

Reality of Death and the Meaning of Life: An African Perspective

Hyginus Chibuike Ezebuilo, PhD

Abstract

Philosophers through the ages have provided answers to the question of what makes life meaningful. Much of their answers are construed as accounts of which final ends a person ought to realize in order to have a life that matters. But can existence really be meaningful if death is its definitive end? Employing the phenomenological method, this paper examines how, for the African, life can be meaningful (if it is ever possible) given the reality of death towards which every created thing tends. The finding of this paper is that for the African, death is not “a necessary end” as some would have us believe. Death is only a beginning of a new life, and meaning of life depends on harmony with God’s purpose for the individual. For the African, the account of meaning in life is that the better one fulfills a purpose God has assigned the more one’s existence is significant. The idea is that God has a plan for the universe and that one’s life is meaningful to the degree that one realizes God’s plan for oneself. The paper, thus, concludes that fulfilling God’s purpose by choice is the sole source of meaning, with the existence of an afterlife necessary for it. If a person failed to do what God intends him/her to do with his/her life, then, on the African perspective, his/her life would be meaningless.

Keywords: Africa, Life, Death, Meaning, God, Subjective, Objective.

Introduction

When the topic of the meaning of life comes up, people often pose one of two questions: so what is the meaning of life? And what are you talking about? We shall begin with the latter which seeks to clarify what we are saying when we talk about the meaning of life. Afterwards we shall attempt to provide an answer to the former. Some accounts of what makes life meaningful provide particular ways to do so for instance, by making certain achievements, developing moral character, or learning from relationships, etc.

Is life truly meaningful? Should one dare to seek meaning in life? If life is meaningful, what precisely confers meaning to it and how? Is nihilism about meaning in life true? Nihilism is the view that questions the assumption that life is meaningful. According to nihilism, what would make a life meaningful either cannot obtain or as a matter of fact simply never does. The straightforward rationale for nihilism is the combination of supernaturalism about what makes life meaningful and atheism. However, the most common rationale for nihilism these days do not appeal to supernaturalism. The ideas shared among many contemporary nihilists is that there is something inherent to the human condition that prevents meaning from arising, even granting that God exists, hence, the usual lamentation in Igbo language, *uwa enwero isi* - literally, the world is meaningless.

These are the problems which this study sets itself. It is divided into five sections. The first is introduction, the second which is a theoretical framework, attempts an understanding of the meaning of meaning as a concept. It provides us the premise that meaningfulness concerns a final good in a person's life that is not necessarily the same as happiness or rightness. The rest of the discussion addresses attempts to capture the nature of this good. The main aim of the study is the attempt to provide an African conception of the meaning of life which is based on the African epistemological paradigm.

What is the Meaning of Life: Conceptual Framework

There is need to clarify what is meant by 'meaning' when we talk of life's meaning. Many philosophers writing on this subject talk of life's meaning to indicate a positive final value that the life of an individual can exhibit. Only a few believe either that a "meaningful life is a merely neutral quality, or that what is of interest is the meaning of the human species or universe as a whole".¹ Most often, the idea is to ascertain whether and how the existence of a person over time has meaning, a certain property that is desirable for its own sake. Indeed, most writings on meaning believe that it comes in degree such that some lives (as a whole) are more meaningful than others. One can also claim that some people's lives are meaningless and that they nevertheless share equal moral status with others.

Another important element of the sense of meaningfulness is that "it connotes a good that is conceptually distinct from happiness or rightness."² In the first place, to ask whether someone's life is meaningful is not one and the same as asking whether her life is happy or pleasant. As Nozick rightly observes "A life in an experience or virtual reality machine could conceivably be happy but certainly it may not be taken to be a *prima facie* candidate for meaningfulness."³ Furthermore, one's life logically could become meaningful precisely by sacrificing one's happiness or even one's life.

Of course, one might argue that life would be meaningless if (or even because) it were unhappy or immoral. This position is not true. Asking whether a person's life is meaningful is not identical to considering whether she has been morally upright. There seem to be ways to enhance meaning that have nothing to do with morality, for instance, making a scientific discovery. Our point is that the question of what makes a life meaningful is conceptually distinct from the question of what makes a life

1 Seachris, J. "The Meaning of Life as Narrative: A New proposal for Interpreting Philosophy's 'Primary' Question." *Philo*, (12) (2009), Pg. 5-23.

