address it; instead, it is because addressing it would cause a greater evil, and a lesser evil is preferable to a greater evil. This perspective differs from other limited God views, which argue that good and evil are necessarily metaphysically connected and, therefore, the problem of evil is not an issue for the limited God view; it also differs from views that argue that because God is not perfect, he, just like humans, commits evil as a result of his moral flaws. Additionally, our view differs from these because it grants the limited God more moral duties than other limited God perspectives in the African philosophical literature. That is, other views of the limited God either grant that God has no duties or, compared to our view, consider that God has much more limited duties.

The article is divided into four sections. Section 1 provides a critical exposition of the African limited God view, highlighting the (a) limited moral duties and (b) cosmic versions of the view to assess their plausibility. Section 2 offers a critique of current African limited God views as a solution to the problem of evil. We contend that they are insufficient to resolve the problem of evil. In section 3, we rescue the limited God view and argue that invoking African panentheism supplies a moral framework that strengthens the limited God view and resolves the problem of evil. The section after this, section 4, explains why our view is morally preferable to other theodicies and addresses some possible objections.

2. The Limited God View in African Philosophy of Religion and the Problem of Evil

African conceptions of God are drawn mainly from ATR and linguistic and cultural phenomena like myths, proverbs, wise sayings,

worldviews, and belief systems. ATR is a religious label describing a pattern of African worship practices, beliefs about God, lesser deities, and ancestor veneration. Just as Western philosophers of religion have over the centuries relied on information about God's nature supplied by Christianity to problematise some of the fundamental questions of Western philosophy of religion, so have African philosophers relied on information about God's nature provided by ATR to establish the admittedly still fledgling field of African philosophy of religion. Unlike Christianity, ATR does not have a holy book that explicitly discloses God's nature and his will. Consequently, African philosophers of religion rely on cultural data embedded in myths, indigenous African languages, proverbs, etc., to deduce traditional African views of God and problematise matters arising from these conceptions of God (Gyekye, 1995; Kasomo, 2009).

Unsurprisingly, African philosophers interpret the cultural data on God differently. Nevertheless, the multiple interpretations of God and how he is related to the world (and evil) fall into two broad views or schools of thought: the African theistic view and the limited God view (Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Agada, 2022). The theistic view mostly agrees with the traditional conception of God in Western philosophy of religion that generates the logical and evidential problem of evil. The African theistic view affirms that the problem of evil necessarily arises in the African context because traditional African societies conceive God as a supreme being that possesses the traditional omni-properties, namely, omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, and omnipresence (Idowu, 1973; Gyekye, 1995; Oduwole, 2007).

However, recent scholarship in African philosophy questions the view that the African God possesses the attributes of the Christian God. These philosophers hold that traditional African societies conceive God as a creator-deity that is only powerful and knowledgeable to a degree and is by no means omnipotent and omniscient (Bewaji, 1998; Wiredu, 1998; Fayemi, 2012; Agada, 2022; Attoe, 2022a, 2022b; Chimakonam and Chimakonam, 2023).

Contemporary African philosophers of religion who defend the limited God view offer at least two kinds of arguments regarding the explanation of the problem of evil; these can be classified as (a) the limited moral duties perspective and (b) the cosmic perspective.¹ The two views intersect and are, in many ways, overlapping.

¹ There is also a 'moral relativist view' which denies the existence of evil, but we do not address it here because it differs significantly from the views discussed here.

However, for the purpose of clarifying the moral arguments underlying them, the distinction is useful. According to perspective (a), evil in the world is, for the most part, attributed to human free will – the capacity of human beings to make voluntary choices from a set of options available to them – and also malevolent spiritual entities and forces that manipulate the inherent powers of the universe to cause harm. Majeed (2016, p. 81) has identified the entity *Obonsam* as a malevolent spirit in Akan cosmology.²

2.1 The Limited Moral Duties Perspective

Kwasi Wiredu offers an interesting argument in support of the limited duties perspective. Wiredu finds in the traditional Akan conception of a thing as a spatiotemporally located entity a veritable ground for rejecting the idea of an African God with the omni-properties. According to Wiredu, the Akan language does not have any equivalent of the abstract existential *to be* and *is* of the English language. In the Akan language, a thing can only exist in a particular location, whether this thing is something existing actually or a conceivable idea. Given the spatio-temporal framework encompassing the universe, considered as a totality, Wiredu asserts that the concept of a transcendent God is incoherent in the Akan language. In his words:

[E]verything that exists exists in exactly the same sense as everything else. And this sense is empirical, broadly speaking. In the Akan language to exist is to *wo ho*, which in literal translation, means ‘to be at some place’. There is no equivalent, in Akan, of the existential ‘to be’ or ‘is’ of English, and there is no way of pretending in that medium to be speaking of the existence of something which is not in space. (Wiredu, 1996, p. 49)

If God is not a being outside the universe, he cannot be a creator *ex nihilo*, Wiredu reasons. There must be something in the universe that has always existed that God uses to design the world. Wiredu favours the term designer over creator to emphasise God’s limitation

