

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_ajet-02.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ajet-02.php)

# Analysis of an African Reflections on Evil

Joseph B. O. Okello

## INTRODUCTION

This article will attempt to investigate the problem of evil as perceived by the African mind. This investigation will revolve around two levels of perception. The first level will involve the ordinary, non-philosophically-minded Africa's understanding of evil. In other words, I will seek to analyze how a non-intellectual African would articulate his or her perception of the problem of evil. At this level, I will show how African Traditional Religion seems to have played a role in shaping this understanding.

The second level of perception will focus on how African philosophy has attempted to deal with this problem. By this I refer to the manner in which selected African philosophers have reflected over the philosophical problem that the existence of evil has posed. Thus, the works of a prominent African philosopher, namely, Kwame Gyekye, will get some attention. After each investigation, both levels of perception, together with their implications, will be tested for validity.

But first, it is necessary to establish whether or not evil exists in Africa, and whether or not it poses intellectual challenges to the African mind. Is the existence of evil only a Western occurrence, or does it also extend its cruelty to Africa and other parts of the world? In other words, is evil a universal problem? Initially, these questions can, and do sound rather absurd. For who can doubt the universality of evil? But I raise these questions for the following reason. If evil is universal, it follows that it has

---

Joseph B. O. Okello has earned a MDiv and an MA both from Asbury Theological Seminary in the US. He is currently pursuing doctoral studies at St. Andrews University.

raised as many philosophical questions in other parts of the world as it has in the Western world. This means that philosophers who come from these different parts of the world have their reflections to share, and therefore deserve a hearing. Upon reading their works, one will realize that the struggles are essentially the same, but the philosophical approaches differ in some areas. Observe the following instance of evil as witnessed and documented in an African setting, paying close attention to the question raised toward the end of the article.

It was a night Emmanuel Murangira will never, can never forget. Huddled into the Eto Technical school, in Rwanda's Murambi Province, Murangira, his wife, children, brothers, sistens and 40,000 fellow Tutsis awaited their fate, numb with shock and helplessness. Hutu militia who had surrounded the school told them, "We want to kill you and we want our children to ask, 'What did a Tutsi look like?'" Then the killing began. Murangira is now a caretaker at the school, which has been turned into the Gokongoro Genocide Site, in memory of those massacred in 1994. "We stood there holding hands and we could not do anything but pray before they started to kill us," he told PANA. "They started killing with machetes, then they used their guns and when they were tired they threw in grenades, a mission that took them two days to complete. My wife, my children, brothers and sisters are among these people." Rwandan authorities have so far managed to locate 27,000 decayed bodies around the school, which are on display at the school . . . Murangira narrated his story as he showed the PANA correspondent the bodies of children and mothers frozen in death with screams on their faces. Some of the deceased mothers are still clutching on to their babies, as if they can still protect them. In the next room, hundreds of skulls and bones are neatly arranged. *To the question, "What did the Tutsis do to God to deserve this?" A guide, Jean-Marie Jabo, could only reply, "I don't know . . ."* What is even more horrifying are the tales from survivors that victims had a choice to be killed with a machete or pay a fee to be shot - - a quicker way to the inevitable end. A number paid for their own executions.<sup>1</sup> (Emphasis mine)

The event described above it punctuated with indescribable horror and pain. It is almost impossible to read this excerpt without posing a pertinent philosophical horror and pain. If God exists, why does he allow such things to happen? It is my contention that the philosophical, as well as the non-

---

<sup>1</sup> Newton Kahema, "The Pain of Visiting a Rwandan Genocide Site," <http://www.africanews.org/pana/news>

philosophically oriented African, have both struggled with finding possible answers to this and many other related questions. I am not attempting to answer the question at this point. I am simply suggesting that evil is as real in Africa as it is in other parts of the world. It is therefore reasonable to suspect that African minds have reflected over the problem of evil just as much as every other philosopher has. Some of these reflections deserve some attention for the simple reason that they raise profound philosophical implications that deserve to be answered by serious Christian philosophers. It is therefore, my intention to start this investigation by surveying the first level of Africa's answer to the problem of evil.