2 Wolf, S. *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2010) pg. 56.

3 Nozick, R. 1974. *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. (New York: Basic Books, 1974), Pg.42-45.

happy or moral, even if it turns out that the best answer to the question of meaning appeals to happiness and/morality – which we really have no doubt. A meaningless life, on the other hand, connotes the concept of an absurd, unreasonable, futile, or wasted life.

If talk about meaning in life is not by definition talk about happiness or rightness, then what is it about? We agree that it is difficult to find a consensus on the matter. One answer is that a “meaningful life is one that by definition has achieved choice-worthy purposes”⁴ or involves “satisfaction upon having done so.”⁵ However, for such an analysis to clearly demarcate meaningfulness from happiness, it would be useful to modify it to indicate which purposes are germane to meaningfulness. On this score, we suggest that the candidates for grounding “meaning are purposes that not only have a positive value, but also render a life coherent”,⁶ make it intelligible,⁷ or transcend animal nature.

Now, it should be noted that the above purpose-based analysis excludes as not being part of life’s meaning some of the most widely read texts which purport to be part of it, such as Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialist account of meaning as being constituted by whatever one chooses, and Richard Taylor’s discussion of Sisyphus as being able to acquire meaning in his life merely by having his strongest desires satisfied. Admittedly, these are *prima facie* accounts of meaning in life, but they do not essentially involve the attainment of purposes that foster coherence, intelligibility or transcendence. Knowing that meaningfulness concerns a final good in a person’s life that is not necessarily the same as happiness or rightness provides a certain amount of common ground. The rest of this discussion addresses attempts to capture the nature of this good.

4 Nielsen, K. “Linguistic Philosophy and the Meaning of Life.” In E.D. Klemke (ed.). *The Meaning of Life*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pg.177-204.

5 Wohlgennant, R. “Has the Question about the Meaning of Life Any Meaning?” In O. Hanfling (ed.). *Life and Meaning: A Reader*, (1981), Pg.34-38.

6 Markus, A. “Assessing Views of Life, A Subjective Affair?” *Religious Studies*, (39) (2003), Pg. 125-143.

7 Thomson, G. *On the Meaning of Life*. South Melbourne: Wadsworth. Wolf, S. 2010. *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2003), Pg. 8-13.

Naturalism

Naturalism is the view that a meaningful life is possible in a purely physical world as known by science. In other words, it is the view that meaning in life is possible, at least for many people, even if there is no spiritual realm. Among the naturalists, however, there is a debate about two things: the extent to which the human mind constitutes meaning and whether there are conditions of meaning that are invariant among human beings. To answer these questions, the naturalists divide into the subjectivists and the objectivists.

Subjective and Objective Arguments for Meaning in Life

Subjectivists believe that there are no invariant standards of meaning because meaning is relative to the subject, that is, it depends on an individual's pro-attitudes such as desires, ends, and choices. According to this view, something is meaningful for a person if she believes it to be or if she desires it. Meaning in life varies from person to person, depending on each person's mental states. Hence, one's life is more meaningful, the more one gets what one happens to desire strongly, the more one achieves one's highly esteemed goal(s), or the more one does what one believes to be really important.

People are primarily moved to accept subjectivism because, for them, the alternatives are unpalatable; they are sure that value in general and meaning in particular exist, but do not see how it could be grounded in something independent of the mind, whether it be the natural, the non-natural, or the supernatural. In contrast to these possibilities, it appears straightforward to account for what is meaningful in terms of what people generally find meaningful or what people want out of life.

There are other circumscribed arguments for subjectivism. One is that it is plausible since it is reasonable to think that a meaningful life is an authentic one. If a person's life is significant insofar as she is true to herself or her deepest nature, then we have some reason to believe that meaning is simply a function of satisfying certain desires held by the individual or certain

ends of hers. Furthermore, it is argued that from the subjectivist point of view meaning intuitively comes from losing oneself, that is, in becoming absorbed in an activity or experience. For instance, work that concentrates the mind and relationships that are engrossing seem central to meaning, precisely because of the subjective elements involved, namely concentration and engrossment.

Critics, however, maintain that the above arguments are vulnerable to a common objection. As Taylor noted "They neglect the role of objective value both in realizing oneself and in losing oneself."⁸ One is not really being true to oneself if one intentionally harms others and one is also not losing oneself in a meaning-conferring way if one is consumed by these activities. There seem to be certain actions, relationships, states, and experiences that one ought to concentrate on or be engrossed in, if meaning is to accrue.

