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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Engaging and developing Ada Agada's philosophy: moral responsibility, creation, and the problem of evil

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Abstract

In a recent article in *Religious Studies*, Ada Agada argues that the problem of evil is relevant not only to those who consider God to hold the Omni-properties but also to those who understand God as a limited deity. He rightly points out that the limited-God literature in the African philosophy of religion has neglected to address the problem of evil by too quickly dismissing it. Agada then argues that the reason why the problem of evil is philosophically relevant for the limited-God view is that He, as the creator, has sufficient powers to address evil and, thereby, moral responsibility regarding the evil in the world. In this reply, I uphold that although Agada is correct to affirm that the problem of evil is relevant for the limited-God view, he is mistaken to contend that the reason is that God is the creator. I contest this view and argue that Agada has not given enough reasons to believe that God has moral responsibility over evil in the world. However, I illuminate how Agada can develop this argument in the future.

Keywords: African philosophy; bad luck; creation; moral responsibility; the problem of evil

Introduction

Ada Agada is one of the most important scholars in the African philosophy of religion and metaphysics. He has produced important work developing a sophisticated ontology that easily competes with other systems in the African and Western philosophy (Agada 2015, 2021, 2020, 2019). More recently, he has turned to addressing the problem of evil (Agada 2022a, 2022b). His views on the problem of evil have been developed mostly in his recent article in *Religious Studies* (Agada 2022b). In this article, Agada defends the view that some African philosophers who believe that God is a limited deity have mistakenly argued that the problem of evil is not a philosophical problem in African philosophy. The bulk of his argument is that God is morally responsible for the evil in the world because He is the creator who creates the world from the pre-existing mind-matter called mood. As the creator who has the properties of power and glory, He has enough power and knowledge to address this evil, and African philosophers should offer a theory that takes this into account (Agada 2022b).

This article is a response to Agada's view. Although I agree that the proponents of the limited-God view need to address the problem of evil and that Agada's work is groundbreaking, I think he is mistaken in contending that this is the case because God is morally responsible for the evil in the world. I uphold that Agada's arguments are insufficient to

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show that God has moral responsibility for the evil in the world. He only shows that there is a causal connection between being a creator and the existence of evil. But I argue that to have causal responsibility is not the same as having moral responsibility. Having said that, I argue that this is not hopeless for Agada's theory. Instead, he needs to combine the necessary conditions for assigning moral responsibility I outline later in the article, with his theory that God has power and glory. By showing how these can interplay with each other, Agada may be able to find a solution to the problem. This article differs from previous work in at least two ways. First, unlike most scholars from the African tradition, I agree with Agada that the problem of evil is relevant for the limited-God view (Bewaji 1998; Chimakonam 2022); second, this article is the first to relate the question of moral luck and moral responsibility to the problem of evil.

To further this argument, I have divided this response into two sections. The first section outlines Agada's statement in his recently published article in *Religious Studies*. The second section criticizes his view by contending that Agada has not established moral responsibility but only the causal responsibility of God. In this section, I will also address some potential objections that Agada may raise against my argument and point to how Agada can strengthen his theory.

Ada Agada's argument

Agada rightly points out that there are two families of views about God in the African philosophy of religion. On the one hand, there is what he calls the transcendental view of God (Agada 2022b). According to the transcendental view, God holds the properties that routinely Christian Theists attribute to Him: He is omnipotent, omnibenevolent, omnipresent, and omniscient. The other great family of views about God in the African philosophy of religion is that God is a limited deity: He is powerful, knowledgeable, and good, but not omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient (Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Agada 2022; Agada 2022b). Agada agrees with this latter conception of God because it offers a more complete metaphysical scheme (Agada 2022a, 2022b).

Although the view of a Limited God is not rare in African philosophy, Agada disagrees with how African scholars who support this perspective have addressed the problem of evil. While scholars of the transcendental view acknowledge that the problem of evil is a real problem that needs to be addressed, the ones who hold the God-limited view have tended to dismiss the problem of evil as a real problem in African philosophy. Routinely, these scholars contend that the problem does not arise in African philosophy because the limited God (a) is not powerful and cannot, therefore, address the evils in the world (Fayemi 2012; Ogbonnaya 2022; Schachter 2022); (b) He is not wholly good and, therefore, it is natural for Him to do evil (Gbadegesin 1996; Bewaji 1998; Ibeabuchi 2013); (c) there is nothing intrinsically evil in the world and, therefore, there is no duty for God to address these supposed evils (Attoe 2022a), (d) God is not a conscious personalized entity and instead a material and non-conscious one and thereby it is beyond God's capabilities to address evil (Attoe 2022a, 2022b); and (e) good and evil are complementary entities and, thereby, God enables evil as a necessary condition for enabling good (Chimakonam 2022; Chimakonam and Chimakonam 2022). The arguments are slightly different from each other, but in common, they hold the view that the problem of evil is not a significant concern in African philosophy. In short, for these scholars, 'the problem of the incompatibility of evil in the world with an omnipotent God does not arise in African philosophy of religion' (Agada (2022b), 2).