### **Understanding Evil in a Non-Philosophical African Context**

Perhaps no other African theologian and philosopher has done more extensive research on African Tradition and Philosophy than John S. Mbiti. Mbiti's research reveals that several views exist concerning the origin and nature of evil.<sup>2</sup> Be that as it may, these African views still contend categorically that God is neither the creator nor the author of evil.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, many African societies hesitate to attribute to God any occurrences of evil, be it moral or natural. Evil is usually seen as having its origin, not from God, but from other beings that can and do exercise free will.<sup>4</sup> These lie in the category of spiritual beings and human beings.<sup>5</sup> Referring to spiritual beings Mbiti says, "In nearly all African societies, it is thought that the spirits are either the origin of evil, or agents of evil."<sup>6</sup> He also writes,

There are people in every community who are suspected of working maliciously against their relatives and neighbours, through the use of magic, sorcery and witchcraft . . . this is the centre of evil, as people experience it. Mystical power is neither good nor evil in itself. But when used maliciously by some individuals, it experienced as evil. This view makes evil an independent and external object which, however, cannot act on its own but must be employed by human or spiritual agents.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1994), 204.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

What Mbiti seems to be saying here is that according to some African societies, beings with free will function only as agents of evil without necessarily being the origins of evil. He also observes that this might not be the case with other African societies where evil is viewed as an independent external object.<sup>8</sup> In such an instance, it has to be employed by an agent for its effects to be seen. This, of course, leaves no room for natural evil as understood by Western thought. For, according to Mbiti's findings, what is considered natural evil can ultimately be traced back to a free will agent.<sup>9</sup> He writes,

We have emphasized the corporate nature of African communities which are knit together by a web of kinship relationships and other social structures. Within this situation, almost every form of evil that a person suffers, whether it is moral or natural evil, it is believed to be caused by members of his community. Similarly, any moral offense that he commits is directly or indirectly against members of his society.<sup>10</sup>

Thus whereas in Western thought, natural evil may be viewed as occurring independently of agents, in an African perspective it is seen as occurring with the help of an agent. For example, a tornado would be considered, in the West, an occurrence independent of human or spiritual agency, whereas in Africa, the same would have human (or spiritual) agency as its origin. Whether or not the African view is an authentic representation of truth about evil is not the point here, I am only attempting to outline what a large majority of Africans believe to be the origin of evil. Consider, for instance, the following observation made by Deuseddit Nkurunziza, another African theologian, on the Bantu People's understanding of evil:

The Bantu experience of life is not always characterized by joy and happiness. They also experience the tragedy of life, and most especially death. Every tragic even is believed to have a reason and a personal cause. The traditional Bantu are not satisfied with secondary explanations and have no appreciation for the concept of coincidence. The question "why" is fundamental for them. When illness occurs, merely listing the cause of the

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

disease, which would probably satisfy a Westerner, is only of relative interest. They want to know why that particular person contracted the disease in question. In case of death, they seek to find out why the death occurred, and specifically who was responsible.<sup>11</sup>

My intention in this section has been to show three major facets of the problem of evil as understood by the non-philosophically oriented African. The first facet we saw, albeit briefly, is the fact that most African societies exonerate God from the accusation of bringing disaster on humanity. Secondly, we have seen that some of these societies maintain that evil is an independent, external object that needs an agent in order for its occurrence to be perceived. Thirdly, we have also observed that, in many African cultures, what is understood as natural evil in the West is really moral evil in Africa. In other words, any kind of evil befalling the African originated, not from unknown causes, but from creatures with free will. These creatures can either be human beings or spiritual beings. What is left for us is to determine whether these views do obtain when analyzed philosophically.

It is worth noting that when Africans maintain that God is not the author of evil, they are consistent with the Biblical theology of God. Many African societies view God as all-powerful, all knowing and good. For instance, the Akan people see God as the Creator, the Dependable One, the Eternal One, the Omnipotent One and so forth.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps it is for this reason that V. Y. Mudimbe, an African philosopher, observes that God is not only the origin and meaning of our essence. He is a causal and eternal being who must not simply be understood as a Supreme Being, but as the Pre-existing One.<sup>13</sup> With this view of God in mind, it is easy to see why Africans would never think of God as a possible source of evil. Thus, the first facet of African's perspective on the problem of evil is quite successful.

---

<sup>11</sup> Deusdedit R. K. Nkurunziza, *Bantu Philosophy of Life in the Light of the Christian Message: A Basis for an African Vitalistic Theology* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1989), 118.

<sup>12</sup> Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 70.

<sup>13</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 149.

Africans could also be partially right when they see evil as an "independent object." But they also maintain that it can only be perceived when an agent with free will chooses to use it on an individual. Just the same, I suggest that his view is inadequate at one crucial area. One wonders why, with a belief system that upholds the omnipotence and goodness of God, only a few African thinkers have attempted to give an explanation why a good and powerful God allows evil to occur. This is especially so in light of the fact that the all too apparent tension between God's goodness and evil's existence emerges when one posits the existence of both. Secondly, very few explanations, which are also inadequate, have been given as to the possible origin of this evil. Consider the notion of "independent evil" postulated by Mbiti. This position about independent evil warrants three possibilities. First, it leaves open the possibility that evil is as eternal as God and that the two will remain in conflict eternally, without either one of them ever realizing the complete victory of one and the utter defeat of another. For when a subject is understood to have eternal characteristics, it is assumed that its cessation is impossible. But if this is the case, then God, as understood by the African, ceases to be omnipotent. An omnipotent being should be able to resoundingly defeat all evil rather than remain in an eternal conflict. Perhaps this is not what the Africa implies when he or she poses the existence of independent evil.