More promising, perhaps, is the attempt to "ground value not in the responses of an individual valuer, but in those of a particular group"⁹ - in an inter-subjective move. Objectivists maintain that there are some invariant standards for meaning because meaning is not mind-dependent, that is, it is a real property that exists, independent of anyone's mental states. According to this view, something is meaningful in virtue of its intrinsic nature, independent of whether it is believed to be meaningful or desired.

Objective naturalists believe that meaning is constituted by something physical independent of the mind about which we can have correct or incorrect beliefs. For them, obtaining the object of some variable pro-attitude is not sufficient for meaning. Instead, there are certain inherently worthwhile or finally valuable conditions that confer meaning for anyone, neither merely because they are wanted, chosen, or believed to be meaningful, nor because they somehow are grounded in God.

⁸ Taylor, C. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), Ch. 4.

⁹ Wong, W. "Meaningfulness and Identities." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, (11) (2008), Pg. 123-148.

According to Metz Thaddeus, morality and creativity are widely held instances of actions that confer meaning on life while actions like trimming toenails and eating snow (and the other counterexamples to subjectivist arguments above) are not. He writes:

Objectivism is thought to be the best explanation for these respective kinds of judgments: the former are actions that are meaningful regardless of whether any arbitrary agent (whether it be an individual, her society, or even God) judges them to be meaningful or seeks to engage in them, while the latter actions simply lack significance and cannot obtain it [even] if someone believes them to have it or engages in them.¹⁰

It follows that to obtain meaning in life, one ought to pursue the former actions and avoid the latter ones.

A pure objectivist thinks that being the object of a person's mental state plays no role in making that person's life meaningful. For instance, utilitarian with respect to meaning are pure objectivists, for they claim that certain actions confer meaning on life regardless of the agent's reactions to them. On this view, the more one benefits others, the more meaningful one's life, regardless of whether or not one enjoys benefiting them, and whether or not one believes that they should be assisted, etc".¹¹ But relatively few objectivists are pure in this sense. Indeed, remarks that a "large majority of them believe that a life is more meaningful not merely because of objective factors, but also because of subjective ones such as cognition, affection, and emotion".¹² Most commonly held is the view captured by Susan Wolf's slogan: "Meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness."¹³ This

¹⁰ Metz, T. "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life" *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (2007), Plato.stanford.edu/entries/life-meaning/#Rel

¹¹ Singer, I. *Meaning in Life: The Creation of Value*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

¹² Metz, T. "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life" *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (2007), Plato.stanford.edu/entries/life-meaning/#Rel

¹³ Wolf, S. *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), Pg.211.

theory then implies that no meaning accrues to one's life if one believes in, is satisfied by, or cares about a project that is not worthwhile, or if one takes up a worthwhile project but fails to judge it important, be satisfied by it, care about it or otherwise identify with it.

Supernaturalism: God-based Account of Meaning in Life

Supernaturalism is the view that meaning in life must be constituted by a certain relationship with the divine being. If one fails to have the right relationship with God, then, one's life is meaningless. Some supernaturalist thinkers take some kind of connection with God (understood to be a spiritual being who is all-knowing, all-good, all-powerful and who is the ground of the physical universe) to constitute meaning in life.

The most widely held God-based account of meaning in life is that the better one fulfills a purpose God has assigned the more one's existence is significance. The "idea is that God has a plan for the universe and that one's life is meaningful to the degree that one helps God realize this plan, perhaps in the particular way God wants one to do so".¹⁴ Thus, fulfilling God's purpose by choice is the sole source of meaning, "with the existence of an afterlife not necessary for it".¹⁵ If a person fails to do what God intends him to do with his life, then, her life would be meaningless.

What Metz calls purpose theorists differ over what it is about God's purpose that makes it able to confer meaning on human lives. Some argue that God's purpose could be the sole source of moral rules, where a lack of such would render our lives nonsensical. Others maintain that our lives would have meaning only insofar as they were intentionally fashioned by a creator, "thereby obtaining meaning of the sort that an art-object has".¹⁶ Here, freely choosing to do any particular thing would not be

14 Affolter, J. "Human Nature as God's Purpose," *Religious Studies*, (43) (2007), Pg.443-455.

15 Cottingham, J. *On the Meaning of Life*. (London: Routledge, 2003).

16 Gordon, J. "Is the Existence of God relevant to the Meaning of Life." *The Modern Schoolman*, (60) (1983), Pg. 227-246.

necessary for meaning, and everyone's life would have an equal degree of meaning.