² Majeed compares this malevolent entity with the Christian Satan, but it is important to be cautious of this comparison. A number of African philosophers have asserted that ATR has no conception of an entity corresponding to the Christian Satan and have attributed the tendency to invent Satan equivalents to the imposition of Western/Christian conceptual frameworks on ATR.

in the scheme of things. He thinks the term creator conveys the idea of an entity that brings something entirely new into being. Since Wiredu conceives the universe as fundamentally physical, the primordial stuff that God uses to create the world (which is a part of the universe as the immense totality)³ must be physical. This physical stuff limits God and may well be the source of evil. Wiredu writes:

[The Akan] seem to operate with the notion of the power of God, implying rather less than absolute omnipotence. That power is still unique in its extent, but it is conceptually not altogether unlike that of a human potentate. Indeed, God himself comes to be thought of as the model of a father who has laid well-intentioned plans for his children, which are, however, sometimes impeded not only by their refractory wills but also by the grossness of the raw materials he has to work with. (Wiredu, 1998, p. 41)

In Wiredu's interpretation of Akan religious philosophy, God emerges as a limited deity comparable to a superhuman, but by no means omnipotent, being a kind of 'just and benevolent ancestor' (2010, p. 195).⁴ He suggests that *moral evil* is simply the consequence of the misuse of human reason (Wiredu, 1996, p. 158), while *physical evil* must be regarded as a necessary part of the world's furniture. Physical evil is necessary because it is factored into the gross matter of the primordial or pre-existing physical stuff. This physical evil is simply part of a cosmic order. Moral evil follows from human possession of reason and, therefore, free will, which inclines them to act in ways they deem fit to pursue their various interests.

Wiredu's subtle invocation of the free will argument is not intended to introduce the concept of a theistic God through the backdoor. He is instead trying to show that even if God has a moral obligation to reduce or eliminate the moral evil in the world, as a limited deity there is little he *can* do to reform human beings, morally speaking. This is so because, for Wiredu, human beings are by their very nature inclined to engage in non-moral and harmful conduct. Regarding physical evil, similar to what occurs with moral evil, Wiredu's limited God cannot reduce or eliminate physical evil

³ Wiredu distinguishes between *world* and *universe*. He regards the world as a part of the universe. God created the world from resources available in the universe. There is no qualitative break between the two spheres, for the universe is the totality in which the world is extended.

⁴ Ancestors are typically conceived in African thought as possessing superhuman powers, although they continue to constitute part of the lineage they represented while alive.

because physical evil is factored into the eternally existing primordial physical stuff from which God fashions the world. The idea that a limited creator-deity – or designer, as Wiredu prefers to describe the limited God – is benevolent enough to wish to reduce or eliminate evil but lacks the powers to do so is salient in the thought of other proponents of the limited God view like Bewaji (1998) and Fayemi (2012).

2.2 The Cosmic Perspective

J.O. Chimakonam and Amara Chimakonam (2023) present one of the clearest versions of the cosmic perspective from a complementaristic/relational standpoint in an attempt to show that God has no obligation to reduce evil in the world. Drawing inspiration from African relational (complementaristic) ontology, Amara Chimakonam (2022) proposes that instead of regarding good and evil as opposites, we should see them as valuable complements in a world created by a harmony-God. This harmony-God is powerful but not omnipotent, knowledgeable but not omniscient, good but not omnibenevolent. This being expresses its creative power by sustaining the balance of good and evil in the world and all the relations that constitute the world (Chimakonam and Chimakonam, 2023). For Amara Chimakonam (2022, p. 32), the logical problem of evil does not arise within the limited God framework because good and evil belong to an existential context in which both are useful, with the one required for the other to be in a relational linkage within the cosmic order. As the ultimate cause of the world, the harmony-God, in whom good and evil harmoniously coexist, necessarily expresses his dual nature in the world, thus making good and evil necessary constituents of the world. Since evil in the world is not incompatible with God's nature, he is not under any obligation to reduce evil, let alone eliminate it. Reducing or eliminating the evil in the world will upset the complementary balance of nature, such that the world is no longer a complementary world and God is no longer a harmony-God. They note that divine moral intervention will make the world worse. Their stance implies that any intervention from the harmony-God may introduce a different, perhaps more intense, species of evil into the world. The claim here is not that God is impotent, although he is not omnipotent; rather, a harmony-God is not obliged to reduce, or eliminate, evil in the world since evil is a *necessary complement* of good and the harmony-God himself is the perfect example of the good-evil complementarity.

