



Faces of Evil: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Igbo-African Understanding

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Abstract

The concept of evil is a complex and multifaceted idea that has been debated and studied by philosophers, theologians, and anthropologists for centuries. In the Igbo-African worldview, evil is understood through a tripartite framework consisting of the metaphysical, ethical, and moral dimensions. This paper provides a philosophical examination of these three dimensions of evil in the Igbo-African worldview. The metaphysical dimension explores the origins and nature of evil as a force in the world. The ethical dimension examines the moral responsibility of individuals for their actions and the consequences that arise from those actions. Finally, the moral dimension explores the role of society and community in shaping our understanding of good and evil. Through a careful examination of these three dimensions, this paper offers a comprehensive philosophical perspective on evil in the Igbo-African worldview.

Keywords: *Conceptions of Evil, Metaphysical Dimension, Ethical Dimension, Moral Dimension, Igbo/African Worldview.*

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In this article, we delve into the philosophical examination of the three-dimensional conceptions of evil within the Igbo-African worldview. Obviously, philosophy occupies a central role in African culture and intellectual history.¹ Evil is a universal phenomenon that has been the subject of philosophical inquiry for centuries, and it continues to be a significant topic of discussion in contemporary philosophy. The Igbo people of West Africa have their unique understanding of evil, which is deeply rooted in their cultural and spiritual beliefs.² This article seeks to explore the three-dimensional perspective of evil in the Igbo worldview and how it differs from other philosophical views of evil. The article will examine the metaphysical, ethical, and moral dimensions of evil and how they are understood in the Igbo culture. The article will also analyze the implications of the three-dimensional view of evil for moral reasoning and ethical behavior. Overall, this article aims to shed light on the rich philosophical heritage of the Igbo people and contribute to the ongoing discussion on the nature of evil.

IGBO CONCEPT OF EVIL

The Igbo people of Nigeria have a unique and complex understanding of evil, which is deeply rooted in their cultural beliefs and traditions. In Igbo cosmology, evil is not seen as a single entity, but rather as a multifaceted concept that can manifest in different forms and degrees. The Igbo conceptualization of evil encompasses both natural and supernatural elements, and it is understood to have both physical and spiritual consequences.³

One of the most important aspects of the Igbo

conceptualization of evil is the idea of “chi,” which refers to the personal god or divine spirit that is believed to guide and protect an individual throughout their life.⁴ In Igbo belief, chi is responsible for both good and bad events in a person’s life, and it is said to have the power to either bring blessings or inflict harm. If a person is deemed to have committed an evil act, their chi is said to become angry and turn against them, bringing misfortune and suffering.⁵

Another key aspect of the Igbo understanding of evil is the idea of “juju.” This term refers to supernatural powers that are believed to be capable of causing harm or misfortune.⁶ Juju is often associated with black magic, witchcraft, and other forms of malevolent magic, and it is said to be used by people to bring harm to others. In Igbo society, juju is often associated with fear and is considered a dangerous force that should be avoided at all costs.

The Igbo also have a concept of “ogun” or “uchu,” which refers to evil spirits that are believed to inhabit the natural world. These spirits are said to be responsible for disease, natural disasters, and other forms of misfortune. Hence, the rituals and ceremonies that are performed in order to appease the gods and ensure a harmonious relationship with the spiritual world.⁷ The Igbo believe that ogun can be appeased through offerings and sacrifices, and they often seek the help of traditional healers to diagnose and treat ogun-related illnesses. The rituals and ceremonies that are performed in order to appease the gods and ensure a harmonious relationship with the spiritual world.

In addition to these supernatural forms of evil, the Igbo also believe that human actions can contribute to the

manifestation of evil in the world. This can include acts of greed, envy, cruelty, and other forms of immoral behaviour. In this sense, the Igbo see evil as a choice that individuals make, rather than as a predetermined fate.

Generally, the Igbo-African conceptualization of evil is a complex and multifaceted concept that encompasses both natural and supernatural elements. It is seen as a force that can bring both harm and blessings, and it is believed to have both physical and spiritual consequences. Through their cultural beliefs and traditions, the Igbo offer a unique perspective on the nature of evil and its impact on the world. It is in this regard that Okechukwu C. Okafor argues in his article "The Philosophy of African Culture" that African culture has its own unique philosophical foundations and is not simply an imitation or adaptation of Western philosophy. He also highlights the importance of African philosophy in shaping African culture and provides insights into the different philosophical perspectives and traditions within African societies.⁸

Metaphysical Dimension of Evil

The Igbo people of Nigeria have a rich cultural heritage that includes a deep understanding of the metaphysical dimension of evil. In traditional Igbo spirituality, evil is not seen as a force that exists in opposition to good, but rather as a necessary aspect of the balance and harmony of the universe.⁹ This perspective is rooted in the belief that all things, both good and evil, are created by the divine and have their own unique role to play in the world.¹⁰

In the traditional Igbo worldview, evil is not considered an independent entity but is rather a manifestation of imbalance and disharmony in the natural order.¹¹ This imbalance can be caused by a variety of factors, including human actions, natural disasters, and spiritual interference. The idea is that evil is not an inherent part of the world, but rather a result of the world being out of balance.

