

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Rethinking the concept of God and the problem of evil from the perspective of African thought

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### Abstract

In this article, I show that: (1) There is a transcendence strain in African Traditional Religion (ATR) and traditional African thought that agrees perfectly with traditional monotheism and legitimizes the question of the relation of God with evil in the world. (2) There is incontrovertible evidence of the conception of God as a limited deity that subverts the categories of omnipotence and omniscience. (3) African philosophers of religion must show how a transcendent or, conversely, a limited God is related to the evil that exists in the world, since the overwhelming stance of ATR is that God is the creator of the world and wields effective power. I substitute the categories of omnipotence and omniscience with the novel categories of power and glory and argue that while a powerful and glorious God is not the author of evil and cannot eliminate evil in the world, such a God can be conceived as working to reduce the evil in the world through the instrumentality of human moral agency.

**Keywords:** African philosophy; evil; glory; God; mood; omnipotence; omniscience; power

### Introduction

Early scholars of African Traditional Religion (ATR) presented an African perspective of God that cast the deity in the mould of the God of traditional monotheistic religions like Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (see Idowu (1962); Mbiti (1969); *Idem* (1970); Idowu (1973); Awolalu and Dopamu (1979); Metuh (1981); Achebe (1994); Njoku (2002); cf. p'Bitek (2011); Metz and Molefe (2021)). With the God of ATR assuming the aspects of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence, the problem of evil naturally arose. If God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, then he is powerful enough to eliminate moral and physical evil: if he is unable to do so, he is neither omnipotent nor omniscient, and if he is unwilling, then he is not omnibenevolent (see Mackie (1955); Plantinga (1975); Hick (1985); van Inwagen (2006)). Omnipotence implies omniscience since to say that a being is all-powerful is to imply that such a being is powerful enough to actualize a state of affairs that makes the being able to know all things and know what has to be done to preserve the privilege of omnipotence.

However, later scholars of ATR and philosophers of religion with interest in the decolonization project in African humanities have stridently questioned the earlier view of God in their conviction that the casting of God in the mould of the Christian God was motivated by the desire to prove that Africans have an elevated, or non-primitive, independent

conception of a Supreme Being (see, for instance, p'Bitek (1971); Sogolo (1993); Bewaji (1998); Wiredu (1998), (2010); Oladipo (2004); Abimbola (2006); Balogun (2009); Fayemi (2012); cf. Igboin (2014)). Consequently, for these critical scholars, the problem of the incompatibility of evil in the world with an omnipotent God does not arise in African philosophy of religion. I argue in this article that there is evidence that supports the legitimacy of both the early transcendence view of God and the later view of a limited God and that the question of God and evil is an unavoidable question for African philosophers, whether they adopt the limitation view or stick with the transcendence view.

The main sources of information about ATR are oral sources. These oral sources include proverbs, wise sayings, riddles, cultural and linguistic phenomena such as worldviews of traditional African societies and orally transmitted religious texts (for instance, the Ifa corpus of the Yoruba people), names for God in African languages and names given to individuals at the time of their birth, as well as traditional religious and worship practices. Both the theists and the sceptics rely on these sources to arrive at their conflicting stances on the existence of God. The antinomy of God's existence in African philosophy of religion is captured by the following conflicting propositions:

- (1) There exists a Supreme Being that is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent.
- (2) There is no transcendent God but only a limited deity that cannot eliminate evil in the world.

In this article, I will argue that: (1) There is a transcendence strain in ATR and traditional African thought that agrees perfectly with traditional monotheism and legitimizes the question of the relation of God with evil in the world. (2) There is evidence of the conception of God as a limited deity that subverts the categories of omnipotence and omniscience and renders them inapplicable. (3) It is necessary for African philosophers of religion to acknowledge the legitimacy of the two conflicting views in order to avoid formulating inconsistent theories of the relation of God with the world that depict God as both omnipotent and limited in the same respect. (4) Whether one accepts the transcendence view or the limitation framework, it is necessary for African philosophers of religion to show how a transcendent or, conversely, a limited God is related to the evil that exists in the world, since the overwhelming stance of ATR is that God is the creator of the world and wields effective power, even if one believes that this power is not absolute. (5) The view of God as a limited deity who is yet not powerless, since he is powerful enough to create the world from pre-existing material, is more plausible than the opposing transcendental view of God. Consequently, I substitute the categories of omnipotence and omniscience with the novel categories of power and glory and argue that while a powerful and glorious God is not the author of evil and cannot eliminate evil in the world, such a God can be plausibly conceived as working to reduce the evil in the world through human moral agency. I assert that substituting the categories of omnipotence and omniscience with the categories of power and glory supplies a more complete metaphysical scheme that describes a universe in which belief in God's existence is rational and in which evil can be accounted for as simply a necessary part of the furniture of an imperfectly expressed universe. I submit that such a metaphysical scheme fills the knowledge gap created by African philosophers who reject the transcendence view of God and accept the claim that God is a limited creator-deity but fail to demonstrate the extent of his power.

### **Navigating the antinomy of transcendence and limitation**

If it is asserted that 'There exists a Supreme Being that is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent', evidence can be extracted from African oral sources that both prove

and disprove the assertion. If it is also asserted that ‘There is no transcendent God but only a limited deity that cannot stop the evil in the world’, both corroborating and discrediting evidence can be extracted from African oral sources. In this section I will highlight the conflict that constitutes the antinomy of transcendence and limitation and underline its significance for African philosophy of religion.