The harmony-God is overwhelmingly concerned with maintaining the balance of good and evil in the world rather than reducing or eliminating evil. He distributes evil and ensures it does not exceed the amount of good in the world. In the words of the Chimakonams (2023, p. 334):

A harmony-God is one who has the capacity for the opposing values of good and evil, and represents a being in whom both polar values complement each other. To those who worship Him, He rewards good deeds with good and punishes bad ones with evil. He brings the rain but also brings the sun. He raises a forest only to blaze it down with fire. He gives a child to a mother and takes it the next day. He creates and destroys not just for the fun but for the overarching need to maintain the balance of good and evil [...]. He is the harmony-God, and His ultimate concern is to balance the use of his good and evil relational capacities.

Thus, the harmony-God may be able to reduce the evil in the world as a moral duty, in a similar way that a human being has such a moral obligation. Reducing evil as a moral duty implies not, at the same time, reducing the amount of good in the world. Note that the harmony-God's powers are vast even though they are not of the order of omnipotence. The harmony-God is also good even though his goodness is not of the order of omnibenevolence. The extent of his power and goodness implies that he may be able to reduce evil as a moral duty. But he is *not primarily concerned about reducing evil* in the world as a moral duty because for the harmony-God a more significant metaphysical imperative lies in maintaining the balance of good and evil regardless of the intensity of suffering that creatures endure. This God is an entity 'with relational capacity to maintain a balance of the opposing values of good and evil and sustain such complementarity' (Chimakonam and Chimakonam, 2023, p. 337). The harmony-God of the Chimakonams is focused on maintaining the good-evil balance and does not feel morally obliged to reduce evil since doing so will destabilise the good-evil balance and produce a worse world. This is because good requires evil to exist, i.e., it is a necessary metaphysical condition, and this eliminates God's duty to reduce evil. What God needs to do, instead, is to keep the balance between the two so that there is enough evil to complement an equal amount of good. This stance differs from our thesis in at least two ways: (a) while this view, like our view, relies on the logico-metaphysical idea of complementarity between good and evil to justify the existence of evil in the world, our view gives an

explanation grounded on lesser evils – it does not explain the existence of evil simply as a necessary condition for good, but instead sees (lesser) evil as the best possible outcome amongst several options; and (b) as a result of (a), our view attributes more duties to God than the views of the Chimakonams. In the next sections, we will argue that even a limited God like the harmony-God has moral duties and that such a God can reduce current evils in the world but refrains from doing so to avoid greater evils.

3. Why a Limited God Has Moral Duties

The limited God stance often gives the impression that God could not have done any better because he is limited. Consider Wiredu's argument. His argument regarding physical evil can be refuted. The argument is a capability one: God could not have made the world better, therefore he has no duty to make it better. However, it is clear that with the progress of science, especially health science, God could have made the world better. If we humans, who are much more limited than God, can invent technology which improves the lives of people with disabilities, why would God not be able to prevent these disabilities? It seems reasonable to think that if humans have the capability for enhancement, God, being more powerful, will have a higher capacity for enhancement. If Wiredu upholds the view that there is something different about technological development and the things God could have done, the burden of proof is on him to demonstrate this. Humans are natural beings, and, in that sense, what they do is within nature's scope. If humans can achieve technological feats within the scope of nature, then God should be able to do so too.

Indeed, because we do not know the nature of God, we cannot assert this with certainty. Our only data comes from humans and is based on human experience. Compared to humans, a more powerful entity like God seems to be able to do more. The best starting point for speculation is from what we already know – human experience – which is what human nature indicates (Cordeiro-Rodrigues, 2022). Put differently, we can only start enquiries from what we know (Williamson, 2018); and what we know is human experience.

The critic could reply that an unconscious, material God, such as the one advanced by Aribiah Attoe (2022a), will have no such capacity. Such a conception of God is one of a kind of mechanical being without a consciousness that produces movement. It would possibly be the case that such a being has no obligations because a

God like the one conceived by Attoe lacks agency and is merely a part of the mechanical order of the universe as a deterministic or conditioning principle. This stance, however, does not quite work to invalidate the conception of God we are articulating in this paper and show that God may not have the capacity to enhance the world. This is because this is not the God of Wiredu or the Chimakonams, and therefore, the argument does not apply.

Perspectives (a) and (b) from the African limited view come up against the same moral problem: giving less responsibility to God than he has. One problem for proponents of the limited God view who deflect blame for the reality of evil from God to free-willing human beings and malevolent spiritual entities is that they grant the limited God of ATR sufficient powers that enable him to gain the status of a creator-deity or architect of the world, however limited he may ultimately be. It would appear, intuitively, that a limited creator or architect of the world would be under some obligation to have created or designed humans and spiritual entities so that the amount of evil in the world would be reduced to whatever extent. Note that what is required of the limited but still powerful, knowledgeable, and good God is not creating a world in which evil is eliminated. What is required of the limited God is to deploy his vast powers and knowledge at the time of creation so that the potentiality for evil is reduced. Consider the following chef analogy: a chef may be responsible for a client's health if, during the preparation of a meal, she was negligent and chose rotten products, did not take into consideration possible allergies, or did not follow a good hygiene standard in the preparation of the meal. However, the chef will not be responsible for what cannot be anticipated – such as a rare disease that the chef could not know about in advance. Still, the chef has some responsibility if the client gets sick due to her negligence or insufficient cooking skills – an issue that borders on capability. While the chef may have little to do after cooking the meal, she bears some responsibility. Given her training and ability, even if limited, she could have done better if she had been more meticulous. A limited but very powerful and knowledgeable God could have done better at creation time if he had been more meticulous in his creation work, for example.