Singer noted that every version of the purpose theory has specific problems, but they all face this shared objection: "if God assigned us a purpose, then God would degrade us and thereby undercut the possibility of us obtaining meaning from fulfilling the purpose."¹⁷ Clearly, however, this objection cannot go without objection. To say that God would degrade us if he assigned us a purpose contradicts the idea of God who is benevolent and all-knowing. It is like saying that your father's plan to enroll you to school is degrading since you could have chosen otherwise. But meaning of life lies more in perfection than in imperfection. Hence, the purpose of a perfect God for us cannot be called degrading or seen as undercutting our possibility of obtaining meaning by fulfilling them. Indeed, fulfilling God's purpose is not only desirable but necessary. In it is found also the true meaning of life.

However, there is no need supposing that God is behind our life when it is meaningful. He writes: If we think of the stereotypical lives of Albert Einstein, Mother Teresa, and Pablo Picasso, they seem meaningful even if we suppose there is no all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good spiritual person who is the ground of the physical world. Even religiously inclined philosophers find this hard to deny.

It is certainly right. Even the most hardened atheist can lead a meaningful life. But who says that God's hand is not in it all? The fact remains that our supposition that there is 'no all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good spiritual person who is the ground of the physical world' does not make it true.

Robert Nozick presents a God-centered theory that focuses less on God as purposive and more on God as infinite.¹⁸ The basic idea is that for a finite condition to be meaningful, it must obtain its meaning from another condition that has meaning.

17 Singer, I. *Meaning in Life: The Creation of Value*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), Pg.29

18 Nozick, R. *The Examined Life*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989)

For instance, if one's life is meaningful, it might be so in virtue of being married to a person whose life is meaningful (say an important person). And, being finite, the spouse must obtain his or her meaning from elsewhere, perhaps from the sort of work he or she does. And this work must obtain its meaning by being related to something else that is meaningful, and so on. A regress on meaningful finite conditions is present, and the suggestion is that the regress can terminate only in something infinite, a being so all-compassing that it need not (indeed, cannot) go beyond itself to obtain meaning from anything else. And that is God.

Thomson's objection to this rationale is that "a finite condition could be meaningful without obtaining its meaning from another meaningful condition; perhaps it could be meaningful in itself, or obtain its meaning by being related to something beautiful, autonomous or otherwise valuable for its own sake but not meaningful".¹⁹ This critique of course lacks merit for two reasons. It is only a self-sufficient being that can be meaningful without obtaining its meaning from something else, but experience has shown that human beings are not self-sufficient. We need each other in one way or another, for one reason or another, and there is never a position a man can find himself in which he can say, 'I need no one's help.' Secondly, something valuable for its own sake cannot be meaningless. So if someone obtains meaning by relating to such a thing, one cannot say that one obtains meaning from something not meaningful.

African Worldview and the Meaning of Life

In trying to see how an African understands the meaning of life, one has to look closely at the identity of a human person in the African sense. "I am because you are" sums up well an African understanding of a person as who he/she is in relation to other beings, both human and divine. The identity of the

¹⁹ Thomson, G. *On the Meaning of Life*. (South Melbourne: Wadsworth, 2003), Pg.48.

individual finds expression both in itself and among other people. The individual stands in relation to other beings. This assumes that the individual cannot live a meaningful life unless he/she relates to other beings. At the same time, other people are there because individuals exist. In fact there would be no other people if there were no individuals.

This is a world that does not consider its interests at the expense of others, a form of either neglect or marginalization. In fact, Mbiti states it as a matter of fact that: Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people. When he suffers, he does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when he rejoices, he rejoices not alone but with his kinsmen, his neighbours and the relatives whether dead or alive...The individual can only say: I am, because we are, and since we are, therefore I am. This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man.

The individual, therefore, must be part of the community to be able to live a meaningful life; and meaningful life finds expression in fellowship with other people. The individual needs other people for his/her existence. Each person lives interdependently with other people; and hence each person is accountable to other people. In order to live a meaningful life, interdependency and accountability go hand in hand. In practical terms, one helps, supports, encourages, shares with and protects other people; and other people should do the same. If one member suffers, for example if one is hungry, the rest have to help. It is normal in Africa to see whole villages agonizing with hunger rather than see some hoarding food and others dying of hunger. All people combat together that which dehumanizes people, and cherish the things that humanize people all the more. In line with this worldview, we will attempt to provide an African conception of the meaning of life which is based on the African epistemological paradigm.