If the above is not what is implied by independent evil, a secondly possibility arises; namely, it leaves open the possibility that evil, wherever it came from, took God by surprise. In other words, in spite of God's goodness and power exhibited in creation, evil managed to force its way into the system that God created without God every intending to include it in his plans. The discrepancies of such a claim are rather obvious. If God is omnipotent and omniscient, he would have known long beforehand that evil intended to interfere with his plans, and would have prevented it from doing so. If, indeed, evil successfully interfered with God's plan, much to God's surprise, we once again have to ask the African what he means by the assertion that God is both omniscient and omnipresent.

Perhaps it is here that the African would suggest a third implication, namely, that evil did indeed interfere with God's plan but only because God allowed it. Whereas this is the most plausible implication of all the three positions, it still raises some questions. Did God allow evil as a necessary interference of his divine purpose and plan, without which these plans

would fail? Or did God simply allow evil to 'fit' into his plans even when he knew that his plans would still succeed without the presence of evil? I once again suggest that the first question, given our understanding of God as omnipotent and omniscient in the African context, self-destructs. For if we maintain that God is omnipotent and omniscient, he would not need anyone's assistance, much less, the assistance of evil, in order to accomplish his plans. Thus, the only plausible question worth pursuing could be the second one. Perhaps God did allow evil to fit in his plans even when he knew that his plans would still succeed without the assistance of evil. But this still raises another pertinent question worth pursuing; namely, why would God allow evil to exist in the universe if its existence was not necessary for the accomplishment of his plans? The answer to this question could be a good starting point in dealing with this issue.

Meanwhile, let us analyze the third facet of the Africans' view on the problem of evil, namely, that natural evil is ultimately moral evil. To do this, let us recall an assertion made earlier that evil is an external and independent object that cannot act on its own; rather, it must be employed by human or spiritual agents.<sup>14</sup> I contend that this statement risks philosophical decimation. For if evil is indeed an independent object, it should, and will act on its own without depending on human or spiritual agents. Otherwise, it ceases to be independent. Could this, after all, be the reason why, rather than classify all evil as moral evil, Western philosophers maintain the notion of the existence of natural evil, one devoid of manipulation from free will agents? On the other hand, if it needs human or spiritual agents in order to act, it has to be dependent, thereby being appropriately termed moral evil.

We have seen three facets of the non-philosophical African's understanding of the problem of evil. We have seen that the first facet is consistent. That is, given their understanding of God, Africans are unwilling to view God as the origin of evil. However, we have examined the implications of the second and third facets and found them unsatisfactory at best. Be that as it may, I wish to pursue one implication that emerged as I analyzed the third facet; namely, why does God allow evil to fit in his plans even when he knows that those plans will succeed without evil? Some African philosophers have attempted to answer this question,

---

<sup>14</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 205.

and it is to them that I now turn. Here we shall examine some of their underlying presuppositions and observe how these presuppositions have influenced their understanding of evil.

### **Evil as Understood by a Selected African Philosophical Mind**

In a chapter entitled, "Destiny, Free Will and Responsibility," African Philosopher, Kwambe Gyekye, makes a thorough philosophical analysis of the Akan People's concept of evil.<sup>15</sup> It would be impossible to understand this concept of evil in the Akan context unless we understand some of their basic assumptions only destiny, free will and responsibility. Thus, Gyekye begins this chapter by asserting that, "Akan thinkers hold that every human being has a destiny that was fixed beforehand."<sup>16</sup> He observes that this belief in destiny is not peculiar only to the Akan people, but is also probably found in all cultures.<sup>17</sup> Outlined below is how Gyekye develops his argument.

Firstly, Gyekye articulates what he thinks are two solid reasons for universal belief in destiny. In presenting his first reason, he contends that a number of Akan thinkers find a link between language and metaphysics. The claim here is that there is some kind of reality antecedent to language - - a reality that language is developed to express or depict. Further, it is held that linguistic structure reflects a deep-lying structure of reality or being.<sup>18</sup> For example, one thinker argued that if there were no accident, the word for accident, namely *asiane*, would never exist in the Akan language. Thus he deduced that the situation or matter that is not real has no name. Therefore, whatever is named must be presumed to be real.<sup>19</sup>

A second reason for this universal belief in destiny derives from another belief that humans are the product of a Creator. If this is true, it is possible to assume that humans were fashioned, indeed, designed in a way that determined their dispositions, talents, inclinations and so forth. In other words, the Creator can determine a number of things in much the same way

