

DEATH IN THE AFRICAN WORLDVIEW OF LIFE'S MEANING: A SHIFT IN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The question, 'the meaning of life' is one that throws humans into deep reflection on what life means or what it should be. Like everywhere else around the world, the African thoughts on the meaning of life is linked to, associated with and in particular places, it revolved around death, of course there are other factors but this emerges prominently. In African worldview, death is the demise from life as we know it to, an afterlife. The question that this inevitable event brings to mind is, 'what is the essence of our labour and emotions invested in living if it ends in death'? Further complicating the matter is the fact that one's specific time length is not given nor guaranteed. This paper has several aims which includes enunciating the African perspectives on the meaning of life with reference to the position of death in this 'meaningfulness' or 'meaninglessness' as we shall see and also to take our minds to reflect on what the 'absence of death' would add to Life's meaning. Employing hermeneutic and conversational methods, the study interrogates whether a life without death would enhance or diminish the quest for meaning.

Keywords: Africa/African, Life's Meaning, Death, Worldview, Philosophy.

INTRODUCTION

The desire to understand life is one that every individual will seek at one point or the other of their existence especially in the face a universal human condition, namely, Death. While some may look within for answers or validation, some may look 'outward' for answers and concession. Ancient philosophy started with the quest to know the origin of all life and as time passed focus began to diversify in the field of knowledge but the curiosity about life never leaves the center stage. In the African philosophical context, the concept of life's meaning is inextricably linked to the inevitability and meaning of death, whose presence prompts reflection not only on the value of human labour and emotion but on the broader purpose of existence itself. Unlike some traditions that draw hard distinctions between the material and spiritual, African worldviews understand life as shaped by dynamic relationships between the individual, the community, ancestral heritage, and supernatural forces; a view well-articulated by Mbiti, who describes African existence as "a rhythm of life in which the living, the living-dead, and the yet-to-be-born are bound in one organic community" (Mbiti 2016, p. 108). Death, far from being a final cessation, is approached as a passage or transition, a movement from visible existence into the realm of ancestors and spiritual continuity. This has profound consequences for notions of meaning: the legacies of the departed, the rituals enacted by the living, and the ongoing participation of ancestors in communal affairs collectively assert that life's significance does not conclude with biological demise.

This article, through hermeneutic and conversational exploration, examines African perspectives on life's meaning with death at the center, interrogating whether the absence of death would undermine or enhance our pursuit of meaning. It situates African thought in dialogue with major

philosophical theories such as supernaturalism, naturalism, and nihilism by uncovering both convergences and distinct African contributions, including the vital force theory and the philosophy of consolation. By doing so, it argues that, in these traditions, death is not an absurd terminus but an integral aspect of existence that lends depth and continuity to human striving.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The salient concept in this research is ‘the meaning of life’. In the face of certain human conditions like death, it is not strange for one to wonder if there is any meaning to life if it is all going to end and, in most cases, without warning or signal. In this quest for finding the meaning of life, the question of approach and theories have played important roles. Looking at reflections and stances from subjective views, the meaning of life births either optimistic or pessimistic response/reaction which Aribiah Attoe explains explicitly in a journal editorial introduction, he says,

The individual, no matter how hard s/he tries to ignore the question, will at one moment or the other encounter this question as s/he tries to decipher the worth and purpose of every striving that has become part and parcel of his/her mode of living. Unsurprisingly, our appraisal of our individual lives often has real-life consequences. On the one hand, the individual who recognises some purpose or worth, with regard to his/her existence, would presumably continue to strive to consolidate his/her attempts at purposefulness or enjoy the sense of fulfilment that characterises the achievement of said purpose and/or feelings of worth. On the other hand, some would consider life meaningless and not worth the effort. In those minds, the more pertinent question, having concluded the meaninglessness of life, is the question of whether life is still worth living (Attoe 2020, pp. 93-99).