The critical point is that a limited creator-deity is not as powerless as the proponents of the limited-duty view suggest. To be clear, they do not mean that God is powerless. But they attribute less powers than he has because they understand God as an entity who, just like humans, struggles and makes mistakes. However, the issue is that, based on this premise, they assume too little about the duties of God. African philosophers like Bewaji (1998) and Fayemi (2012)

have asserted that the limited creator-deity still wields vast powers and, to a great degree, is different from humans because, in comparative terms, the creator-deity has much more power. It has been asked how a creator-deity, even a limited one, will have no obligation to at least try to reduce some of the evil in the world. It is submitted that God may be blameworthy in some restricted sense (Fayemi, 2012). It will appear that when some limited God proponents suggest that God could not have created a better world because of his limitation, they actually mean that while the limited God is capable of reducing the current evils in the world, doing so may produce greater evils. If this is the case, then God has moral duties.⁵

Starting with Wiredu's argument, it is not true that the *quantity* of evil in the world is one that God could not have done anything about, both in the cases of moral and physical evil. There are evils in the world which are excessive. Given that there are excessive evils in the world, it seems God has the basic duty of aiding those in need if this does not entail a significant cost to him (Cordeiro-Rodrigues, 2023). Peter Singer's thought experiment is helpful here. Singer imagines a situation where one adult is passing by and sees a child drowning in a pond. It is relatively easy for this person to save the child and the action comes at a relatively low cost. Singer contends that given the low cost, it will appear that there is a duty to save the child (Singer, 2015). Are there evils in the world that could be addressed at a low cost? There are many evils that even humans have the power to prevent at a low cost and are obliged to perform. God, who is more powerful than humans, should be able to prevent some evils at a low cost. It is not true, therefore, that God is limited to the point of not being able to make this world better, given that even humans could make this world better. Thus, moral evil could be reduced in the world.

In a certain way, our actual world can be considered the best possible world; not in the sense that it is a perfect world or that the world's current state is the best. It is rather in the sense that the lesser evil state is the best we can have in terms of optimal outcomes

⁵ It is worth noting that limited God proponents hold nuanced views about God. For philosophers like Joyline Gwara and L. Uchenna Ogbonnaya (2022), who suggest that God is simply unable to stop evil, the assertion does not apply and God has no additional moral duties. Aribiah Attoe (2022a) presents a unique and intriguing perspective in the literature that denies God personality. Attoe asserts that God is an unconscious material entity. In this materialist framework, God certainly has no moral duties.

in the world. We do not deny that this is the best possible world in this sense. However, we add that this assumed best possible world is to be understood as a tragic world in a certain sense. This is because the best possible world – the best world that God could produce at the time he did – is still a world that is imperfect and contains evil. That does not mean that the limited God is a spectator watching the world and unable to do anything about evil. Rather, God is an active agent who sees the need to improve the world but does not do so because allowing evil is a way to prevent a worse worldly state of affairs.

Moreover, because God is imperfect, there is always room for improvement. The notion of imperfection implies the ability to grow (or degenerate) within the limits of limitation. Suppose the imperfect God is regarded as an entity powerful, knowledgeable, and good enough to create the imperfect world. In that case, it seems plausible that this imperfect world is one that is still in the process of becoming. As God increases in power and knowledge, he improves the world within the limits of imperfection. Therefore, it is hard to see why the imperfect but powerful God described by the majority of the limited God proponents can be conceived as an entity whose task it is to simply create an imperfect world, throw up his hands, and become a mere spectator of the product of his creativity on the grounds that he cannot do more. Only a God who lacks the powers and knowledge to create can be absolved of moral responsibility.

The Chimakonams' stance is more resistant to the problem of evil, given the claim that there is a good-evil balance in the world. In fact, as will become clear in the next section, we do not totally oppose this view. However, the view, stated like this, has some limitations. There is still a lot of suffering in the world, which does not seem necessary for the complementarity that the Chimakonams mention. It may well be the case that this is so, but they need to offer a metric. To state simply that the problem of evil is about balancing harmony seems insufficient; it is also necessary to show why and how harmony is achieved with the great amounts of evil that we all know exist – even if we assume that there is more (or an equal amount) of good than evil in the world, it is still important to know the process. In other words, the fact that evil and good are necessary complements is insufficient to explain evil, because the Chimakonams need to show that the existing quantity of evil is the necessary correspondent of the existing quantity of good.⁶ This is because evil can be necessary

⁶ Note that the view of the Chimakonams may have not yet developed these aspects of the theory because it is relatively new (first published in 2023).

for good but not a specific evil in a given exact quantity. For example, if a criminal is sentenced to prison for 20 years rather than 10, the judicial system does not need to simply state that punishment is important for rehabilitation. It also needs to show that 20 years of punishment does this job better than 10 years of punishment. Additionally, and more importantly, the mere fact of harmony does not imply there is no duty, unless harmony instantaneously balances good and evil. But why would this be the case, if God is imperfect? As stated above, imperfection is a state of incompleteness and, as such, it must change and be corrected. An imperfect God is likely to create imperfect harmony, and there is a duty to continue correcting it.