---

<sup>15</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 104.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

the maker of a car can determine its speed, size and shape. This reflection leads Gyekye to conclude that the notion of pre-appointed destiny may have developed in this way.<sup>20</sup>

Secondly, Gyekye shifts his focus from the universal belief to Akan belief in destiny. It is here that he begins to outline the basis for Akan belief in this concept. He sees the first basis as essentially experiential. In other words, human life itself provides the setting conducive for their thought on destiny.<sup>21</sup> Thus, thinkers have commented that, "It is in life itself that we see that there is a destiny," and also that, "Destiny reveals itself clearly in life." By "Life," in both instances, they meant "human experiences."<sup>22</sup> Gyekye then writes,

Patterns of individual lives, habitual or persistent traits of persons, fortunes and misfortunes, successes and failures, the traumas and enigmas of life; the ways in which propensities, inclinations, capacities, and talents show themselves in individuals; the observed uniqueness of the individual - - all these suggest to the Akan that there is and must be some basis or reason for this individuality. That basis is destiny.<sup>23</sup>

Just how destiny is connected to all these features of life is an issue that Gyekye does not take trouble to explain. But he does give us a hint, when he cites examples, of how the striking features of these phenomena do much to clinch the idea of destiny. For instance, one can easily observe that some particular actions of an individual can be repetitive and persistent throughout the individual's life. This repetition and persistence can point one to where one is heading for later in life.<sup>24</sup> Second, apparent inalterability and inexplicability of elements in one's character is another factor that helps to clinch this idea about destiny. In other words, it can be held, for example, that if a person commits an accidental act, the individual will not commit that action again, for the simple reason that the action itself is not influenced by destiny.<sup>25</sup> Thus:

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 106-107.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 107.

If one day the cocoa bags of a farmer who has become wealthy through buying and selling cocoa catch fire, the occurrence would be considered an accident. On the other hand, if every time he buys cocoa it catches fire, then this repeated event will be ascribed to this destiny: selling and buying cocoa is just not his destined occupation. He ought to give it up and look elsewhere for his "real" occupation. In other words, it is the persistence of an action or behaviour pattern or the inexplicability of an event that induces a belief in destiny.<sup>26</sup>

More examples could be included in this list to further enable us grasp the Akan concept of destiny. This list includes the inexplicability of events in the life of the individual, the apparent irremediability of particular failures in the life of the individual, the constancy of one's good fortunes, and so on.<sup>27</sup> After reflecting on all these, Gyekye concludes that the suggestion of the reality of the concept of destiny arises from the existence of such features of experience in the Akan mind. Thus destiny is that which determines the uniqueness and individuality of a person.<sup>28</sup>

How does Gyekye himself, as distinct from the Akan premise, view this philosophy of destiny? His first reaction is that it is inductive reasoning because it is based on experience. In other words, it is after observing and reflecting upon the constituents of an individual's experience that one draws conclusions based on such an observation.<sup>29</sup> Here, Gyekye is quick to postulate that such reasoning is valid because it "supports the view that the philosophical enterprise proceeds from experience."<sup>30</sup> His second reaction is that this is a conclusion reached "through a profound analysis of human life."<sup>31</sup> Therefore, it is inductive reasoning as opposed to deductive reasoning.<sup>32</sup>

After moving from the universal belief to the Akan belief in destiny, Gyekye turns the focus to his own view. He begins by explaining why he believes that an individual's destiny is given by God. His first reason is that

---

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

the language of some proverbs suggests or supports the divinely imposed theory of destiny.<sup>33</sup> One may not understand why a rigorous philosopher like Gyekye would construct his system of belief on a proverb. However, bear in mind that he believes, to a large extent, on the Akan premise that "anything named must be presumed to be real."<sup>34</sup> Secondly, it would seem that he believes that proverbs are inductive conclusions based upon reflections on various real life experiences. Therefore, since proverbs that comment on the reality of an individual's destiny exist, they must be accurate in their depiction of the "divinely imposed theory of destiny."<sup>35</sup>

His second reason for belief in destiny, closely related to the first, maintains that an Akan myth that expresses the idea of God determining an individual's destiny, exists. The myth suggests that there is no choice of destiny for individuals.<sup>36</sup> This is due to the simple reason that "the Supreme Being has already decided where each of the children would be settled."<sup>37</sup> Once again, we observe a philosopher believing in a myth, and the temptation to accuse him of abandoning his philosophical sense is almost irresistible. At any rate, we have to go back to his reasons for believing in such myths, namely, "anything named must be presumed to be real."<sup>38</sup> Thus, even a myth would not mention that which is unreal. Since the myth talks of God determining the individual's destiny, it has to be real.