The Igbo people believe that the root of evil is not found in the actions of individuals, but in the actions of spirits and deities.¹² According to their beliefs, there exist benevolent as well as malevolent supernatural entities and gods, and it is the equilibrium between them that governs the overall harmony of the world. When the balance between the good and evil spirits is disrupted, this can result in evil manifesting in the world.

In traditional Igbo society, it was believed that individuals could protect themselves from the negative effects of evil by living in accordance with the will of the gods and spirits.¹³ This involved following a strict code of moral conduct, participating in communal rituals, and seeking guidance from spiritual leaders. The idea was that by living a harmonious and virtuous life, individuals could maintain balance in their own lives and in the world at large.

It is worth noting that the traditional Igbo perspective on evil is not limited to their own culture but is also a common belief

in many African societies.¹⁴ This is because many African cultures share a similar worldview that is centered on the idea of balance and harmony in the universe. The concept of evil as a manifestation of imbalance is a common theme in African spirituality, and is often associated with the idea that all things, both good and evil, have their place in the world.

Obviously, the Igbo-African metaphysical dimension of evil is a rich and complex concept that reflects the deep spiritual understanding of the Igbo people. It is a view that recognizes the interplay between good and evil and acknowledges the importance of balance and harmony in the world. By viewing evil not as a force in opposition to good, but as a manifestation of imbalance, the Igbo people offer a unique perspective on the nature of evil that is grounded in the wisdom of their cultural heritage.

Ethical Dimension of Evil

In the traditional Igbo worldview, evil is not seen as an objective force or entity, but rather as a subjective manifestation of human behaviour that is in violation of the moral and ethical standards set by the community.

The Igbo belief in the interdependence of individuals within the community is an essential aspect of their understanding of evil. In this worldview, the actions of one person can have a significant impact on the well-being of others. Therefore, individuals are expected to act in a manner that is consistent with the values and principles of the community, which are embodied in the concept of "Ogu" or "Omenala," which translates to "good character."

In traditional Igbo society, the idea of evil is closely tied to the concept of personal responsibility. The belief is that evil actions are the result of a lack of discipline and control over one's behaviour. It is believed that individuals who engage in evil acts have failed to adhere to the moral and ethical standards of the community and have acted in a way that is harmful to others.¹⁵ As a result, they bring shame and dishonor upon themselves and their families, which can have far-reaching consequences in terms of their social standing and relationships within the community.

The traditional Igbo belief in the power of community to shape behaviour is another important aspect of their understanding of evil. The community is seen as a source of support and guidance for individuals, helping them to develop the discipline and self-control necessary to avoid engaging in evil acts. This is reflected in the belief in the importance of "Ndi-Ichie," or "good people," who are seen as role models for others in the community and are held in high regard as a result of their moral and ethical behaviour.

Undoubtedly, the Igbo-African ethical dimension of evil is deeply rooted in the belief in the interdependence of individuals within the community and the importance of personal responsibility. Igbo concept of evil is more closely tied to the idea of imbalance and disharmony in the natural and spiritual world. Hence, the Igbo people

believe that evil arises from a violation of the natural order, and that this violation can lead to physical and spiritual consequences. This conception of evil actually highlights the interconnectedness of all things in the natural world and the importance of maintaining balance and harmony in one's life and community.¹⁶ The traditional Igbo understanding of evil is not focused on punishment or retribution, but rather on the development of discipline and self-control through community support and guidance. This ethical dimension is a unique aspect of the Igbo worldview and reflects the importance of moral and ethical behaviour in shaping the well-being of the community as a whole. The ethical concept of evil, therefore provides a window into the complexities of Igbo cultural beliefs and values.¹⁷

Moral Dimension of Evil

The Igbo people of Africa have a rich and unique cultural heritage that includes their beliefs about the nature of evil and its place in their moral dimension. In Igbo cosmology, evil is seen as an integral part of the balance of life and the world, and it is believed to serve a crucial purpose in maintaining this balance. This understanding of evil influences the Igbo people's moral code, as they view moral behaviour as a means of preventing or mitigating evil. The significance of this cultural perspective on evil and its impact on moral behaviour and ethical decision-making cannot be overemphasized.¹⁸ The Igbo people, who reside primarily in southeastern Nigeria, have a complex cosmology that includes a belief in a supreme being and a pantheon of lesser gods and spirits. This belief system plays a significant role in shaping the Igbo moral dimension of evil.¹⁹