To understand the meaning of life and not confuse or mistake it with other ideas that asks, ‘what is life?’ or discuss that bother on quality/standard of living (even though these could be influential on what meaning individuals may make of life) as they are quite different issues, Attoe opines that the first step to answering the question of life’s meaning is to look into the concept of ‘meaning’ itself and what theories come to mind upon reflecting on a meaningful life (Attoe 2020, p. 93). For the philosopher Gottlob Frege, the word meaning can be defined in two ways, *Reference* and *Sense*. Sense is the way in which an expression presents its object (as in, the ‘how’), while Reference is the object in the world which the expressions describe (the ‘what’) (Frege 1952). Since understanding of the “concept of meaning” would involve a definition of the term “meaning” that encompasses every conception of meaningfulness (Attoe 2020, pp. 94), the combination of Frege’s ‘Sense and ‘Reference’ is a recipe for a holistic derivation of life’s meaningfulness. Also, to quote Frank Martela from the lenses of Attoe,

The concept of meaning can be described in terms of one’s contribution to life. For him, it is not only “about the contribution taking place, but also about how much my life is responsible for that contribution” ... So, for Martela, all competing theories about the meaning of life only ask about the contribution a life has made and how much of that contribution is intrinsically derived (Martela 2017).

Here, we see that Frank Martela’s definition of meaning involves life in a way that moves between life as an objective concept and a subjective experience in which life is a collection of participation and each participant’s contribution makes up the whole and makes up the participants

meaningfulness in life. This makes sense within the scope of Yolanda Mlungwana's thought that the meaning of life involves making a complete evaluation of life with regards to its 'coherence' (with a whole) 'purpose' and 'value' (Mlungwana 2020). From the discussion so far, we are beginning to have some sense of what an answer to the question of life's meaning would entail but to be more explicit on our findings up to this point, I would like to use Attoe's expression after he considered Martela's and other schola's theories. He said,

When we consider this cluster of variables together, we begin to get a sense of what my preferred concept of meaning entails. Thus, when we ask about the meaning of life, what we are asking is simply this: What are those things in an individual's life (whether the individual's life as a whole or moments in that life) that involve a subjective passionate pursuit, that are most worth pursuing for their own sake, that transcend one's animal nature, that merit great esteem or admiration, and that cohere with one's life story? (Attoe 2020, p. 94)

In the long run, the theory of meaning as proposed by Thaddeus Mertz is one that this work aligns with and it says thus, Thaddeus Metz makes the claim clearer when he says that a concept of meaning "is what all and only the competing conceptions of a meaningful life are about..." (Mertz 2013, pp. 18-19). We see a broader understanding of this theory in Attoe and Chimakonam's adjusted explanation below:

To ask about meaning is to pose questions such as: which subjectively pursued ends, besides one's own pleasure as such, are worth pursuing for their own sake; how to transcend one's animal nature; what in life merits great esteem or admiration; and what overarching goal or purpose ties meaningful actions in a life, taken as a whole, together into one comprehensible and coherent whole (Attoe & Chimakonam 2023, pp. 312-313).

In continuing the search for life's meaning, we move on to see what theories offer us explanations and so far, there are three prevailing theories under which most conceptions on life's meaning can be categorized and they are, supernaturalism, naturalism and nihilism. While these theories are considered mainstream western philosophical theories, there are some African thoughts from African philosophers and scholars that I find to be in tandem with some of these theories and so we shall look at them simultaneously. Starting with supernaturalism, this theory holds that life's meaning is derived from a transcendent source like an ultimate spiritual reality, or God. William Lane Craig contends that in the absence of God, existence would ultimately be pointless since there would be no ultimate goal, objective standards, or purpose. According to Craig, human existence only has meaning when it is in line with God's plan, which gives it eternal importance (Craig 2008). In African philosophy, the closest I found to the supernaturalist view on life's meaning is from the vital force theory. The first perception one derives from the theory is one that offers community or communalism as the foundation from where one can begin to make meaning of life, however, other variables of this theory which do not misrepresent its core value tells us there's a connection to a force that is of more value than what we are able to make for ourselves as individuals. To emphasize this, we shall look at Ada Agada's evaluation of the vital force theory. He says that the vital force theory of meaning appeals first to the community, as a conglomeration of interdependent individuals, in the search for a guarantor of meaning and finally invokes God as the ultimate guarantor of meaning and source of the vital energy of life (Agada 2020). In essence, this theory submits that no amount of human effort or endeavour will give meaningfulness to life as much as one we will derive from a supernatural force.