### *The case for transcendence*

Idowu has noted how the Ifa text captures such superlative qualities of Olodumare, or God, as his eternity, self-sufficiency, and immutability in verses like ‘Olodumare has rubbed His head with bar-wood dust (*Iyerosun*) | He will never die | (His) whole head is become exceedingly hoary’ and ‘The young never hear that Olodumare is dead . . . | The old never hear that Olodumare is dead’ (cited in Bewaji (1998), 9). Gyekye (1995, 69–71) reaches a similar conclusion while discussing traditional Akan theology and analysing Akan linguistic phenomena such as names for God in the Akan language. Significant names for God include *Odomankoma*, or the infinite and eternal, *Otumfo*, or the omnipotent, and *Brekylirihunuade*, or the omniscient. In a famous dialogue between Akunna the village elder and Mr Brown the Christian missionary in Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart*, Akunna tells Mr Brown that the idea of a supreme (therefore, omnipotent) being has always been familiar to the Igbo: ‘Our fathers knew that Chukwu was the Overlord and that is why many of them gave their children the name Chukwuka, Chukwu is Supreme’ (Achebe (1994), 180). Omnipotent and omniscient conceptions of God as revealed in traditional African names are widespread throughout Black Africa (see Mbiti (1970); Idowu (1973); Namukoa *et al.* (2000); Njoku (2002); Agada (2017)).

It may be objected at this juncture that the idea of a supreme being does not strictly correspond to the idea of an omnipotent being. However, Achebe uses the word supreme in the manner that theistic scholars like Gyekye, Mbiti, Idowu, and Njoku use it. All five scholars use the word to describe the God of traditional theism, one conceived as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. Scruples about strict correspondence lie, in my opinion, with the *omni* emphasis in the *omni* words. A being considered to be omnipotent must be a supreme being in a given physical and metaphysical space, with the appellation supreme capturing the condition of an entity that exhibits the highest degree of being and is in itself unlimited by any other entity. If a being cannot be limited by any other being or principle, the powers exhibited by such a being are of the order of omnipotence. To be omnipotent does not mean a being should act capriciously and wield power chaotically.

The ubiquity of lesser deities in ATR is sometimes regarded as evidence that ATR is polytheistic rather than monotheistic, and that, consequently, the God of ATR cannot be a transcendent being. However, the ubiquity of lesser deities merely masks God’s greatness. ATR conceives God as so great and majestic that he cannot deal directly with puny mortals without humans suffering the harm of direct encounter with divine majesty (cf. Paris (1995), 30). Achebe (1994, 180) reconciles the notion of God’s hiddenness and the idea of his transcendence in ATR with his master–servant analogy, where God is the master and lesser deities are his servants who must serve as intermediaries given the privileged standing of the master. God’s remoteness, Achebe notes, does not stop the Igbo from describing him with the name Chukwuka, which means ‘Chukwu [God] is Supreme’ (Achebe (1994), 180). The category of supremacy indicates unrivalled power possessed by an entity in a given or conceivable world, which qualifies such an entity for the title of omnipotence. Paying close attention to the multiplicity of deities in ATR, Idowu (1973, 135) asserts persuasively that the perceived polytheism of ATR is properly a diffused monotheism since God is clearly vested with the ultimate power; he is accorded the honour due the supreme judge in a supreme court. Even Bewaji (1998, 7), an opponent

of the transcendence view, confesses that: 'Olodumare has all the attributes which Idowu, Mbiti, Awolalu, Dopamu, and other theological scholars have annotated, that is, Olodumare is the origin of the universe and in the language of Anselm, He is the being that which [sic] none greater can be conceived.' The God whose existence Anselm's ontological argument seeks to demonstrate is, of course, the Christian God considered as an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent creator.<sup>1</sup> From the evidence adduced so far, it is obvious that there is a transcendence moment in ATR.

### *The case for limitation*

Wiredu has supplied one of the most incisive arguments against the transcendence view and deserves special attention. He declares:

'In the Akan conceptual framework, then, existence is spatial. Now, since whatever transcendence means . . . it implies existence beyond space, it follows that talk of any transcendent being is not just false but unintelligible, from an Akan point of view' (Wiredu (1996), 49–50). Wiredu makes an implicit distinction between a world and a universe in his attempt to refute the notion of a transcendent God who is not spatiotemporally located. Going by Wiredu's interpretation of Akan traditional theology, if we can talk about the world as the creation of an author, then God is not a part of this world, but if we expand the world-space to include the universe (regarded as a totality of all existent things), then God becomes a part of the universe and also becomes subject to law-like conditions. Wiredu appears to be using the term 'world' in the sense of Planet Earth and the known reaches of space. The terms 'world' and 'universe' are often used interchangeably to mean an immense totality of existing and potentially existent things. But whether we use the term 'world' to refer to Planet Earth and the known reaches of space or the universe (the known and unknown reaches of space), Wiredu contends that every describable or conceivable space is physical or quasi-physical (in the sense of ultimate reducibility to the physical, however anomalous certain consciousness properties within this space may appear). If God created the world, he must have done so from a pre-existing physical material (which Wiredu does not identify) in the universe and is, therefore, limited by this pre-existing stuff (Wiredu (1996), *Idem* (1998)). If God is simply a part of the universe, he will be one out of many entities in the universe that modify his being through interaction; consequently, he will lack transcendental powers. Thus, there is always a pre-existing stuff, according to Wiredu, that characterizes an actual universe, of which a created world is a part, and which limits the creating entity.

While Wiredu agrees that the Akan conceive God as a creator and a benevolent entity, he is quick to point out that God does not create out of nothing. The idea of nothingness negates the Akan conception of spatiality as one closely bound with the occurrence of a thing, the here-ness and there-ness of a thing. If God is limited in power and, consequently, in knowledge, he cannot be blamed for the evil in the world. Wiredu (2010, 195) writes: 'On the Akan understanding of things, indeed, God is good in the highest; but his goodness is conceptually of a type with a just and benevolent ancestor.' The comparison with an ancestor conveys God's relative impotence. Being limited by pre-existing matter, he lacks the power to interfere with the law-like course of things and eliminate evil which may well have its basis in the pre-existing matter.