In the Igbo worldview, evil is seen as a deviation from the natural order of the universe. It is believed that the supreme being created the universe with a specific purpose and that when individuals or spirits deviate from this purpose, evil is introduced into the world. This deviation can take many forms, including moral wrongdoing, imbalance in the natural order, and the use of malevolent magic. Therefore, evil is not only caused by human actions but also by the actions of supernatural beings. Igbo conception of evil is a multi-layered and complex understanding, rooted in their cultural and spiritual beliefs. This belief affects the behaviour of the Igbo people, influencing their decision-making and moral reasoning.²⁰

The Igbo people believe that evil can have a profound impact on the individual, the community, and the world as a whole. Evil actions and thoughts can bring imbalance and disorder to the natural order, causing suffering and harm to both the individual and the community. The Igbo also believe that evil can have a contagious effect, spreading like a disease to infect others and disrupt the moral fabric of society.²¹

To counteract the effects of evil, the Igbo have developed a moral code that seeks to restore balance and order to the world. This code is based on a respect for the natural order and a belief in the interconnectedness of all beings. This

idea is basically informed by Igbo ontological view of reality as one-unified whole.²² It emphasizes the importance of morality, justice, and compassion, and encourages individuals to live in harmony with one another and with the world. Therefore, reality is initially perceived by people as a human reality. To put it another way, people understand themselves as individuals within the context of their community. The communal aspect of the Igbo worldview is reflected in families and communities.²³

The Igbo moral dimension of evil also includes a belief in consequences. It is believed that evil actions will ultimately lead to negative consequences for the individual, such as misfortune, illness, or death. The idea of consequences serves as a deterrent against evil behavior and promotes moral responsibility.

In addition to these beliefs, the Igbo people also have a rich tradition of storytelling, which is used to transmit their cultural values and beliefs to future generations.²⁴ These stories often feature heroes who triumph over evil and serve as examples of moral conduct. They also serve to reinforce the importance of living a virtuous life and avoiding evil actions.

Undeniably, the Igbo people's cultural legacy includes the moral concept of evil that is unique to their African heritage. It is based on a belief in a supreme being, the importance of morality and justice, and the consequences of evil actions.²⁵ The Igbo worldview offers a unique perspective on the nature of evil and its place in the moral dimension, highlighting the importance of living a virtuous life and restoring balance and order to the world.

ANALYSING THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE THREE-DIMENSIONAL VIEW OF EVIL FOR MORAL REASONING AND ETHICAL BEHAVIOUR

The three-dimensional view of evil, which considers evil to have metaphysical, ethical, and moral dimensions, has significant implications for moral reasoning and ethical behavior.

From a metaphysical perspective, evil is often understood as a lack of goodness or a deprivation of the perfection that is inherent in the world.²⁶ This view suggests that evil is not a positive entity in its own right, but rather an absence of something good. This understanding of evil has implications for moral reasoning in that it highlights the importance of striving for goodness and avoiding evil by cultivating positive qualities and actions.

From an ethical perspective, evil is often seen as actions or choices that violate moral principles.²⁷ This view suggests that the morality of an action is determined by the intention behind it and the consequences it produces. This understanding of evil has implications for moral reasoning in that it highlights the importance of considering the ethical implications of one's choices and actions, and of making decisions that align with moral principles.

From a moral perspective, evil is often seen as a violation of universal moral values and norms.²⁸ This view suggests that there are objective standards of right and wrong that apply to all people and situations, regardless of cultural, historical, or individual differences. This understanding of evil has implications for moral reasoning in that it highlights the importance of recognizing and upholding moral values and principles, even in the face of challenges or conflicting interests.

In conclusion, the three-dimensional view of evil provides a rich and nuanced perspective on the nature of evil and its impact on moral reasoning and ethical behavior. It encourages individuals to reflect on the metaphysical, ethical, and moral dimensions of their choices and actions, and to strive for goodness, moral principles, and universal values.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the concept of evil in the Igbo-African worldview is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon that can be understood from a philosophical perspective by examining its metaphysical, ethical and moral aspects. From a metaphysical perspective, evil is viewed as an imbalance or disruption in the cosmic order, caused by humans or spirits. Ethically, evil is understood as the violation of moral principles and norms, while morally it is considered to be a violation of the divine will and purpose.

The concept of evil in the Igbo-African worldview is rich and varied, with each dimension providing a unique perspective on the nature and origins of evil. Understanding this multi-dimensional approach to evil is crucial for gaining a deeper understanding of the complexities of evil and its impact on individuals, communities and the world as a whole.

In light of the above, it is evident that the Igbo-African worldview offers a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of evil, which is of great value in the contemporary philosophical discourse on the nature of evil and its role in human life. The examination of the three-dimensional conception of evil in the Igbo-African worldview sheds light on the complex interplay between metaphysical, ethical and moral dimensions of evil, and provides a basis for further exploration and analysis.

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