In reply to our criticism, Wiredu and the Chimakonams could respond that there are better goods brought about by having great evils and, therefore, God is still justified in bringing about those great evils. They are not purposeless because they bring about great goods. Nonetheless, to further sustain our objection, we wish to bring to bear a moral principle, namely, the Pauline Principle, that is widely accepted in ethics: it is not allowed for an actor to cause harm with the intention of producing a good (see, for example, Aquinas, 1981; Sterba, 2019). Sterba (2019, pp. 49–50) identifies three possible scenarios that produce exceptions to the principle that it is not allowed for an actor to cause harm with the intention of producing a good:

1. trivial (e.g., as in the case of stepping on someone's foot to get out of a crowded subway) or
2. easily reparable (e.g., as in the case of lying to a temporarily depressed friend to keep him from committing suicide) or [...]
3. the only way to prevent far greater harm to innocent people (e.g., as in the case of shooting one of twenty civilian hostages to prevent, in the only way possible, the execution of all twenty). (Sterba, 2019, pp. 49–50)

What this passage states is that using evil to bring about good is allowed when the evil done to bring about a good is (1) trivial or minor, (2) when the evil done to bring about a good can easily be remedied, and (3) when causing evil is the only way one can prevent a much greater evil to innocent people. Clearly, evils like the Holocaust are not a case of (1) or (2): the evil is neither trivial nor

However, there is, in principle, scope for the authors to develop it further in more detail to reply to these aspects of their theory that are currently lacking.

is it easily reparable. However, we will argue in the next section that although the Chimakonams fail to point out the scenario painted above, the actual advantage of their theory is that, if further developed, it can be understood as a case of (3). The problem with this good-evil complementary argument version is not that it provides a mistaken ontology. We agree with the relationality of this argument. The problem is that the way this relational ontology is stated is insufficient to resolve the problem of evil. We suggest that the whole matter is not about God's incapacity to reduce evil but rather the implication of him doing so. This idea is implied in the Chimakonams' thought, although it is not explored in detail.

4. African Panentheism, Relational Ontology, and Lesser Evils

Having considered some issues with the limited God view, we wish to argue that, in fact, a relational ontology can offer a solution to the problem of evil, which is more plausible if God's actions are conceptualised as 'lesser evils'. The aim here is not to offer a causal link between God and evil but a theory that engages with *better moral reasons* than its competing theories. From the African limited God viewpoint, especially the one advanced by the Chimakonams, God can limit the actions of entities but does not have the power to curtail these without doing worse. According to the African limited God view, this is because God is not omnipotent. At this juncture, we introduce the idea of the African panentheistic God who imparts vitality, or vital force, to everything. The African panentheistic cosmology understands God as a force that is present in everything (Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Agada, 2022). God gives life and existence to all objects by imparting his vital force to them. God is, therefore, a sustainer of everything that exists (Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Agada, 2022). Take the quote of Placide Tempels referring to African understandings of reality: "[f]orce" in his [the Bantu] thought is a necessary element in "being", and the concept "force" is inseparable from the definition of "being" (Tempels, 2010, p. 34). God is understood as a form of consciousness that is present in everything, and by his presence, he animates all things. God does not encompass all existence, but his essence is present in all things.

In this view, God sustains the evil in the world, and evil can disappear if he withdraws his hand, i.e., if he stops sustaining the world. Nonetheless, given the connection of everything in a panentheistic reality, God cannot do so without destroying the positive things in the world. To be clear, imagine the following analogy.

There is an entity holding the Earth with both hands. The entity holding it observes that some people living on Earth are destroying it, and this entity wishes to make them cease to exist. But the only way to do so is by withdrawing its hands from holding the Earth. Doing this, however, will inevitably make all entities on Earth cease to exist together with the bad people. Thus, the entity refrains from withdrawing its hands because it believes having good and evil entities on Earth is better than not having entities at all. To give a more clarifying real-life analogy: if a lifeguard is saving one person from drowning and sees three other people drowning and decides to try to save the four of them, she may end up with none, and it is better to save one life rather than lose four. The issue for African pantheism is the same, i.e., there is no way to stop evil without creating a world worse than the present world. We do not aim to prove this causal connection exists. Instead, we aim to show that for a limited being, like the one described by this view of God, decisions have opportunity costs and to make a good decision often means to allow other evils to occur. That is, we aim to elucidate the mechanisms of decisions of a limited God and tease out the moral implications. Thus, the point is that understanding evil through this causal connection allows a better moral justification for the existence of evil.