For the Naturalist theory, it asserts that meaning in life arises strictly from natural elements in existence and experience such as human achievements, relationships, and subjective fulfilment. Susan Wolf argues that meaning is neither entirely subjective nor supernatural but depends on engaging in objectively worthwhile projects (Wolf 2010). So, this theory is particular about the here and now of existence as we know it and promises of a reality ‘above’ our immediate reach. While the meaning of life from this view can be sought from either a subjective or objective pursuit as is to be seen from different proponents of this school of thought, the bottom line is that it must be within the sensibility of the natural world. A look at Richard Taylor’s contribution to this theory reveals a more subjective dynamic to Susan Wolf’s. Taylor emphasizes subjective meaning, stating that individuals create their own meaning through their desires and pursuits (Taylor 2010). From the mind of an African scholar whose conception on life’s meaning fall within this naturalistic purview, we are introduced to a “Consolation Philosophy”. The consolation philosophy is the framework on which Ada Agada builds and establishes an African line of thought on the meaning of life. According to him, despite the challenges and suffering prevalent in human experience, especially within African societies, individuals can find meaning through consolation which is deeply connected to human emotions (Agada 2015). An interpretation of Agada’s philosophy of consolation from Attoe which says that the universe (and objects in the universe) continues to yearn to achieve its purpose (perfection) (Attoe 2020, p. 95), buttresses and concludes our discussion here that whether our inspiration comes from within or from outside, it must make sense in tangible reality and within this space, we are able to make meaning of life.

Finally on the mainstreams of western philosophy on life’s meaning, we look at Nihilism. Nihilists argue that life is ultimately meaningless because there is no inherent purpose, whether divine or natural. According to Attoe, Nihilism as a theory of meaning stands as a theory of meaninglessness (Attoe 2020, p. 96) and this view is championed by philosophers such as Camus, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer amongst others. For the most part, this view leads to pessimism and despair about life as it leaves subscribers wondering “why should I bother?” This a view also shared by Attoe but with a variation he proposes in his “Philosophy of Indifference” which suggests in some way a neutral nihilist position. More on Attoe’s view on what we can call a neutral pessimism is discussed in the next phase of this work.

DOES THE AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE OF DEATH ADD TO THE MEANING OR MEANINGLESSNESS OF LIFE?

While death could simply be described as the end and demise of life from visible existence, it means more to various African cultural groups. Taking into view Attoe’s account of what death means from the African perspective, death is often seen as the disembodiment of subjective consciousness, which allows for meaning in life to transition into meaning after life (Attoe 2023). The “vital force” theory, articulated by scholars such as Placide Tempels and later expanded by Ada Agada, posits that life’s meaning is rooted in the enhancement and transmission of a metaphysical life force (Tempels 1959; Agada 2018). In this view, every individual strives to increase their vital force, not only for personal benefit but for the well-being of the entire community. Death, therefore, is not an absolute end but a transition to another mode of existence, where the deceased continue to influence the living as ancestors (Bolaji 1962).

African societies often perceive death as a passage to the ancestral realm, where the deceased maintain a relationship with the living. For instance, among the Yoruba, elaborate funeral rites are

performed to ensure the smooth transition of the dead to the ancestral world, reflecting the belief that ancestors actively participate in the affairs of the living (Gbadegesin, Segun 1991, pp. 24-26). This ancestral presence reinforces the notion that meaning persists beyond individual mortality, as one's legacy and memory continue to shape the community. It is important to stress that, in order for death to exist, there must first be life, and conversely, in order for life to have coherence, there must be death. This rhythm is observable in nature, for example, plants sprout, flourish, decay, and return to the earth, sustaining future growth. The scriptures also allude to this natural cycle, such as in John 12:24, where Christ declares, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (Holy Bible, John 12:24). African worldviews resonate with this truth in their belief that the so-called dead are not gone but become "living-dead," continuing to exist within the ancestral realm. As Mbiti observes, "the departed are not dead in the absolute sense; they are alive in the memories of the living and in the world of spirits" (Mbiti 2015, p. 27). Practical instances of this continuity of life beyond the physical world is reflected in the funeral rituals of several African cultures. The Senufo people of Côte d'Ivoire bury elders beneath the floors of their homes, symbolizing the enduring protection and guidance of ancestors (Peeks & Yankah 2004, pp. 247). Similarly, the Ashanti of Ghana conduct elaborate royal funerals, reinforcing the interconnectedness of leadership, ancestry, and communal memory (McCaskie 1995). Among the Dinka of South Sudan, communal "crying ceremonies" feature singing and dancing to help the deceased transition to the afterlife and to comfort the bereaved (Deng 1972, pp. 104-106). These practices illustrate the communal approach to death and the belief that life's meaning is affirmed and celebrated through collective rituals. It is important to note that, such rites are accorded to what is regarded as a *good death*, the passing of an elder in ripe old age, with moral standing, descendants, and the fulfilment of social obligations, because only under these conditions is the deceased ritually accepted into the community of ancestors (Mbiti 2015, p. 113). This acceptance occurs at the completion of the prescribed funerary sequence, the moment when the person's status changes from living-kin to ancestor-kin, thereby ensuring the continuation of reciprocal bonds between the living and the dead (Marleen de Witte 2001, pp. 45). These cultural patterns do more than commemorate the departed, they model a way of thinking in which death is not a feared interruption but an anticipated completion of life's journey. In many African traditions, to live well is to die well, and to die well is to enter ancestorhood. Burial rites, ancestral veneration, and the sustained relationship between living and dead all encourage a mindset that accepts death as the fulfillment of one's earthly role and a continuation of community in another form (Mbiti 2015, p. 107). This perspective not only enriches the meaning of life but also guides ethical living: knowing that one's actions will be remembered and evaluated by future generations inspires a life of responsibility, service, and dignity (Gyekye 1995, p. 155). By acknowledging death as a natural and necessary passage, the living are freed to act with clarity and courage, making each stage of existence purposeful within the wider cycle of life, death, and legacy.