Agada rightly disagrees that the problem of evil should not be a significant concern for African philosophers who defend the limited deity perspective. Agada starts by observing that it is evil in the world and that this is an undeniable fact. Thus, the argument cannot

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be to deny the existence of evil. According to Agada, a limited deity is partly responsible for the evil in the world because he is the creator. As the creator, God is the cause of everything else in the world and responsible for it. Even if God is not omnipotent, Agada contends that He is still *sufficiently powerful* to create the world, making Him at least partially responsible for the existing evil. This is because the magnitude of a creator's power is necessarily such that this creator is accountable for his creation: to grant the power of being a creator to an entity suffices to grant him powers to be morally responsible for evil. Several passages suggest this view:

> Such a sufficiently powerful creator bears some responsibility for the evil in the world he created. (Agada (2022b), 6)

> A creator-God is by no means an impotent God, as suggested earlier . . . The magnitude of power that is conveyed by the notion of creator is . . . the ultimate cause of physical and spiritual phenomena. (*ibid*.)

> 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 the human exercise of free will. (*ibid*., 7)

> 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. (*ibid*., 13)

It is crucial to clarify precisely what Agada is trying to prove. The key to his argument is that a creator is *morally responsible* for his creation. It may be contested that I misunderstand Agada's point because he never uses the concept of 'moral responsibility'. Nonetheless, he cannot be trying to prove that God is *causally* responsible for evil. Agada sees his work as different from other philosophers working in the limited-God perspective in the African philosophical groundwork. Most of them have understood evil as causally linked to God. John Bewaji considers that the Yoruba God is not perfectly good and is capable of committing evil (Bewaji 1998). The Igbo religion also routinely contends this (Anizoba 2008; Nwonwu 2014). Ademola Fayemyi has clearly stated that God is responsible for some forms of evil (Fayemi 2012). Jonathan Chimakonam and Amara Chimakonam consider that good and evil are caused or allowed by God as a matter of complementarity (Chimakonam 2022; Chimakonam and Chimakonam 2022). Hence, the thesis of the causal link is not new, and this cannot be what Agada is arguing for. What these authors have failed to see, according to Agada, is that there is still a philosophical problem at stake. Namely, God is morally responsible for the evil in the world and, as such, philosophers still need to explain why God allows evil and how He is trying to address it.

To explain why a limited God is morally responsible for the evil in the world, Agada offers a sophisticated new theory grounded on the concepts of mood, power, and glory. Starting with mood, Agada defines it as follows:

> [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

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> 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 (2022b), 87)

The concept of mood is a key one for Agada's philosophical system – Consolationism – which he has already developed in his previous work (Agada 2020, 2015, 2021). Agada is a vitality theorist, that is, he believes that an ethereal force permeates everything and animates everything that exists (Agada 2021, 2019). But unlike Placide Tempels's description of Bantu's vitality, Agada does not think this force is immaterial. Instead, this force – which is what Agada calls 'mood' – is a consciousness-matter/mind-matter phenomenon that animates, gives life, sustains everything, and from which everything else evolves. In other words, mood manifests itself as a form of perpetual striving that maintains, underlies, reproduces, and expands everything that existed, exists, and will exist. Thus, everything that exists is an instance of mood. God himself is the greater instance of mood. Hence, God is also limited by mood (Agada 2022b).

The mood is not perfect and includes two fundamental forms of emotion – joy and sadness. Mood and these emotions are present in all reality. This means, in turn, that God himself is not perfect, and His imperfections reflect the imperfection of mood. More precisely, Agada eschews the categories of omnipotence and omniscience and replaces them with power and glory. The terms may initially be confusing, but Agada defines them:

> 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. (Agada (2022b), 8)

> 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. (*ibid*.)

Hence, 'power' for Agada means to be the most powerful existing entity (i.e. more powerful than humans and semi-deities), but not being all-powerful. Agada does not specify power limits; his main point is that God is powerful enough to create the world. By 'glory', Agada means to have vast knowledge but not total knowledge of the world. Just like the category of power, the category of glory refers primarily to the knowledge of creating the world. Agada may mean more than this, but he does not specify the limits of knowledge.