If Wiredu is hesitant to describe God as capable of evil, Bewaji pointedly says that God is capable of evil. In a manner reminiscent of the evil-God challenge in Western philosophy of religion, which invites one to imagine the possibility of an omnipotent, omniscient,

and all-evil God (see, for instance, Law (2010)), Bewaji (1998) suggests that God may be so great as to be capable of doing both good and evil. At this point, it appears that Bewaji is conflating the transcendence and limitation views which, as I have already noted, constitute an antinomy in African philosophy of religion. Bewaji suggests that a God capable of doing both good and evil, without any external constraint on this capacity, must possess powers of the magnitude of omnipotence. This confusion notwithstanding, Bewaji is actually asserting that the reality of evil in the world is compatible with the postulation of God's existence in Yoruba theology since God is conceived as a limited (but not powerless) being that is neither omniscient nor omnipotent and certainly not all-good. He cites the Ifa corpus where it is documented that Olodumare, or God, seeks the counsel of the divinity of wisdom, Orunmila, whenever he is perplexed about certain questions, including the question of his (God) own immortality (Bewaji (1998), 9–10). Here, we see that God is limited in knowledge and, therefore, power. For, as previously asserted, to lack in knowledge means an entity is not powerful enough to actualize a state of affairs that makes knowledge possible and adequate. Fayemi (2012) corroborates Bewaji's view of God's limitation when he notes that the lesser deities in the Yoruba belief-system play an effective role in the organization of the world. On God's limitation, Oladipo (2004, 360) writes that:

If omnipotence implies 'infinite powers,' then to say that Olódùmarè is omnipotent is to say that He is almighty in the sense that He is not subject to any constraints in the exercise of His powers. However, it is doubtful that Olódùmarè can be said to be all-powerful in this sense. A crucial consideration in this regard is the acknowledgment, by the people, of other powers and principalities – divinities, spirits, magic, witchcraft, and so on. Some of these powers and forces are treated as ends in themselves. Hence, the people endeavor, through sacrifice, to be on good terms with them in recognition of their powers to aid or hinder human activities.

For Fayemi, while God is the ultimate cause of the lesser deities, he does not have sovereign power of control over the deities. It is not clear how God is the ultimate cause of the ubiquitous and hyperactive deities and still lacks full controlling powers over the deities. Fayemi does not say whether possession of free will by the lesser deities is an endowment from God, which God values enough to not demand absolute and automatic obedience from the lesser deities. One may understand Fayemi's sense of ultimate causality in terms of dependency. The lesser deities could have been created directly by a powerful but not all-powerful God who later discovered that he needed the support structures erected by the now relatively independent deities that he brought into existence for the effective actualization of his will.<sup>2</sup> One can also approach the idea of ultimate causality simply in terms of God's overlordship, but not sovereignty, over the lesser deities established through God's superior power and knowledge, such that God can impose serious punishment on erring deities and even annihilate them altogether. Whichever sense of ultimate causality is plausible, Abimbola denies the thesis outright and insists that in traditional Yoruba theology God does not enjoy any pre-eminent status in the pantheon of gods. According to Abimbola (2006, 72), the God depicted in the Ifa corpus is a limited deity rivalled in knowledge and power by the divinities Ifa, Obatala, and Esu. This view is contested (see Igboin (2014)); however, it goes a long way in demonstrating the legitimacy, the cultural rootedness, of the limitation thesis.

### *Navigating the antinomy*

We see two broad views about God, with each view opposed to the other and legitimized by ATR and traditional African belief-systems. It is just as correct to say that ATR endorses

the thesis of God's transcendence as it is to assert that in ATR, God is a limited deity, neither omnipotent nor omniscient and not all-good. The antinomy cannot be resolved if resolution means reconciliation, in view of the equal legitimacy of the conflicting views. However, the antinomy can be navigated so that African philosophers can produce coherent theories about the existence of God. Failure to recognize the equal legitimacy of the two views and philosophize only within one framework, after epistemological commitment to the framework, will lead to the kind of contradictory statements philosophers like Bewaji (1998) and Fayemi (2012) make when they attempt to seriously engage with the question of God's existence and assert his omnipotence and limitation simultaneously with respect to his power.

While Bewaji (1998, 7) asserts that the categories of omnipotence and omniscience are imported Western categories that must be subjected to de-colonizing critique, he, paradoxically, submits that the Yoruba-African God is the perfect God of St Anselm, a being a greater than which nothing can be conceived. Fayemi (2012, 7) also falls into contradiction when he argues for God's limitedness as a co-creator who cannot eliminate moral and physical evil but who is yet, and paradoxically, 'the Supreme Deity, the sustainer and upholder of the universe'. The idea of a supreme being in the universe that upholds the same universe belongs to the framework of transcendence. African philosophers are at liberty to pick the framework they find most plausible or attractive and philosophize accordingly. In this article, I will argue that God is a limited but by no means powerless deity.

The framework of transcendence naturally raises the problem of evil and invites theists to construct theodicies that explain how a good God who is omnipotent and omniscient can allow the kind, and magnitude, of suffering we find in the world. African philosophers who reject the framework of transcendence in favour of the framework of limitation are mistaken in supposing that by embracing the claim of the compatibility of evil with the existence of a limited God they render the problem of evil irrelevant in the context of African philosophy of religion.

It is commonly assumed that the problem of evil arises only for someone who thinks that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and all-good (see, for instance, Mackie (1955); Plantinga (1975); Hick (1985); van Inwagen (2006)). This criterion does not apply strictly to the African philosopher of religion because the framework of transcendence is rivalled by the framework of limitation in the African context even as the latter presents God as a sufficiently powerful creator of the world rather than an impotent deity. Wiredu, a consistent opponent of the transcendence view, accepts that God possesses unique powers that confer the privilege of a creator on him. He 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' (Wiredu (1998), 41). God may not be conceived as omnipotent, but he is still powerful enough to create worlds. Such a sufficiently powerful creator bears some responsibility for the evil in the world he created.