Gyekye's third and final reason for belief in destiny is articulated as follows. He asserts that the "soul setting foot into the world" should be presumed as completely devoid of knowledge of this world's conditions.<sup>39</sup> Owing to this ignorance, it is impossible for the soul to determine its own destiny. Therefore, only the omniscient God, who knows of such conditions, is able to determine for the individual his or her own destiny. For this reason, the ignorance of the soul concerning the world renders implausible the self-determined theory of destiny, and plausible the divinely imposed theory of destiny.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 104-5.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 113-4.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 104-5.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 114.

But just what is the nature of this destiny that Gyekye is talking about? Is it a future earthly settlement, or is it an immaterial destiny - - one beyond this world? In answering this question, Gyekye suggests that it is a general destiny.<sup>41</sup> By this, he means that the message encapsulated within the souls is comprehensive by the very fact that it determines only the broad outlines of an individual's mundane life. In other words, it does not include the specific details.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, "not *every* action that a person performs or *every* event that occurs in one's life comes within the ambit of his destiny."<sup>43</sup>

Gyekye here quickly notes that this concept carries with it two major difficulties. The first problem it raises is as follows: how can one determine the exact level of generality of one's destiny? Secondly, what attributes or elements constitute the message of destiny? If the nature of the content of the message could be determined, an idea of the level of generality could be obtained.<sup>44</sup> Here, Gyekye admits that in his research, his discussants were generally unsure about the elements that were included in one's destiny.<sup>45</sup> But the same were "unanimous in claiming that the time of a person's death and possibly also the manner and place of death are stipulated in his destiny."<sup>46</sup> This left Gyekye to conclude that the level of the generality of destiny remained vague.<sup>47</sup> Despite this conclusion, he still noted that "the inexplicable events in one's life, the unalterable and persistently habitual traits of character, the persistent actions and the behavior patterns of an individual are all traceable to destiny. If this is the case, one might arrive at the conclusion that only certain 'key' events and actions are embodied in destiny; or "that the destiny of an individual comprises certain basic attributes."<sup>48</sup> Therefore, this implies that "not everything that a person does or that happens to him or her represents a page from the 'book of destiny.'<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 114-5.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 115.

In light of the above, Gyekye postulates that destiny cannot be changed owing to the fact that it is conceived in terms of basic attributes.<sup>50</sup> According to him, "basic attributes do not change."<sup>51</sup> Moreover, if an omnipotent God determines destiny, it obviously cannot be changed.<sup>52</sup> Consequently, Gyekye argues that the insistence of the proverbs that God's destiny cannot be changed or avoided is logical.<sup>53</sup> Also, he maintains that changing one's destiny is not only an impossible idea, "but it is also one that should, strictly speaking, not arise in a system in which destiny is divinely determined."<sup>54</sup> This is especially so when one considers the Akan belief that God is good. If God is thought of as good, then, "the destiny fixed by God must be good." Thus "bad things are not included in the message of destiny."<sup>55</sup>

How is it then, that in Akan thought there lies a necessity to change one's destiny, or to put it differently, to change what is good? Gyekye proceeds to give us a clue here. He suggests that such a necessity really does not exist, the reason being that the talk of changing one's destiny really refers to the attempt to improve one's life condition.<sup>56</sup> He writes,

For instance, a person's path may be strewn with failures, either because of his or her own actions, desires, decisions, and intentions, or because of the activities of some supposed evil forces. A person in such a situation may try to do something about the situation by, say, consulting priests and diviners. But in so doing, he or she would certainly not be changing destiny as such; rather, he or she would in fact be trying to better the conditions of life . . . by some means. Therefore, one should speak of improving one's circumstances in life rather than of "changing" one's destiny.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 116.

Besides, it seems a widely held view that the individual, in Akan thought, has no knowledge of his or her own destiny.<sup>58</sup> Also, divine knowledge of an individual's destiny does not seem to be fatal to the individual's exercise of free will. This is so, owing to the fact that one does not presume to have access to the knowledge that God has about anyone's destiny.<sup>59</sup> Suffice it to say, however, that the Akan view seems to hold a very strong deterministic conception of the world.<sup>60</sup> Gyekye himself asserts that every event seems to have a cause in Akan thought, and that nothing is attributed to chance.<sup>61</sup> All of the above now enables us to understand how Gyekye's perception of destiny has influenced his philosophy of freedom, and the implications this has for his understanding of evil.