This position as Attoe rightly observes gives its apologists a hope of for meaning in the afterlife. This afterlife meaning of life is in tandem with several religious views and has received criticism from nihilists like Nietzsche and even Attoe. For Nietzsche in his critique of the Christian religious meaning of life which is based off on an afterlife, the "otherworldly" orientation of this view is distracting and misleading from present reality (Nietzsche 2005, p. 155), hence does not help the cause. Attoe on the other hand acknowledges that this view is an optimistic one for its apologists (African and anyone who subscribes to this view of the meaning of life), because it allows for the transition to the ancestral world (a belief system widely held across several cultural groups in Africa), however his submission is that it undermines life's meaning. In his work, he provides

several reasons for his pessimistic position one of which is that the idea of a second death inherent in the African conception of death (Attoe 2023, p. 311), makes death an ultimate final destination and thus proves to him that life is ultimately meaningless. He arrives at this position by moving from the ‘communal’ and collective view of African on the meaning of life embedded in the vital force theory and moves to the individual experiencing the situation – death. I mean, looking at it from this view makes you wonder why one would experience death in one life with hopes of another life where you would likely die again? Sheer meaninglessness it appears to be. This I believe is responsible for Attoe’s “Philosophy of indifference” which is aimed at reducing the psychological burden of death's inevitable nature by promoting a life lived without an undue connection to meaning.

This work is inclined to the optimistic view that death contributes to the meaningfulness of life, hence finds something incomplete in Attoe’s conclusion on the impact of death. For one, I ask, since this conclusion is derived from the individual/subjective implication of death on the experiencing subject, what do we know about what they feel about death while in the state of being dead? If the knowledge presented is based off of what those alive and experiencing both living and the feeling of losing a member is, then it takes us back to the communal sense of life’s meaning from where African make sense of the concept of death and find it as part of life’s meaningfulness in the first place. As for the deceased, a chapter is closed and while we hold dear our views on ancestral life, the questions I have are, how do we account for the nature of life in that realm? Is it similar to what we know in this reality or different? But, I argue here that Attoe’s submission for an inherent insinuation of a second death in African view is based on the assumption that the order of the ‘afterlife’ follows the order of this life. The next thing on our minds then is how then can we derive a meaning of life that will make sense to us as individual (subjective experience) outside of our collective communal understanding (objective experience) such that at or with death (whether ours or of a loved one), there’s still meaning in the race we have run or are running? It is at this point I consider the relevance of Destiny in the contribution to the meaning of life.

DEATH OR ITS ABSENCE IN THE ‘MEANINGFUL’ LIFE

Working with the existing conception of destiny in the African worldview, one can derive sense in the meaning of life in the face of death, especially if we take into consideration the importance of time and space in the very nature of life. The appropriation of time and seasons in existence and experience suggests that the concept of meaning can only be understood within time and space, hence the expiration of life (death) should not denote meaninglessness but meaning which is part of life. What then do we do to eliminate the absurdity associated with the idea of death in our experience? I suggest that we look at what we can do with our experience (of life and death as a whole).

I want to state that I agree that life’s meaningfulness should be understood from the perspective of ‘meaning’ rather than some other ideas that may be. I also want to state that I agree with Attoe as he does with Mertz’s concept of meaning which he holds with some changes and additions. I however do not accept the part where life is meaningless because of the finality of death (and also refuse his advice to disassociate life from meaning in order to manage the anguish it presents from his explications because a lot would be at stake if we were to go about living without ‘meaning’) because I do not see how we can remove the idea of death which is a part of life from the meaning of life that we here adopt from Mertz—that is, one that is pluralistic—as it would be a paradox.