Death in African Worldview

The professional “study of psychology in Africa has been and is still dominated by Western approaches”.²⁰ Similarly, views on conception of death and the meaning of life in psychology are mainly based on traditional Western epistemological paradigm. But the fact remains that there are other realities such as those of Africans whose conception of life and death, for example, are different in interpretation, representation and meaning. As Baloyi and Maobe-Rbothata rightly observed, “no measure of imported experience can ever be authentic, unless it is constructed and interpreted from within the context of the lived experiences of the recipients.”²¹

Death is a natural transition from the visible to the invisible ontology where the spirit, the essence of the person, is not destroyed but moves to live in the spirit ancestors’ realm. This meaning attached to death is consistent with the Africa’s cultural, historical, epistemological and methodological conceptions of being-in-the-world, and are premised on these dimensions. Perceptions and conceptions about the meaning of life and the reality of death in any cultural system are based on certain philosophical presuppositions and worldviews. Given that there are cultural differences in conceptions of the person, conceptions of life and death as well as humanness can vary across cultures as well. It is for this reason that we are careful not to assume that all Africans conceive death and the meaning of life according to the above dimensions of being-in-the-world.

The being of an African does not exclude the spiritual connectedness with the world of the living dead or as Mbiti puts it, “The spiritual presence in the affairs of the living or becoming a member in the company of spirits...considered to

20 Baloyi, L. & Maobe-Rbothata, M. “The African Conception of Death: A Cultural Implication.” In L.T.B. Jackson, D. Meiring, et al (eds.). *Towards Sustainable Development through Nurturing Diversity: Proceedings from the 21st International Congress of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology*. https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/iaccp_papers/119/, 2014.

21 Baloyi, L. & Maobe-Rbothata, M. *Towards Sustainable Development through Nurturing—2014 Diversity: Proceedings from the 21st International Congress of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology*. https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/iaccp_papers/119/, 2014.

be in a state of personal immortality."²² Nsamenang, states that an African worldview envisions the human life cycle in three phases of selfhood. There "is a spiritual selfhood, which begins at conception, or perhaps earlier in an ancestral spirit that reincarnates"²³. Second is a social or experiential selfhood which begins with the rite of incorporation or introduction of the child into the human community through to death, third; an ancestral selfhood which follows biological death.

It is worth noting that from the indigenous African worldview, these selfhoods do not exist as autonomous, independent, and in isolation. They are "interdependent, interrelated and co-exist in a corroborative and collective way"²³. The self gets defined and understood in relation to the others, and gets meaning from its relational connectedness to other cosmic life forces. The meaning attributed to the self or to its life is based on the meaningful contribution the self makes to the wellbeing of others and the environment. Life experiences and developmental phases, death included, are not viewed as separate from each other, outside of their encompassing context. When people die, they transcend to the spirit world to be in the company of the living dead or ancestors. Ancestors "protect and provide guidance to those in the material realm and therefore are highly respected, venerated and very important to the community of the living"²⁴. There is therefore continuous and unbreakable communication and connectedness between the living and the living dead.

Viewed in this perspective, Africans do not conceive death and life as two separate phases, instead, there is harmony and interdependence between the two life forces which is different from the "western perspective in which life is seen to be

22 Mbiti, J.S. *African Religions and Philosophies*. (Oxford: Heinemann Educational, 1990) pg 40.

23 Nsamenang, A.B. *Human Development in Cultural Contexts: A Third World Perspective*. (Newbury Park: Sage Publication, 1992).

24 Baloyi, L. & Maobe-Rbothata, M. *Towards Sustainable Development through Nurturing Diversity: Proceedings from the 21st International Congress of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology*. https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/iaccp_papers/119/, 2014.

233 Baloyi, L. & Maobe-Rbothata, M. *Towards Sustainable Development through Nurturing Diversity: Proceedings from the 21st International Congress of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology*. https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/iaccp_papers/119/, 2014.

consisting of discrete stages, starting with conception and ending with death".²⁵ Here, death marks the end of life, for in dying, the dead person literally ceases to exist. For the African, death is not broadly seen as a necessary end of life but a necessary end of this present life and a necessary beginning of another life.