After reading Gyekye's arguments on destiny, one might ask whether, in Akan thought, human beings are free, and in what sense would they be free. His response to this question begins by a recapitulation of the argument that Western philosophy offers pertaining to human free will. He writes, "If every event is caused, as determinism holds, then human action and behaviour too are caused, and hence cannot be held to be free, and therefore cannot be held morally responsible for those actions. There is a suppressed premise in the argument, which is that human actions are (a species of) events."<sup>62</sup> This premise, argues Gyekye, is only partially correct. He counters that there is a sense in which human actions are not events. Events, according to him, are mere happenings or occurrences that do not originate from human design and motivation. These include occurrences like the flooding of a river, the erosion of the sea, a tremor of the earth, and so on.<sup>63</sup> By making this assertion, he draws a distinction between an *event* and an *action* - - the latter being a "result of human deliberation, intention, decision, and desire."<sup>64</sup> However, he concedes that there is and has been a sense in which human actions have been termed events. For instance, "The French Revolution was a momentous *event* in the history of France,' 'The bond of 1844 was a significant *event* in the

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 117

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 120.

history of Ghana,' 'The intertribal wars in Africa were tragic events,' 'Egyptian President Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in December 1977 was a historic event.'"<sup>65</sup> In these statements, the sense of events is plainly different from the sense they have in the occurrences mentioned earlier.<sup>66</sup>

This leads Gyekye to conclude that in Akan thought, the doctrine of determinism is irrelevant as far as human actions are concerned. The implication here is that this doctrine is not fatal to the freedom a person has in actions or behaviour. Thus, the notion that every event has a cause does not subvert, or even eliminate the individual's role in human actions.<sup>67</sup> He writes,

Now Akan thinkers conceive of a cause in terms of spirit or power . . . and humans also have a spirit, even if of a lower potency, that is the basis of thought, deliberation, will and so on. It follows that man is a causal agent. Determinism therefore does not negate the effectiveness of human beings as causal and therefore moral agents.<sup>68</sup>

How, then, does this affect Gyekye's understanding of the problem of evil? First, he begins by asserting that the problem that evil poses is more complex in Akan thought than in Western philosophy.<sup>69</sup> According to him, in Western philosophy the problem centres around God. But in Akan thought the problem revolves around both God and the lesser spirits.<sup>70</sup> By this he means that in Western thought the problem is brought about by the seeming conflicts between the attributes of God and the existence of evil. But in Akan thought, the problem of evil is conceived in terms of both the attributes of God and also of the lesser spirits. Nevertheless, Gyekye admits that when pushed to its logical extremes, the philosophical nature of the problem of evil is quite similar to that of Western philosophy and theology.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 123.

Take, for instance, the Akan conception of God. In Akan philosophy, God is conceived as omnipotent and wholly good. In spite of this conception, the Akan thinkers do not appear to find these attributes of God incompatible with the fact of the existence of moral evil.<sup>72</sup> According to Gyekye, Akan though locates the source of the problem of evil elsewhere than in the relationships between the attributes of God and the fact of the existence of evil. This is so solely out of the contention by Akan thinkers that evil is not a creation of God.<sup>73</sup> According to them, the lesser spirits and humanity's free will provide the sources for evil. Thus, although God created all these, they are considered in Akan theology and cosmology to have independent existence of some sort.<sup>74</sup>

However, one would immediately be tempted to ask, as Gyekye does, why a wholly good God would create a being that has the capacity to do evil. A possible answer he offers is that their capacity to do evil stems from the operations of the independent will of the beings themselves, be they spiritual or human<sup>75</sup>. But this, according to him, is not altogether a satisfactory answer. For if God is omnipotent, does it not follow that he has the power to eliminate or control the evil wills and actions of the lesser spirits and human beings so as to eliminate evil from the world?<sup>76</sup> Moreover, even if it were granted that he endowed the lesser spirits and human beings with independent wills, one would expect the wholly good God to be "willing to intervene when he sees them using their wills to choose to act wrongly and so to cause evil."<sup>77</sup> Or, to push Gyekye's question to a deeper level; given that God is omnipotent, he certainly could have made human beings in such a way that they always chose to do good, thereby avoiding evil. Besides, he could also intervene in the event of human freedom of the will leading to evil, and that he could thus control human will.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

To these questions Gyekye has an answer. He argues that if God were to do all these, humans could act in a wholly determined way without any choice at all. This, according to him, would contract the general nature of the concept of destiny and free will as understood by Akan thinkers. Also, it would have resulted in subverting human rationality - - a factor that not only distinguishes human beings from beasts, but also enables them to make general judgements before acting.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, when it is insisted that God should have made human beings such that they always chose the good implies, in effect, that God should have made non-rational creatures and less than human, and therefore wholly without the ability to choose. Even if God were to create humans such that they always chose the good, they would still not be regarded as free inasmuch as the choice of the good would have been predetermined.<sup>80</sup>

Thus Gyekye concludes by asserting that the problem of evil does indeed arise in Akan philosophy and theology. The Akan people maintain that although moral evil exists in the world, this fact is not inconsistent with the assertion that God is omnipotent and wholly good. According to them, evil is ultimately the result of the exercise by humans of their freedom of the will, an attribute endowed upon them by their Creator.<sup>81</sup> Thus we have, in summary, the basic contention of Akan philosophy of destiny, and how it influences their understanding of evil. In the next section, I wish to make a critical analysis of this contention in order to determine whether it obtains.