In relation to the question of evil, Agada contends that God is not the origin of evil, as the origin of evil is mood, which, in itself, contains evil. God also cannot eliminate evil totally because evil pre-exists him and is included in mood, which limits God's actions. But God is the one who creates the world from this pre-existing mind-matter (mood), and therefore He can reduce evil and is responsible for the reproduction of some evil. That is, He is responsible for His creation; therefore, He can work through his actions to reduce evil. Agada does not specify on many occasions what evils are God's responsibility, but in commenting on the work of Ademola Fayemi, Agada gives us a clue:

> 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. (*ibid*., 7)

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According to this quote, Agada believes that God is responsible for what usually is classified as 'natural evil' – earthquakes, diseases, typhoons, etc. – but not for actions that result from human choice. In short, Agada argues that the Limited God is not the origin of evil – the origin is mood. God is working with mood to create the world, and as mood contains evil, the Limited God (who is Himself an instance of mood) cannot eliminate evil. But a Limited God has many powers (He has Power and Glory) that enable Him to address evil by reducing the evil in the world He creates from the mood. This Limited God is morally responsible for addressing these evils because He is the world's creator. Given these characteristics of the Limited God and His relation to mood, those holding a limited-God view ought to explain the existence of evil.

The creator's moral responsibility

In the previous section, it was established that what Agada wants to defend is not simply that God is causally responsible for evil. This is too trivial, and other philosophers working within an African philosophical framework have done so too. Agada wishes to argue that a God with the properties of power and glory, through working on mood, is *morally responsible* for the evil in the world; this moral responsibility results from being the creator; hence, for Agada, to be the creator with power and glory implies that He has some duties to address evil. In this section, I wish to contend that, as it stands, Agada has failed to show that God is morally responsible. Agada only shows causality, but from this causality, he is not right to infer (as he sets the argument) moral responsibility. However, I end the section by pointing out that the objection is not fatal for Agada's theory and offer a suggestion on how he can build a new argument.

To understand my argument, it is important to clarify the differences between causal and moral responsibility. To judge whether someone is morally responsible means to attribute certain powers and capacities to that person and view that a certain outcome has arisen from the actions they have freely exercised with their powers and capacities. The agent must possess powers and capacities to be responsible for the action (Levy and McKenna 2009; Williams 2022). That is, judging whether someone is morally responsible means attributing certain powers and capacities to people. However, the powers of causal and moral responsibility are different. Someone who is causally responsible may not be morally responsible. A young child may be causally responsible for some evil but not morally responsible. For example, imagine that there is a there-year-old child who goes to Church and hears the story that Jesus was resurrected after being crucified. As a result of this Church teaching, the child thinks that there is some causal connection between resurrection and being crucified. Let's say this child sees his one-year-old brother sleeping but believes he is dead. In order to resurrect him, he crucifies the one-year-old and, as a consequence, kills him. Clearly, the three-year-old is causally responsible for the evil caused. But he is not morally responsible for such action. Even if this example is not very convincing, think of an example of a mosquito that bites someone and causes malaria. The mosquito is causally responsible as it bit the person, but the mosquito is not morally accountable for it. These two examples show that people who lack the right capacities are *exempted* from blame. In short, moral responsibility is not the same as causal responsibility. If one is morally responsible, then one is causally responsible, but not vice versa. The powers and capacities required for moral responsibility are distinct from those needed for causal responsibility; therefore, moral responsibility cannot be inferred from causal responsibility.

Now, what conditions (including capacities) are necessary to have for moral responsibility? There are at least four conditions: (1) awareness of the meaning of one's action, (2) awareness of the consequences of one's actions, (3) awareness of alternatives to

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one's actions, and (4) not being conditioned by moral luck (Rudy-Hiller 2022). Starting with the first condition, let's think about a thought experiment. Imagine Mark presses a switch which starts a treadmill where Susan is standing and makes her fall and break her arm. Imagine there is no reason to activate this switch and break her arm, like preventing greater harm (*ibid.*). In what conditions is Mark morally responsible for Susan's breaking of the arm? Mark must be aware of the action He is doing: Mark must know what the switch is for, and if he believes the button is a light switch, then he is not aware he will hurt Susan when he presses it. If he is not aware of it, he does not seem to be liable to be blamed for it. He must be aware that he is performing the action in question to be blamed for it (Levy 2014).