However, note that the fundamental point here is not that God wishes to promote a higher good by allowing evil, as many Christian analytic philosophers have asserted; instead, God desires to refrain from committing evil towards innocent bystanders. The problem is that God cannot withdraw his hand without causing further evil, i.e., without harming innocent bystanders. Because the world is relational and everything is connected, there is no way for God not to harm innocents when stopping evil. When one causes harm, it inevitably impacts the other because there is unity in being. Consequently, because God does not wish to harm innocent bystanders, he must refrain from harming wrongdoers too.

In short, the interconnectedness of beings makes it inevitable for harm to be caused to others if God takes any remedial action. According to this view, God allows evil to prevent greater harms and not because he has a greater purpose. He refrains from producing a better world not because good and evil are faces of the same coin, as the Chimakonams state, but because there is a chain of causation and interconnectedness that prevents the possibility of a remedial world. This view is inspired by some aspects of the Chimakonams' perspective but does not face the complications of their view. It explains the existence of evil in the world not in terms of complementary necessity but in terms of cosmic interconnectedness, which can be done

without a metric for how much evil is necessary for good. And it recognises that the work of God is a work in progress and, therefore, God needs to be routinely addressing the issue with his moral duties. In this latter case, the Chimakonams are ambiguous about their meaning of how many duties God has but they do suggest he has not many duties. The duty is about balancing harmony, not reducing evil itself: according to their conception, harmony is to be prioritised. By contrast, our view affirms that a limited God has the duty to reduce evil.

What can this theory offer? At this stage, it is critical to clarify the fundamental points of what we are stating. We are not affirming that we have found a causal link between interconnectedness and evil. This causal link cannot, in fact, really be found because there is no way to verify it empirically. Instead, what we are claiming is that such an understanding of the problem of evil as avoiding lesser evils has a *better explanatory power vis-à-vis other theistic explanations* that either consider God all-powerful and has motives to allow evil or simply state that a limited God does not have duties to do anything or to do nearly nothing. Within a theistic framework, our perspective offers *better moral reasons* to accept that God allows evil. Specifically, our theory aims to show there are good moral reasons for God to allow evil. The moral reason we suggest – to allow lesser evils – is better than reasons such as creating greater goods or attributing nearly no moral responsibility to a being with limited power. What is at stake, therefore, is not the proof of a causal connection. Instead, it is whether one explanation is more satisfactory than others. As Luís Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Pao-Sheng Ho state ‘It is widely agreed that rationality comes about by degree. Therefore, there is no such thing as theism being rational, period; rather, the proper thing to say is that theism is more rational than something else’ (Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Ho 2022, p. 10).

Note, however, that there are also good reasons to believe in interconnectedness (the idea underlying our argument), reasons of the type that support our view. For example, it is generally agreed that ecosystems are interconnected with each other and that it is the interaction between organisms in the ecosystem that allows it to function – e.g., a plant producing oxygen, which is essential for the survival of animals, who, in turn, produce carbon dioxide for plants’ photosynthesis. This is not the only instance of this interconnectedness; there are many others, like the connection of neural networks, DNA, and nutrient cycling. Surely, by stating this, we do not aim to prove in this paper that everything is interconnected, but instead that in addition to the good moral reasons for endorsing such a view, there are

also aspects of nature that suggest the kind of ontology we are putting forward.

5. Why is this View to be Morally Preferred over Western Alternatives?

But why exactly is this view *morally better* than the Western alternatives? The sceptic may still question why this view ought to be endorsed, especially *vis-à-vis* mainstream theodicies. Our starting point is that a theodicy or a defence can only make sense because God had a *moral justification to allow evil* (Sterba, 2019). If God did not have such a moral justification, his allowing or causing evil would not be morally justified. In other words, a theodicy and a defence must be morally attractive to be convincing. The arguments concerning evil coming from mainstream Western philosophy presuppose a conception of value. A certain value is worth defending, therefore, God is morally permitted to allow or cause evil for the sake of that value. What values are usually considered from a Christian philosophical viewpoint in the context of the problem of evil? We cannot go through all potential answers. Hence, we will focus on the most prominent ones and show that the moral implications are unacceptable.

Particularly important for the Christian tradition is that God could not have given free will to individuals and simultaneously controlled their actions (Augustine, 2012). Free will requires that individuals have some degree of autonomy in their decision-making and actions. It is contradictory to have free will without the possibility of choice. Providing free will without this autonomy is a logical contradiction, just like it is a logical contradiction to conceive of or create a married bachelor. God cannot simultaneously provide such freedom and prevent individuals from doing evil (Plantinga, 1974).