Regardless of Wiredu's distinction between a designer-God who is limited by the material from which he fashions the world, and a transcendent God who creates the world *ex nihilo*, he clearly accepts the proposition that God created the world, at least in the context of his reading of traditional Akan theology (see Wiredu (1998)). A creator-God is by no means an impotent God, as suggested earlier. The idea of God as the creator of the world is widely upheld in the ATR literature. Even when a sceptic like Abimbola (2006) undermines the transcendence view, he accepts that God is, at least, a co-creator, together with other deities. The magnitude of power that is conveyed by the notion of creator is not reduced by the phenomenon of God's hiddenness and the ubiquity of lesser deities since the ultimacy thesis holds true in most traditional African societies to the effect that God is the ultimate cause of physical and spiritual phenomena

(see Idowu (1973), 135). Given the degree of power that a creator and controller wields, Fayemi is right, then, to assert that God (and the lesser deities) bears a level of responsibility for the evil in the world, at least the species of evil not attributable to human exercise of free will. This species of evil would include diseases afflicting humans and animals and natural disasters.

It is not straightforward to understand how a limited but creative God is related to the world in which evil persists. African philosophers have largely overlooked this problem. Wiredu paid passing attention to it by suggesting that evil may have its origin in the pre-existing matter from which God fashions the world. In the following sections, I will advance Wiredu's intuition by constructing a metaphysical model that shows how a limited God can be a powerful creator and have an obligation to reduce the evil in the world by using the human being as the primary vehicle of amelioration rather than through direct miraculous intervention. In the process, I will supply a novel perspective on God and argue for the rationality of belief in his existence using an argumentative manoeuvre that I will dub the argument from vitality.

### The existence of God

Okot p'Bitek (2011, 51–52) has suggested that if the Christian God has not survived the age of scientific and philosophical scepticism about religion it is unlikely that African deities (or gods) will fare better since it will become increasingly clear that belief in the existence of these deities is irrational. He takes the unargued position that ATR is polytheistic (cf. Metz and Molefe (2021)) and asserts that the concept of a high deity called God is an imported Western concept. I have already shown that this idea is false even as I have favoured the limitation framework which admits that Africans largely believe in the existence of a God who created the world but is by no means omnipotent and omniscient. In this section I will argue that it is rational to believe in the existence of a limited God by demonstrating that the phenomenon of life in the world makes the most sense when we appeal to a higher being that maximally exemplifies life and imparts it to entities in the world, being sufficiently powerful and knowledgeable to do so.

The cosmological argument for God's existence takes several routes to demonstrating the existence of God as a necessary being. One form or the other of this argument has flourished in Western philosophy right from the time of Plato and has received a scientific colouring in the thought of contemporary Western philosophers of religion like Craig (1979) and Collins (2009) who deploy data from physics in defence of traditional theism. So much has been written about standard cosmological arguments that it will be unproductive to explore them here. The argument from vitality that I deploy in this section may come across as a form of the cosmological argument to the extent that life, as a common feature of the world, is my starting point. However, the argument from vitality finds its bearings within African philosophy rather than Western philosophy and only defends the rationality of belief in the existence of a necessary being (in the sense of *existing* as the maximal embodiment of vitality) that is yet neither omnipotent nor omniscient but powerful enough to create the world. The argument will not be presented as a proof given the difficulty of proving God's existence by the mere force of argument (see Kant [1781] (1970)). God as a limited creator is presented here as a postulate.

Cosmological arguments usually proceed from the consideration of contingent features of the world like motion, order, and the fact of contingent objects existing in the world. The common denominator is the postulation of necessity as the ground of contingency. Necessary existence is assumed to be true and absolute, such that it is logically contradictory to deny the reality of a thing possessing necessary existence. The biggest challenge for Western philosophers of religion has always been demarcating the existential

boundary between necessity and contingency, between the operative sphere of a necessary being and the sphere of dependent contingent realities. Thus, it has proved difficult to stop with God when the cosmological argument is employed to show that positing God's necessary existence puts an end to the infinite regress of causes of contingent phenomena.

However, the necessity–contingency dichotomy will not be problematic in this article since I set out to argue for the existence of a powerful God (who creates worlds) and a glorious God (who is knowledgeable enough to create worlds) but is neither all-powerful nor all-knowing. The existence of a powerful and glorious God is necessary only in the sense that the brute fact of the world makes the most sense with the postulation of this God as the instrumental source of the vitality that animates the world.<sup>3</sup> In other words, a being that maximally exemplifies vitality must exist for a world full of vital features and phenomena to exist. A necessary being, therefore, does not have to be a perfect being. It also does not have to be outside the universe, conceived in the Wiredu sense as a God-limiting totality beyond the non-limiting world that God created. For the sake of emphasis, I use world here to mean our living planet and the known reaches of space where life can possibly exist, a vast space that exhibits features of vitalism. The vital force is an animating principle regarded as basic and distributed throughout the world and possessed by all entities in the world, whether alive or not alive (see Njoku (2014)). The vital force is variously described as a life-force (Tempels (1959)), a non-material animating principle (Gyekye (1995)), a quasi-physical phenomenon (Wiredu 1996), and a consciousness-matter event (Agada (2020)). The vital force is believed to come from God as the highest embodiment of vitality in the universe (Tempels (1959); Imafidon (2019)). The term 'universe' is used to mean both the known and unknown physical and metaphysical spaces conceived as an absolute totality. The vitalistic God has been widely discussed by scholars like Metz and Molefe, Tempels, and Nalwamba and Buitendag (2017). Metz and Molefe, Tempels, and Nalwamba and Buitendag identify the vitalistic God with the theistic God. Given that I favour the limited God thesis, I identify the vitalistic God with the limited God in this article. A vitalistic God can continually create worlds from resources already available in the universe and continually expand the frontiers of this universe. Such a God is a being of power and glory. Such a being is necessary simply by reason of its maximal vitalistic existence, which explains the vitalism of things in the world. Such a necessary being is subject to no other being except its very nature which limits it and which is constituted by the universal vital force. This force would be the fundamental principle of the universe and God would be the highest being that exemplifies this force. His creativity then consists of manipulating this vital essence and transmitting it to all created things. This means that God is that being with the highest knowledge of the necessary operation of the vital force, for which reason God is regarded as a being of glory.