A second condition is that the person must know what consequences of his action will follow. If the person does not know or cannot reasonably predict the consequences of his actions, then he is not to be blamed (Zimmerman 1997). For example, if I ate infected food which made me patient zero of a pandemic, and there was no way I would know that eating that would cause a pandemic, then I cannot be blamed for causing the pandemic. A third condition of being aware of the alternatives prescribes that the person must know there is an alternative action to what he or she is doing. As Neil Levy contends:

> Perhaps it need not be the case . . . that agents need genuine access to alternative possibilities when they choose and act, but they do need *epistemic* access to a range of alternatives: they can only appropriately be blamed for acting if they believed that alternatives were available to them, and understood the significance of these alternatives. (Levy (2015), 111)

Finally, the absence of moral luck condition prescribes that moral responsibility only arises where there is no moral luck. Moral responsibility must refer to something under our control; in contrast, luck, by definition, cannot be prevented; for someone to be considered morally responsible, they need not be conditioned by luck. A person can only be morally accountable to the extent that the actions of this person can be explained in terms of factors under this person's control.

In taking this on board, the key question is whether Agada's characterization of God can make Him morally responsible. I believe that Agada does not give sufficient reasons to attribute moral responsibility to God. To start, as his quotes show, Agada considers that God is morally responsible because He is the *creator*. But, simply being the creator of something is insufficient to hold moral responsibility (Fischer et al. 2007; Talbert 2019; Williams 2022). As the three-year-old and mosquito examples show, one can be *causally responsible without being morally responsible*. As explained, Agada mainly uses the concepts of power and glory to refer to creation: glory is a form of knowledge of how to create, and power refers to the power to create. But these kinds of properties are distinct from the ones required for moral responsibility. Knowing how to create and having the power to do so is not the same as knowing what kind of action one is performing, being aware that there are alternatives, and aware of the consequences of one's action. To return to the examples of the three-year-old and the treadmill, they have the power to act, and they know how to do it, but they do not know what the action means, nor do they know the consequences or that they have an alternative to that action which is better. Likewise, a limited God that knows about creation shows no indication that He has power and knowledge on these things; in fact, there is an indication of the opposite: He is limited by the pre-existing mind-matter (mood). According to the requirements set above, Agada would need to prove that power and glory are sufficient, that God would know what he is doing, the consequences of what he is doing, knows he has

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alternatives, and that his actions are not the result of moral luck. But for a limited God with limited power and knowledge, it is difficult to see how He can know and do all this.

Of course, Agada may reply that I am being uncharitable towards his view. Although he insisted on the point of creation, he meant more than that. He can claim that he meant by power and glory to have power and knowledge about alternatives, the meaning of the action, the consequences of his actions, and that He is not conditioned by luck. However, if Agada claims that God can have this knowledge and is immune to chance, it is difficult to see how this is not an omnipotent and omniscient God.

If power and glory mean limited knowledge and limited power, there are things that God does not know, and given that He is limited by mood, it is reasonable to think that there is a lot about the consequences, alternatives and meaning of His actions that he does not know. Let us say that God caused the devastating 1755 Lisbon earthquake because he set up the tectonic plates that way at the beginning of creation. God, then, is causally responsible for the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. But it is more difficult to contend that He is morally accountable because, like Mark in the example given earlier, He needs to know many things in advance. Namely, He needs to understand all about tectonic plates, He needs to know that setting the tectonic plates in a certain way millions of years before would eventually lead to a causal chain to the 1755 earthquake, and He needs to know there is an alternative to set the tectonic plates differently. Additionally, He needs to set up the tectonic plates in a deterministic way so that no luck factor will influence the chain. The causal chain is too complex to predict that the tectonic plates would lead to the 1755 earthquake. For a God with limited knowledge, this seems to be quite a lot to know millions of years in advance.

On top of this, a God conditioned by mood is also partly subject to at least two forms of moral luck: causal and constitutive luck. Causal luck is 'how one is determined by antecedent circumstances' (Nagel (2012), 60); constitutive luck refers to the traits and dispositions that one has and influence our decisions (*ibid*.). God is determined by causal luck to the extent that the *pre-existing* mood will determine the circumstances where God is and what He can know. That is, He is determined by mood regarding what He can know at his time of creation. He is also the subject of constitutive luck: mood is everywhere, including in God and its part of His constituency; therefore, his actions are conditioned by mood, and He has little choice. In other words, to concede that God is limited by mood is precisely to concede that He may not be able to know and do many things about his own creation. Therefore, He cannot be attributed moral responsibility. If God is limited by mood, then it is reasonable that there are many evils in His creation He cannot predict, control, or do anything about.