Someone like Richard Swinburne (Swinburne, 1998) contends that there is a need for recurrent evil to appear to inspire and educate individuals to engage in morally good acts. If these evils did not occur, then individuals would not have justified knowledge of what is evil and what is good; therefore, their choices would not be morally justified. Other individuals' testimonies can help, but these are insufficient to provide significant knowledge of harm. Take the example of Covid-19 negationists: it is routinely the case that even in the face of a substantial number of deaths, they deny the existence of the pandemic, and only when infected by the virus and suffering from it do they believe in its existence. Thus, we can

become more responsible through experiencing something rather than hearing about it. So, for Swinburne, most of the evil in the current world seems necessary to achieve a greater good. For the learning about doing good to take place, recurrent exposure to evil is needed. Note further that the greater the possibility of evil, the better the action is. For example, imagine two individuals who never cheat on their partners. Individual A does not do this because he has never had a chance to do so. No one is interested in him. Individual B, in contrast, is routinely faced with temptation and opportunities but always resists them. Indeed, individual B's actions are much more valuable than individual A's, and a world where someone can perform an act of love in this way is a better world.

In short, God could only logically bring greater goods by bringing the possibility of evil. Thus, for these Christian philosophers, free will coheres with the concept of morally justified evils because enhancing free will through evil is, to a certain extent, justified. The value of free will implies that all evils in the world are morally justified for the greater good. Thus, Western Christian philosophers tend to think that there is no excess of evils in the world. The argument that is implied by Plantinga and Swinburne here is one about the promotion of greater good through evil. The evils in the world are therefore necessary and justified for a greater good, i.e., the good of free will.

Another family of responses can be condensed into the view that evil is necessary for character formation. Through vicissitudes, one can learn to become a better person. Take, for example, the view of Eleonor Stump, who contends that: '[T]hings that contribute to a person's humbling, to his awareness of his own evil, and to his unhappiness with his present state contribute to his willing God's help. I think that both moral and natural evil make such a contribution' (Stump, 1985, p. 409).

It is only through adversity that one learns virtue; therefore, it is necessary to be exposed to evil so that one learns to be a better person. In other words, the experience of evil is a necessary condition for moral development. For instance, Swinburne, who also holds this view, contends that someone can only become courageous by doing courageous acts (Swinburne, 1998). Nonetheless, courageous acts are only possible in a context where there is a chance to be courageous. Hence, the existence of an evil situation where courage can be performed is necessary. John Hick, in a similar line of argument, maintains that the formation of souls involves one going through a process of suffering to finally achieve a greater state to enter heaven (Hick, 1971).

A third family of justifications for the existence of evil proposes that humans will receive a great good from God due to the sacrifice of experiencing evil. Stump, for example, contends that as a recognition of going through evil, God will allow us to unite with him in the end (Stump, 1985). Likewise, Marilyn McCord Adams upholds that humans will receive God's grace for having experienced evil for him. In both cases, the great good that God gives out scales any evils that may exist in the world (Adams and Adams, 1991).

The point we wish to make is that all the main families of theodicies and defences offer the same kind of rationale: evils are justified since they lead to a *greater good*. They differ in what they consider to be the greater good that justifies evil. The approaches are, however, problematic because, generally speaking, the good in question is only applicable to a certain group of people and not the good of all (Sterba, 2019). In the case of the arguments about free will, note that the possibility of a greater good through evil only applies to some individuals. The existence of evil curtails free will for a greater number of people, i.e., it does not maximise free will. The same applies to the character formation argument. Evil is likely to curtail the opportunities for many individuals to develop their character and only allow a few people to benefit from it. In terms of the union with God, as the Bible states in Matthew 22, only a small percentage will be saved. This entails that the many are sacrificed, according to this view.

Why is the theory offered by us better than the Western alternatives? Some Western theists tend to understand that all evil is morally justified because there are good reasons for it to exist – e.g., soul-making, free will, etc. (see, for example, Hick, 1971; Plantinga, 1974; Stump, 1985; Swinburne, 1998). As argued elsewhere, these Western philosophers are committed to considering that all moral evils in the world are morally justified (Cordeiro-Rodrigues, 2023). Any evil (say, the Holocaust) is to a certain extent justified because it is allowed by a morally perfect entity. God allows evil because such evil can promote a greater good; to the extent that God allows it and he is morally perfect, horrendous means (e.g., the Holocaust) are morally permissible for the sake of greater goods, according to this view. In contrast, the African perspective does not face this problem because it does not privilege the promotion of a greater good; rather it emphasises avoiding a greater evil.

Note, however, that this view understands God as limited, i.e., not omnipotent; it does not need to concede that God is limited for the argument to be successful. Furthermore, the African view does not imply that all greater goods can be pursued through evil means. Instead, the point is that greater evils (further harming the innocent)

should be prevented by accepting lesser evils (allowing suffering in the world). It merely affirms that God is not warranted to harm innocents, thereby creating a greater evil, in the process of intervening to remove the evil in the world. Accordingly, he is justified to refrain from forms of punishment of evil doers, or other forms of intervention, that can lead to greater evils.