### **Evaluation of Kwame Gyekye's Thought**

In our investigation of Gyekye's thought, several motifs seemed to govern his thought process. The first of this is his contention that every human being has a destiny that was fixed beforehand. This, according to him, is observable from the fact that particular actions of an individual can be repetitive and persistent, thereby pointing the observer to where an individual is heading for later in life. Secondly, he contends that this destiny is fixed and cannot be changed, and that only God has the power to determine this destiny. Thirdly, he maintains that since God is good, the

---

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

destiny fixed by God must be good. It would therefore be pointless for anyone to attempt to “re-fix” this destiny.

Whereas this view does seem to have credibility in some areas, inconsistencies occur in Gyekye’s argument, some of which will be addressed below. But before I attempt to do this, we probably need to start from a common ground. I am referring to what Gyekye, and other African theologians and philosophers mean by the term “God.” Should we take their understanding of God to be similar to the Judeo-Christian understanding of God, or should we have a completely different view? As noted earlier, most African thinkers maintain that the African concept of God, with a few exceptions, is identical to the God of the Bible. For instance, one sage philosopher is known to have declared that he believed in the existence of one God “both for the Whites and the Blacks.”<sup>82</sup> **Along with many other pieces of evidence not cited here, it would be safe to assume that when we talk of God in African philosophy, the reference is identical to God as described in Christianity and Judaism. We are now ready to evaluate Gyekye’s philosophy.**

Gyekye’s philosophical contribution to the problem of evil deserves to be read. His reflections introduce an interesting vantage point worth considering. He attempts to provide an explanation why a good, omnipotent God would allow the existence of evil. He provides some thought provoking reading when he talks of the sense in which humanity is determined and the sense in which humanity is not. He also takes considerable trouble to argue that human actions are the result of the exercise of free will. But in some areas, the structure of Gyekye’s argument begins to crumble, and I intend to point them out.

First, Gyekye maintains that every human being has a destiny that was fixed beforehand, a destiny that cannot be changed. According to Gyekye, this destiny has to be a good one by virtue of the fact that it is a destiny fixed by a good God.<sup>83</sup> At a glance, this position sounds rather attractive. It implies that all people will, in the long run, have a good, final destiny. However, I think it raises serious problems when one begins to apply its

---

<sup>82</sup> Henry Odera Orika, “Sagacity in African Philosophy,” *African Philosophy* (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 61.

<sup>83</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 116.

principles to its logical conclusion. For if by “all people” he means the good people as well as the bad, this will not only include moralists and kind people; it will also include thieves, criminals, murderers and the like. Moreover, consider the case of Rwanda that I cited at the introduction of the article. Suppose I tell the relatives of those massacred that God has fixed a good destiny for all people, including the murderers of their brothers, sisters, wives, sons and daughters. I suspect that I will not be much of a comfort to them for the following reasons. It makes no sense for God to finally give a good destiny to merciless killers - - and especially so, if he does not hold them responsible for their actions. If those responsible for the genocide could do it at this stage of life without restraint or some form of retribution, what assurance does Gyekye’s philosophy give that the same people will not carry out similar offenses at the next point of destiny? This position implies that, without restriction, one can kill as many people as one wants, and will still end up at a good point of destiny, perhaps together with those he killed! My contention is that this view of determinism as presented by Gyekye needs some serious revision. However, lest I be accused of passing quick judgments on Gyekye philosophy, perhaps, a critical analysis of his basis for belief in this version of destiny would be appropriate.

For instance, observe Gyekye’s first two reasons for believing in his version of destiny. The first reason he gave for this belief was that many Akan proverbs referred to this concept. The second reason is that Akan myths on destiny existed. One will recall that I gave reasons why I thought Gyekye believed in this concept; namely, the premise that only that which is named is real. Whereas this does have some credibility, I would still maintain that it is shaky. A proverb or a myth does not necessarily depict objective truth all the time. Some considerations have to be given as the context from which they evolved. For instance, just because I believe in the Swahili proverb, “Too many cooks spoil the broth,” does not mean that this is always the case. I may have to employ the proverb, “Many hands make light work,” in some instances. What I am attempting to suggest is that care must always be taken when we attempt to use proverbs as a basis for belief or expression of truth. They do not always reflect truth in every situation. Also, just because something has been mentioned does not guarantee its authenticity. It might be totally fictitious. For instance, the existence of science fiction movies like *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* fit Gyekye’s description of what has been named. But this does not guarantee the

occurrence in real life, of star wars, or the existence of beings inhabiting other planets. Thus Gyekye's belief in proverbs as a basis for making truth claims is rather shaky.