### *Intuitions of a vital God in African thought*

The human being is believed to embody vitalism in various degrees. The more active the vital force of a human being is the more abundant life is (see Tempels (1959); Nkemnkia (1999); Imafidon (2019)).

The value attached to vitality will seem to privilege life as the most salient feature of the world since without life, either actually or potentially, there can be no rationality, except when we speculate about the possibility of the existence of a pure consciousness. According to Metz and Molefe (2021, 397):

[W]hat stands out about the African tradition is the conception of God in terms of bios, that is, what African philosophers tend to call 'life-force' but what may also

be called ‘vitality’ . . . a gradient property, with God having the maximum degrees of strength, creativity, synthesis, growth, vibrancy, actuality, self-motion, and reproduction.

Metz and Molefe use the term ‘reproduction’ as a measure of God’s creative powers. Life in the broad African context includes ‘everything in the perceptible world’ (Metz and Molefe (2021), 397). A noteworthy implication of this broad understanding of bios is the admissibility of panpsychism in African thought, since one can legitimately infer that the life-force or divine energy can be interpreted by philosophers in terms of a fundamental consciousness quality. However, given the conceptualization of the life-force, or vital force, as some kind of principle active throughout nature (and which underlies physical objects), including God’s nature, the principle is inextricably linked to the structure of matter, such that a pure consciousness-form cannot be actual although thinkable (see Agada (2015); *Idem* (2020)). Consequently, God cannot be a pure consciousness-form, or logos, or thinking substance if he must be actual. Thus, the African intuition of bios taking precedence over logos makes sense in respect of God as the maximal vital being. God’s rationality will then be an instrument for the ordering of the world as best as he can rather than a primal condition for, and of, his existence.

A God who is not pure logos or rationality will be one limited by the stuff (vital force) that it maximally exemplifies. The vital force limits this God because it is an independent principle which animates all things, including God, and which contains within it the germs of imperfection that it transmits to all things. More will be said on this matter in the next section where the vital force is reconceptualized as *mood*. A God who is pure rationality will be an omniscient being. To possess the perfection of omniscience implies the possession of omnipotence, and a God possessing these perfections cannot be limited. Omniscience and omnipotence are perfections attributable to a perfect being. The traditional theistic God would possess a blemish if he possessed one perfection and lacked the other. If he is lacking in the perfection of omniscience, he is no longer perfect and will lack powers of the order of omnipotence. It will then follow logically that a being that is not pure rationality will lack the fullness of knowledge and power to create a perfect world without evil.

### *The argument from life*

Proposition 1: There are beings in the world that possess the quality of life.

Proposition 2: Biogenesis is a plausible hypothesis.

Proposition 3: A world that is alive must have a powerful but not omnipotent being, which maximally embodies life, as its designer.

I understand the term ‘life’ in the sense already suggested in this article and emphasized by Metz and Molefe (2021). This understanding of life encompasses the biological sense of a fundamental quality that enables beings to exhibit secondary characteristics like self-motion, reproduction, eating, thinking, willing, and feeling. These secondary characteristics are reducible to yearning, or striving or goal-directed activity, either consciously or unconsciously. Entities that possess active life yearn. Such entities include animals and plants. My understanding of life also extends to entities in the mineral kingdom like rocks, mountains, and rivers. These entities cannot reproduce but they possess the capacity for *activity*, which is apparent in the intense subatomic interactive motions that constitute their operative sphere and impact the workings of natural laws. Such entities possess passive life. Passivity here implies a potentiality for active life. Thus, it is plausible that what seems to us active life emerges from passive life rather than from non-life.

Accordingly, the thesis of abiogenesis is denied. Abiogenesis is the view that living forms ultimately emerged from non-living matter while biogenesis holds that life is fundamental (see, for instance, Farley (1972)). The way life is defined in this article breaks down the borders of abiogenesis as a theory and reimagines this theory as biogenesis. If biogenesis is denied, life as a feature of the world must be regarded as an anomaly, since it seems implausible that non-life generated life. But life cannot be an anomaly in the world in view of its pervasiveness in its active manifestation in the animal and plant kingdoms, with millions of species exhibiting the characteristics of life. It makes sense to say that life is a norm of all entities in the world, either in its active manifestation or its passive manifestation, such that the claim of biogenesis holds true that life is a fundamental feature of the world rather than an instrumental quality required for entities possessing varying degrees of active consciousness to achieve their goals. In the first place, reason is necessarily dependent on life. It is not a supreme value but is rather a secondary characteristic dependent on the fundamental and, therefore, superlative quality of life. Indeed, active life as exhibited by entities in the plant kingdom persists in the absence of a developed faculty of reason.