On the other hand, if Agada wants to affirm that God knows all these causal chains and has the power to predict and stop them, it is difficult to see how this God is not omnipotent and omniscient, rather than having power and glory. To fully know the consequences, the alternatives, and the meaning of the action means being all-powerful and all-knowledgeable. Moreover, if God is not conditioned by luck, it means that all is under His power, which, once again, implies that He is omnipotent. Agada faces a dilemma of either endorsing an all-powerful God or denying that a limited God has a moral responsibility for all His actions.

Agada may contend that I offered a false dilemma: either God knows everything, and He is omnipotent, or He is limited, and He cannot know enough about His creation and cannot address evil. Agada may contend that it is possible to contend that God knows about his creation to stop evil and still not claim He is omnipotent and omniscient.

In reply, the problem with this potential objection is that it makes the concepts of omniscience and omnipotence meaningless. What it means to be omniscient is that for every proposition q, if q is true, then D knows q. And if Agada's God is not determined by luck

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is because He for every proposition q, if q is true then D knows q. Omnipotence usually means having the power to do what is logically possible. Both propositions usually refer to knowledge and the power of things unrelated to human free will. To know those things about creation that I mentioned above and to have the power to modify them is precisely how the literature has referred to omniscience and omnipotence. If Agada means something else by these terms, then he must explain further what these terms mean.

However, I wish to add that my point here is not totally fatal to Agada's argument. Agada could eventually develop a theory based on those four conditions for moral responsibility mentioned above. He needs to offer a detailed analysis of how God is limited by those conditions, but then explain what the relationship with mood is and, from there, be more precise about the details of power and glory. In other words, as it stands, Agada cannot prove God's moral responsibility; but Agada can be more specific about God's power and glory to reply to this objection. For questions of space, I do not wish to give a full account of how Agada can pursue this project. Hence, I simply wish to point out that, *prima facie*, conceptually speaking, there is no tension between moral responsibility and mood. Agada can, for example, following the African tradition of God as an entity who is constantly learning, contend that the more experienced and knowledgeable God becomes, the more duties He has because He more fully comprehends His creation and the things that cause evil. If Agada explains that power and glory increase over time and then it is not just power and glory regarding the act of creation but also the functioning of the creation, then Agada can explain that God gained more (1) awareness of the meaning of one's action, (2) awareness of the consequences of one's actions, (3) awareness of alternatives to one's actions, and (4) is less conditioned by moral luck because He is now more powerful and knowledgeable. As such, God can then be considered morally responsible for the evils that occurred after He gained more power and glory. There are two clear implications for this. First, even though God can be considered responsible for some natural evil, as Agada thinks, it is much less of the quantity of natural evil than Agada anticipates. As the Lisbon earthquake example shows, these may result from unforeseen actions of which God is unaware and cannot be accounted morally responsible (albeit He can be considered causally responsible). Second, this theory leads to a conclusion like what Chimakonam and Chimakonam (2022) have defended: evil is necessary for good. For it is only through gaining experience of evil that God can realize what causes evil and therefore avoid it in the future.

This is a project worth pursuing because the God-limited view is *morally better* than the other views precisely because there is no moral responsibility for the evils in the world. Due to his limited powers, the limited God cannot be responsible for the horrendous evils that exist. At best, He was incompetent due to his limited capacities in building the world. But this is a much less harsh accusation than the one that a transcendental God with all the Omni-properties would have to respond to. According to most theodicies, God allows or causes evil for a greater good. Theodicies tend to justify evil by appealing to higher goods. But trying to justify evil by appealing to higher goods is like killing civilians to demoralize the enemy country. This is morally impermissible, and therefore it is a weak moral basis to justify God's actions. The limited-God approach is in a much better position here. If God has limited power and knowledge, He is not acting immorally because ought implies can (Kant 2008, 2018). Thus, the fact that there is no moral responsibility for the evils in the world does not preclude the argument that God has some moral duties (Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2022; Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Ho 2022).

Conclusion

In this article, I contended that Agada is correct about the fact that philosophers holding the limited-God view still need to address the problem of evil; nonetheless, I also

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contended that Agada is wrong about the reasons for this. He maintains that the reason why the problem of evil is relevant for the God-limited view is that God, as a creator, is morally responsible for the evil in the world. However, I objected that Agada had not established God's moral responsibility: a creator is not necessarily morally responsible. I think, however, that the mood theory is a good one and that the objection does not need to be fatal to Agada's argument if he further develops the concepts of power and glory combined with the four conditions for moral responsibility I outlined in this reply.

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