As to who exactly determines what is good and what is evil, Gyekye has a very definite answer. According to him good or evil is not that which is commanded by God or, for that matter, any spiritual being. Neither is it that which is pleasing to a spiritual being. Rather it is the community that ascribes "goodness" and "badness." In fact, the sole criterion of "goodness" is the welfare or the well being of the community. This, says Gyekye, enables the community to avoid blaming God when he does not deliver what is expected of him. Besides, a thing is not good because God approves it; rather, God approves of the good because it is good in and of itself.<sup>84</sup>

The danger posed by this argument is that it takes a relative standard and makes it absolute. How, for instance, do they arrive at what they believe is good if God is not involved as the giver of the standard? Take, as an example, the old idea of two cultures. Suppose one of the cultures believes that loving their neighbour is a good thing, how would they survive next to another culture that believes that eating their neighbour is a good thing? I will therefore argue here, as I have done so elsewhere, that in order to come up with absolute standards, we need an absolute lawgiver. Also, if we maintain (as Gyekye does) that God is all-powerful, would it not follow that his power has the element of absolute authority in it? Further, would it not be logical to suppose that he desires that we submit to that authority? If this is true, and I think it is, are cultures not making a dangerous error when they arbitrarily set a standard they believe God would conform to? I contend that it is inconsistent to maintain that God is all-powerful while at the same time autonomously decide what is good and what is evil.

Thirdly, I would have appreciated from Gyekye a further exposition of his distinction between an *action* and an *event*. He maintains that an action is the result of human deliberation. He also postulates that events are mere happenings and occurrences that do not originate from human design and motivation.<sup>85</sup> By his argument therefore, natural evil, as understood by

---

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 124.

Western philosophy, would fall under the category of events. These would include natural disasters like earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes and so on. One will also recall Gyekye's assertion that in Akan thought, every event seems to have a cause, and that nothing is attributed to chance.<sup>86</sup> He does not clarify what the cause is. Perhaps it is a spirit. If this is so, it would contradict his later claim that all the events are determined. Perhaps the cause of these events is God. But this would still contradict his claim that God is not the author of evil, for included among the events he lists, are natural evils like earthquakes, tornadoes, the flooding of rivers and the like. At any rate, what I am suggesting here is that I would have appreciated a deeper exposition of *events* versus *actions* from Gyekye.

The fourth aspect of Gyekye's argument that I wish to expose is another possible instance of inconsistency that he probably did not detect. One will recall that he strongly argued that human beings exercise free will. According to him, *events* are determined, but *actions* are the result of human free will.<sup>87</sup> In light of this, consider, once again, his statement. He writes, "Nevertheless, it is clear that the Akan notion of destiny is a general one, which implies that not everything that a person does or happens to him or her represents a page from the 'book of destiny.'"<sup>88</sup> A closer look at this statement will expose a contradiction. According to this statement, some things a person does do not represent a page from the 'book of destiny.' One would, by implication, deduce that the same statement suggests that there are other things a person does which could represent a page from the book of destiny. If this is what the sentence implies, and there is no reason to believe that it does not, is Gyekye not suggesting that some human actions and choices are determined? My conclusion is that Gyekye's philosophical system needs thorough revision if it has to be taken as a valid truth claim.

### Conclusion

My intention in this article was to investigate the problem of evil as understood by the African mind. The investigation revolved around two levels of thought: the non-philosophical response to evil in Africa, and the

---

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 115.

philosophical response to the same, with specific reference to Kwame Gyekye's thought. We have investigated both levels and have seen that they echo, in Africa as in the Western countries, the same intellectual problems posed by the problem of evil. But we have also seen that they contain serious flaws as belief systems, and therefore, need to be revised. In other words, the inconsistencies they portray do not render them sound as systems of belief. I suggest we articulate a world-view that offers the best possible solution to dealing with the problem of evil. It would seem to me that the Judeo-Christian system of belief is just such a world-view. However, articulating it would require another article altogether.

### Bibliography

- Gyekye, Kwame. *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Kahema, Newton. "The Pain of Visiting a Rwandan Genocide Site." [Http://www.africanews.org/pana/news/19971101](http://www.africanews.org/pana/news/19971101)
- Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1994.
- Mudimbe, V. Y. *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988.
- Nkurunziza, Deusdedit R. K. *Bantu Philosophy of Life in the Light of the Christian Message: A Basis for an African Vitalistic Theology*. Frankfurt Main: Peter Lang, 1989.
- Serequeberhan, Tsenay. Ed. *African Philosophy: The essential Readings*. New York: Paragon House, 1991.