In the world we observe different levels of the sophistication of life as possessed by entities, from the elementary level of passivity exhibited by passively living beings to the advanced level exhibited by actively living beings. There must exist a powerful being with sufficient knowledge of the operation of the fundamental vitality that animates the universe, of which this being is a part, to create a world inhabited by living beings. This being is said to possess power as the creator of a living world from a living pre-existing stuff animating an eternally existing universe in which this being is the maximal embodiment of the living stuff. The pre-existing stuff constitutes the universe and is, therefore, as old as the universe. It predates the being that manipulates it to create the world since the being is a manifestation of the pre-existing stuff. This powerful being is said to be a being of glory because it possesses a level of knowledge sufficient for it to order the world. This powerful being cannot, however, be an omnipotent being since it is a part of a limiting universe animated by a pre-existing life-stuff which is necessarily incomplete since its fundamental orientation is yearning. That which seeks in perpetuity is not only incomplete in itself but is also always imperfectly actualized. The pre-existing stuff is thus an eternal mood (see previous section), the perpetual yearning of a fundamental principle that can be instantiated in particular entities. *Mood* expresses itself as a perpetual striving to endure, reproduce, multiply, and expand without ever reaching perfection, or completeness.

A powerful but limited being knowledgeable enough to accumulate the most powers that it can acquire through the manipulation of the living, eternally existing stuff is required if a world populated by living things is to become actual. Such a living world will not exist in reality if it remains a mere plan in the thought of a living being that looms large in a universe animated by *mood*. A living world emerges as a creation of a living God that creates something not previously actual from a living material or stuff that constitutes its nature in a living universe in which this being looms large as the maximal exemplar of the vitality of the eternal *mood*, or the pre-existing stuff. This being is the entity called God. It is powerful but not omnipotent, knowledgeable but not omniscient, endowed with personality and benevolent but unable to eliminate evil in his created world by divine fiat. While the empirical verification of the existence of this being is impossible, the empirical verification of its non-existence is also impossible. But if it makes sense that positing its existence sheds light on the phenomenon of life, then believing sincerely in its existence is not contrary to reason. Thus, it is demonstrated that: (1) there are beings in the world that possess the quality of life, (2) biogenesis is a plausible hypothesis, (3) a world that is alive must have a powerful but not omnipotent being, which maximally embodies life, as its designer.

### The categories of power and glory and the problem of evil

I will proceed with the exploration of the categories of power and glory as substitutes for the traditional categories of omnipotence and omniscience by first advancing the idea of vital force as a consciousness-matter event rather than as a wholly immaterial principle as Gyekye (1995) proposes or as an ultimately physical phenomenon as Wiredu (1996) asserts or as merely a spark of divine energy posterior to God's existence (Tempels (1959); Imafidon (2019); Metz and Molefe (2021)). If the vital force is wholly a consciousness-form, that is, immaterial, it is difficult to see how it can interact with and, in fact, animate material or physical objects. In this case, it will be not only irreducible but it will also be isolated since it has nothing in common with material objects. It will be self-sufficient, needing no interactive relationship with anything material outside it for worlds to emerge. If the vital force is conceived as wholly, or ultimately, physical, consciousness will not exist in the world since mental qualities will be regarded as merely epiphenomenal. This stance will appeal to the eliminative physicalist, but it cannot account for the apparent independence of subjective experience in the context of human life considered as a project in the world. If the vital force is simply a spark of divine energy and, therefore, not a limiting universal principle, then God is pure consciousness, or logos, perfect and self-sufficient. Paradoxically, such a perfect being will not be able to create a material world like the one we inhabit because this being will be completely isolated from whatever is material, since it has nothing in common with materiality. Logically, one can conceive a perfect being that is omnipotent, omniscient, and a pure consciousness-form as a creator of material worlds. But practically, it remains problematic how such a being can create a material world.

The difficulties and paradoxes are resolved once the vital force is conceived in terms of an event, a necessary occurrence or universal phenomenon, in which consciousness and matter are fundamental and mutually intelligible (Agada (2021), 4–8). The bond of mutuality that makes continual interaction possible will then be the yearning essence of both phenomena. Matter yearns and is either now alive as in the case of an animal or it yearns and is potentially alive as in the case of objects in the mineral kingdom. With this transformation of the vital force into a consciousness-matter event, the limiting primordial principle that Wiredu identifies as pre-existing matter becomes what I call *mood*. The idea of *mood* is particularly attractive because it unifies the African universe of material and non-material objects by accounting for the reality of consciousness phenomena instead of cavalierly dismissing such phenomena as Wiredu does with the claim that in Akan thought existence is synonymous with spatiality. But a specific space need not be conceived solely in terms of physical space. One can imagine a metaphysical space in a possible world where qualities and objects do not obey the known physical laws governing our world.

*Mood* is the primordial consciousness-matter event which animates all entities in the universe, including God, and limits everything in varying degrees given its essence as an eternal search for the fullest reality. *Mood* is that which 'marks the boundary between the physical and the immaterial' (Agada (2020), 111) in the sense of the physical indicating the latent consciousness phase of an entity, with the term 'immaterial' indicating the latent physical phase of an entity. More expansively, *mood* is:

[T]he primordial mind-matter interface and the source of all intelligence and emotions in the universe . . . The idea of *mood* as a proto-mind implies that it is an event prior to what is commonly referred to as mind or the sphere of mental properties . . . *mood* as proto-mind is what produces mindness in things. It is also submitted that *mood* is a unity of the physical and the minded. It follows, then, that this fundamental

principle is an event, the mind-matter interface, where the borders distinguishing mind from matter are constantly transgressed, such that it makes more sense to talk about phases of reality rather than wholly independent mind and matter spheres. (Agada (2022), 87)

In other words, borders demarcating the spheres of operation of mentality and materiality in an entity are constantly transgressed so that language describing both mental and physical properties can apply to a physical entity without contradiction. For example, it can be said of a human being that he or she is seeing a white car, with the ongoing experience of seeing whiteness not transferable to another person and not reducible to physical neural processes. Non-reducibility means that the event of experiencing whiteness gives a measure of the dominant mentalistic or consciousness phase of a phenomenon (the experience of whiteness) whose latent material phase is constituted by neural processes.