The Christian theist may also contest our argument by affirming that God's morally allowing evils is not the same as his condoning them. When a government allows adultery, for example, it is not morally condoning it. Instead, when a government allows adultery, it is making a statement that the act of punishing adultery is worse than allowing it and, therefore, allowing it is a lesser evil. This can be, for example, because punishing adultery would involve a certain restriction of freedom and this restriction is morally worse than adultery. In reply, we note that the above scenario is not the same as what the analytic Christian philosophers are suggesting. These philosophers are not avoiding a lesser evil; they are promoting a greater good. Hence, a better analogy for their view is that a government would allow the genocide of everyone who has HIV to promote the good of ending HIV transmission.

Further, if evils in the world are not excessive, to allow this genocide is, according to the Christian theist, just the right amount of evil necessary for a greater good. But the conclusion that genocide should be allowed for free will to exist is such a strong statement that it is difficult to sustain without further justification or evidence. That is, the burden of proof rests with the Christian theist. The African view does not face such complications because it disagrees with the point that an evil like genocide is not excessive; moreover, it is not arguing for a greater good but instead for a *lesser evil*. In short, although both views endorse the idea that God refrains from intervening, one states that this is done for the promotion of a greater good while the other affirms that this passivity is for the prevention of a greater evil.

Surely, the critic may push that the lesser evils explanation is not a satisfactory explanation of the problem of evil because if it were true that the evils in the world were lesser evils, then horrendous evils, such as babies and children being raped and killed, would cease to exist. In reply, our theory does not entail that evils cease existing, but it also does not intend or need to do so. The theory needs to offer a better explanation of why evils exist. Still, the question is: can such horrendous evils be considered lesser evils? While from our perspective, i.e. that of those who are living in the world, this does not seem to be the case, it is in fact possible to imagine much

more apocalyptic worlds in which there is much more evil than the evils existing in our world. For example, a worse world would be one where the number of babies and children being raped and killed could be higher or could even be a common generalized practice. There is, therefore, no contradiction in stating that horrendous evils exist and that all evils are lesser evils *vis-à-vis* a worse possible world that is more evil than our world.

Note that an additional moral difference makes this African perspective morally attractive. In the case of the panentheistic God, because he is in everything, when he allows evil to occur, he is allowing pain to himself too for a better outcome. God sacrifices himself to feel pain for a better moral outcome; it is not just other entities that endure the suffering. Sacrificing himself to pain can be said to be an advantage because God is not asking others to make great sacrifices for him, but with him. This contrasts, for example, with the view of McCord Adams and Swinburne, who contend that the great value of suffering lies in the fact that God will reward people with union with him or grant grace, which is a great thing according to them (Adams, 2000; Adams and Adams, 1991; Swinburne, 1998; Stump, 1985). The logic in the panentheistic form of the African view is different: it is not a reward but a communal activity where each one sacrifices and acts according to a logic of reciprocity, sometimes for a greater good and sometimes to avoid a greater evil. This is not to say that some Christians do not believe that God suffers when humans suffer: more traditional Christians may defend this. But concerning the question of evil, this position has not been argued at length, and other explanations have been given for sin. The one we advance here is morally attractive because of the value of solidarity. It is also ethically valuable for Christians because it coheres with the idea that the sacrifice Jesus undertook was worthwhile partly because of its solidarity with humans. The utilitarian may object that this view is not morally attractive because it involves more suffering (God's and humans' suffering) and less suffering is better than more suffering.

Nonetheless, it is unclear that the quantity of suffering is the only morally relevant scale here. When a family member has cancer, the right thing to do does not seem to be to evaluate if ignoring her suffering will diminish overall suffering. Instead, there is something intrinsically valuable to giving support and enduring the pain together and sharing the goal of treatment. According to our view, the victim is inevitably harmed when the aggressors are harmed. And here, the solution is much more intuitive than the Western alternatives. While the alternatives affirm that it is worth sacrificing some individuals'

well-being for the greater good of free will, the alternative we have proposed states that it is not fair to sacrifice the innocent to punish the evil ones. There is a clear recognition that there are evils that perform no function and bring no benefits to the world. Yet, there is a recognition that God does not do anything about these evils, given the consequences of intervention. This view that recognises that some evils are not morally justified has some clear moral advantages over the mainstream Western Christian perspective in the analytic tradition.

6. Conclusion

In this article, we offered a solution to the problem of evil from the African limited God perspective. We addressed the problem of evil using African philosophical concepts and theories. We proposed the view that the best moral explanation for the problem of evil is that which regards evils in the world as lesser evils. We engaged in a cross-cultural exercise that compared the attractiveness of the limited God solution to variants of the free will theodicy championed by a number of analytic Western philosophers. We contended that the limited God view is better than the Western alternatives that have been put forward. According to the view favoured in this article, it makes sense that evil exists in the world because a God who is neither omnipotent nor omniscient but sufficiently powerful and knowledgeable to create the world, refrains from intervening to reduce evil in the world because such intervention will lead to a greater evil than the one in our actual world.

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