Also, in several African cultures, there are different adages/proverbs on death which forces us into deep reflection into life's meaning in such ways that it forces us to 'make meaning' out of life. One of such adages is the Zulu proverb, "A person is only truly dead when they are forgotten", meaning that a person's legacy lives on in the memories and stories of those they leave behind. Proverbs like this tells us that because of death, we should make meaning while alive. Yet another Hausa proverb on death says, "The earth does not get fat from the bodies of the dead", meaning that death is a natural part of life, and no matter how many people pass away, life continues. This Nigerian adage could be taken to mean absurdity or vanity and it can also be seen as a reason to 'make hay while the sun shines', whatever interpretation one would derive from it would simply tell me what I am thinking which is that death adds up to make meaning of life. When we now consider Heidegger's view on being as being-towards-death, and also the interpretation that death in itself means something temporal, (Temporality) which it shares with life, we have to agree that the meaning of life is intertwined with the event of death.

I am of the thought that it is not just the fact that death exists that makes some of us inclined to think life is absurd or meaningless, but that it is very likely because of how and when it happens in some contexts. In many African societies, especially Nigerian cultures, when an aged person (typically from the age of 80 and above) dies, we call it a celebration of life, there is less or no crying (sorrow) and a lot of 'gyration'. From James Nnorugu's work we see an instance of where death is not considered tragic,

Many believed that natural death was a blessing from God. As...stated that it is the subject of constant prayer for Africans in most of their prayers to die a good death in old age... Achebe...has a good example of the celebration of a good death in some traditions in Africa. He reported that when Ezeudu died the people of Umuofia celebrated his death with lots of food and other merriments. At the funeral, there were gun salutes, the beating of drums, and the clanging of machetes. And various types of masquerades came to perform to pay their last respect to the dead (Nnoruga 2024, pp. 156-165).

This suggests that it is not the idea of dying that is solely responsible for the gloominess sometimes associated with death, but the 'how and when'. Because if we reflect on the following questions: "What type of existence or living would we have if there was no death"? Would it be 'better' if we had a say on the 'when' and 'how' of our death? I do not suppose that any response I put forward here will satisfy the curiosity of our wondering minds but, let us not forget that the physical and mental state of the human body/mind declines with age and would gradually not fit into the idea of meaning contained in Mertz's and Attie's view which I have also adopted, and so I wonder if 'not dying' would make life any more meaningful to those who think it is meaningless because of death. I rather think that in the memory of those who have died and whatever purpose they lived their life for, it becomes 'meaningful' or 'meaningless' to them while they were alive and to those alive after they have died. Perhaps, if we had a say on 'when' and 'how' we die, it would suppress the agony and absurdity as well as the mystery of life/death.

CONCLUSION

The central claim of this paper can be made more explicit in the following way. If meaning is bound up with temporality, legacy, and responsibility, then death cannot be a negation of meaning but its very condition. First, death places limits on existence, and these limits are what make human

striving urgent and significant. Second, death affirms continuity, since the living carry forward the legacies of the dead, ensuring that life has communal and intergenerational meaning. Third, African cultural practices, from elaborate funeral rituals to ancestral veneration, demonstrate that death enriches life by rooting it within a cycle of continuity and remembrance. Therefore, far from rendering life meaningless, death is a necessary boundary that makes life meaningful.

While accepting that life's meaning can be derived from an understanding of the concept of meaning and having seen its role in our understanding of life's meaning, this work associates itself with the views held by Mertz and Attoe on the plurality that makes up meaning as being more holistic for our understanding. That life is meaningless because of death is where this work departs from others whose view of life's meaning is intertwined with death. This work takes our minds to reflect on what could be if death was not in the picture, in the bid to show us that death does not equal absurdity or meaninglessness but is rather an important part of deriving life's meaning.

The submission here is that, whether we look to our spirituality as a people or we abandon it completely, death happens to all and sundry with no warning in some instance, and no opportunity to have a say or input on how each of us would want it to be, (In such instance that we have an input, life would be demystified and perhaps it would not be a bad thing for it to be demystified, or maybe it would have terrible repercussions on how life is lived, the debates are welcome) but embracing it and 'making hay while the sun shines' would be of benefit and make losses less agonistic.

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