*Mood* is 'originary intelligence and feeling, containing within itself the conditions of growth and development . . . It motivates the activities of all things as their essence. Everything in the universe is a development of *mood*, both the animate and the inanimate' (Agada (2019), 4; see also Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya (2021)). The term 'inanimate' refers to what I understand in this article as passive life. From the sense of *mood* presented above it is obvious that a God that maximally exemplifies vitality (now transformed into a primordial consciousness-matter event) cannot possess the superlative qualities of omnipotence and omniscience. God exists necessarily as the highest exemplar of *mood* in the universe; he creates a world by exhibiting great power and knowledge of the operation of *mood*. God exercises power in creating a world by imparting into entities an animating principle that predated him. He is also a glorious being by virtue of possessing the knowledge that enables him to harness *mood* and create a world of active entities (both animate and 'inanimate'). Accordingly, in a universe of *mood*, God is a being of power and glory. The superlative categories of omnipotence and omniscience are inadmissible, because if God is omnipotent and omniscient, he will create either an absolutely good universe without evil or an absolutely evil universe without good.

This is the case because an omnipotent God is all-powerful rather than sufficiently powerful. In the same manner, an omniscient God will be all-knowing rather than sufficiently knowledgeable. A God with the fullness of power and knowledge can do all things. If this God is good, he will only create a good world, and in this good world there will be no suffering endured by actively and passively living beings. If this omnipotent and omniscient God is evil, he will only create a bad world since goodness is not part of his nature, being thoroughly evil as befitting a malicious omnipotent and omniscient deity. In other words, an all-powerful God with full knowledge of past, present, and future will maximize goodness and badness in any world he creates in accordance with his own nature. Let one suppose that indifference is a third variable: will this world not be the perfect manifestation of a reality created by a being that is indifferent to good and evil? The amount of indifference in the world is minimal given that humans, and even animals, are self-interested creatures pursuing their various ends. A world like ours could not be the product of an indifferent God. But if, for the sake of argument, we imagine an indifferent God that possesses the attributes of omnipotence and omniscience, this God will not bother to create a world indifferent to good and evil in the first place. Being thoroughly indifferent, this God will not see the point of creating a world and will be wholly preoccupied with the contemplation of his infinite greatness. He can be said to be indifferent to good and evil only to the extent that these concepts do not interest him, not because he cannot conceive them.

However, our actual world reveals evidence of both good and evil. By evil, I refer to moral and physical phenomena that inflict suffering on active life and mar the beauty

of passive life. Moral evil will then consist of damages or harm resulting from the activities of active life forms like human beings and animals. No active life-form will be deemed not responsible for its action, although some active life-forms are more liable than others. For instance, while a human being, a chimpanzee, and a lion involved in the killing of their own kind are responsible for doing something evil, the human being is more liable by reason of the higher advancement of human consciousness. Physical evil refers to phenomena like diseases, old age, death, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, etc. An earthquake involves harm caused to both active life-forms (humans and animals, for instance) and harm to passive life-forms (for instance, the deforming of the physical environment). Instances of evil and goodness in the world are plentiful. Human beings especially are capable of great wickedness; they are also capable of the most sublime acts of compassion and they work consciously to improve the lot of their fellow human beings and the physical environment.

Since there is incontrovertible evidence of both good and evil, it makes sense to posit that God is neither omnipotent nor omniscient. He is rather a good, powerful, and sufficiently knowledgeable being limited by *mood* which is the origin of evil. Since all rationality and all feelings develop as a consequence of *mood*, defined as a fundamental principle of yearning, evil arises naturally as an intimate aspect of the structure of the world, as a principle of yearning which opposes goodness in the quest of all nature for the fullest possible state of being. Thus, when primitive man engages in cannibalism he thinks he is actualizing a state of being that takes him closer to the manifestation of maximum vitality. His evil act seems to him merely the fulfilment of a desire. A lower animal involved in cannibalizing its kind also pursues the actualization of a state of being that expresses a fuller vitality. When Bewaji (1998, 11) confesses that 'God . . . created everything, both positive [good] and negative [evil]. Why? We cannot know', I respond that no harm is done speculating that everything created by God carries the essence of reality, which is *mood*, even as this *mood* constitutes God's nature. Therefore, evil does not originate with God but is rather integral to the structure of *mood* so that any being constituted by *mood* has the capacity for mischief and evil.

If we say that God is good – since he creates a world that reveals evidence of goodness even as the evil in the world is traced to the primordial stuff which he manipulates in the act of creation – can it be suggested that God is partly responsible for the reality of evil? As a creator, God is partly responsible for the evil in the world by enhancing the potentiality of the evil principle that is operative in *mood* through the instantiation of *mood* in ever more entities and worlds such as ours. He is not the source of evil, but he carries some responsibility as a creator. Since he is powerful enough to create an imperfect world, he has a responsibility to want to improve the world and actually work to improve it. But since the existence of God is a postulate rather than an empirically verifiable actuality, it is difficult to demonstrate empirically that a being of power and glory is working to improve the world. One may appeal to religious experience and note how miraculous occurrences have helped reduce the amount of evil in the world.

Yet, this appeal is not convincing and, perhaps, not even persuasive because of the objection that accounts of miraculous occurrences cannot be verified under strict scientific conditions that permit certainty. One way of defending the idea of a good God working to reduce evil in the world is to make reference to human moral consciousness. While it can be said that the capacity for goodness, like the opposite capacity for evil, is rooted in the eternal yearning essence of *mood* and, therefore, does not require any appeal to God for illumination, I note that the concept of God is central to understanding the human moral consciousness. The idea of God in the human mind is unique to the extent that it has a real efficacy in the physical world, regardless of the truth of God's existence or non-existence. For sincere believers, irrespective of religious identity, the meditation

on the idea of God as a good and just being incentivizes behaviour that reduces the amount of evil in the world. The stance I assume here is different from the divine command theory in Western ethics and philosophy of religion. The theory suggests that the morality of an action follows from the actor's obedience to divine authority. In other words, God is the absolute moral authority and his commands determine what is right and what is wrong (see, for example, Carson (2000); Wainwright (2005); cf. Murphy (2002)). Going by the divine command account, not only is human agency discounted but there is a prior assumption that everyone believes in God and that every believer is sincere. My stance proposes that moral actions motivated by sincerely held belief in a just and good, but not perfect, God belong to a unique category and are effective in the physical world as a means of ameliorating pain and suffering. When a sincere believer overcomes the weakness of the will at the expense of personal comfort in the hope that they are doing the will of God, a moral act not commanded by reason occurs. The overcoming of a weak will marks the efficacy of the idea of a just and good God. This moral efficacy would have been absent if the motivating God factor were absent. Such an absence would mean that either the quantity of pain and suffering in the world remained the same or it increased. If the quantity of pain and suffering was unchanged, then there was no benefit; if it increased, then there was more harm.

Against the possible objection that there are just not enough sincere believers in the world to make a difference, I reply that the number of sincere believers is not as important as the morality of the actions of sincere believers. Even if there was just one sincere believer, we would have found sufficient evidence of the moral efficacy of the idea of God, which supports the proposition that a just and good God who gives moral commands is working to reduce the evil in the world.

The point is not that theists and other categories of believers are the only individuals who act morally; instead, the point is that contemplation of the idea of a just and moral God who punishes wicked deeds and rewards good conduct provides a reason, for sincere believers, to act morally that is different from the mere inherent capacity for goodness which humans possess. In other words, contemplation of the idea of God causes the actualization of goodness in the world that would not exist if believers were of the view that God did not exist. If the idea of God has this kind of moral and, therefore, real efficacy in the physical world inhabited by beings he created, then it makes sense to say that God is working to reduce the amount of evil in the world as the source of this efficacious idea.

One may further object that if it is assumed *ab initio* that the actual perfection of nature is impossible since *mood* is a universal limiting principle, then a limited God is a dispensable being and the idea of a just and good God is morally ineffective. A limited God may be just a degree happier than humans in view of the evil that he too struggles to control. The intervention of such a limited God in the affairs of humans is not required: all that humans need is their reason and the will to reduce the pain and suffering in the world through the performance of moral actions. This objection overlooks the assertion that limitation does not equal powerlessness. It is not necessary for God to be conceived in the traditional theistic sense of a perfect being for the idea of his justness and goodness to have a moral efficacy in the lives of sincere believers. It is sufficient that we are able to define God as a being powerful enough to create a world even if the superlative attributes of omnipotence and omniscience elude him.

The African philosopher, in particular, may point out that the significance of the antinomy of God's existence is exaggerated in the light of recent works that strongly argue that Africans traditionally conceive God as limited. It may be assumed in this case that there is no antinomy because the decolonization scholars are correct. The assertion will then be that there is only a limitation framework, as p'Bitek (2011) suggests.

However, this objection overlooks the evidence gathered from across Africa that shows clearly that there is, indeed, a transcendental moment in ATR that legitimizes the transcendence framework. While one can favour either the transcendence thesis or the limitation thesis and actually argue that the limitation thesis is more plausible, as I have done in this article, both theses can be corroborated by evidence drawn from traditional oral sources and are, accordingly, valid cultural propositions worthy of critical philosophical exploration. Consequently, the objection fails.

## Conclusion

Many contemporary African philosophers of religion believe that ATR and traditional African thought present God as a limited deity. I argued in this article that African philosophers cannot make this assertion and sleep easy in the belief that the problem of evil does not arise within African religious philosophy. I showed in this article that the problem of evil arises even within the framework of limitation because the limited deity supported by this framework is not a powerless God. If it is argued that the God described in African religious thought may not be omnipotent and omniscient, it must also be admitted that this God is sufficiently powerful and knowledgeable to create a world out of pre-existing material.

I discussed the antinomy of God's existence in African philosophy of religion, which consists of the opposing theses of transcendence and limitation, and favoured the limitation thesis. I noted the salient idea of God as a kind of maximal embodiment of vital force and proceeded to argue for the rationality of belief in the existence of God as a being of power that most fully exemplifies *mood* in the universe. I showed that even as a limited deity, God is partly responsible for the evil in the world as a creator and that as the source of the morally efficacious concept of God in the human mind, he may well be working to reduce the amount of evil in the world. Further research should focus on the in-depth clarification of the ideas of *world* and *universe* and the place of God in the scheme of things. Such clarification should explore the idea of a first cause and the place of a personal God in an evolvable universe.

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## Notes

1. A discussion of Anselm's ontological argument is beyond the scope of this article. For a critical discussion of the argument, see Millican (2004).
2. One might say that this line of thinking implies the endowment of free will. It could be asked whether the reason suggested accounts for God creating the lesser deities free or accounts for his inability to control them. Since Fayemi favours the limitation thesis, one can be sure that the choices available to God are not infinite. Creating entities with free will might not have been a top priority for him given the possibility that the endowment of free will might further increase the powers of entities at his expense. While God can be conceived as causing the lesser deities, he does not directly control the support structures erected by the deities but may use them to pursue his goals by exerting pressure on the deities. Consequently, the support structures both limit and advance God's options.
3. As an instrumental source, God imparts vitality to things in the world, with this vital quality itself inchoate in what I call *mood*, the fundamental principle in the universe that limits even God.

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