A Meaningful Life is Purposive, Desirable, and Continuous

The idea of meaningful life is connected with the idea of personhood in Igbo-African ontology. The two terms: life and person are not the same. The African values a human life from when it is still a fetus. This is why abortion is abhorrent in traditional African society and many taboos are put in place to ensure the safety of the unborn baby. Life is truly a sacred phenomenon. To be human, however, is one thing while to be a person is another in Igbo-Africa. Certain things are expected of a human being for he/her to be seen as a person. To cut it short, the human being ought to have achieved something worthwhile in life. But achievement does not just happen; it involves other processes. For instance, one has to be morally outstanding, married with children (except forbidden to do so for sacred reasons), and known for something good or a legacy. Anyone who fulfills these condition is appropriately called a person in Igbo ontology otherwise such a one bears the title 'person' only nominally.

It follows from this that personhood is tantamount to meaningful life. A meaningful life is one that by definition has achieved choice-worthy purposes with some positive values in keeping with right conduct. Now, as we noted earlier, the above analysis excludes as not being part of life's meaning some of the most widely read texts which purport to be part of it, such as Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist account of meaning as being constituted by whatever one chooses. Not anything an individual dares to choose is choice-worthy. Account for what

25 Baloyi, L. & Maobe-Rbothata, M. 2014. *Towards Sustainable Development through Nurturing Diversity: Proceedings from the 21st International Congress of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology*, (2014). https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/iaccp_papers/119/_htm, accessed 27/06/2021.

is meaningful is given in terms of what people generally find meaningful or what people want out of life.

Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism proposes a purely subjective approach to the meaning of life. Subjectivists believe that there are no invariant standards of meaning because meaning is relative to the subject, that is, it depends on an individual's pro-attitudes such as desires, ends, and choices. According to this view, something is meaningful for a person if she believes it to be or if she desires it. Meaning in life varies from person to person, depending on each person's mental states. Hence, one's life is more meaningful, the more one gets what one happens to desire strongly, the more one achieves one's highly esteemed goal(s), or the more one does what one believes to be really important.

On the contrary, the African attempts to ground value not only in the responses of an individual but also in those of a particular group. The view captured by Susan Wolf's slogan: "Meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness,"²⁶ is much applicable here. It follows again that no meaning accrues to one's life if one believes in, is satisfied by, or cares about a project that is not worthwhile, or if one takes up a worthwhile project but fails to judge it important, be satisfied by it, care about it or otherwise identify with it.

The role of the divine being as the ultimate ground for meaning in African conception cannot be undermined. God is the one who sets the purpose for life, the individual meets with this purpose or not. If he achieves it then his life must be meaningful, otherwise his life becomes meaningless. It follows then that one needs to be in good relationship with God. This partly accounts for why the African is extremely religious, and as already observed, relationship in the African community includes the divine dimension. One must be in good term with God more so because, the African believes in the existence of the afterlife: after this present life comes God's judgment and

²⁶ Wolf, S. *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*. 2010. Pg.211.

this alone determines one's fate in the next life. Thus, "fulfilling God's purpose by choice is the sole source of meaning, with the existence of an afterlife quite necessary for it, contrary to".²⁷ If a person failed to do what God intends him to do with his life, then, her life would be meaningless.

This is precisely why we say that continuity is a mark of a meaningful life. For, since a meaningful life finds its fulfillment in the community, and since death is not an end to 'life,' it follows that the dead also needs to continue her new life in the community - the ancestral community. We noted above that to be called a person, one has to be morally outstanding, married with children (except forbidden to do so for sacred reasons), and known for something good or a legacy. Now, to gain admittance into the ancestral community, one has to die a good death, in addition to these. Acceptance into the ancestral world is a clear sign that one's life is meaningful. Those who died bad deaths and those who lived bad lives cannot become ancestors; they are regarded as evil ghosts.

Francis Njoku summarizes the "African concept of life in three main points"²⁸ as follows: firstly, God is the originator of life, the creator of man, the universe and the sustainer of creation. Secondly, the ancestor plays an important role in the community life. They are not cut off from the living for they may still reveal themselves in dreams or appear to their living relatives to guide or correct them. Thirdly, life is communal affair. It involves a relationship and communion between man, God, ancestors, divinities, other men and the land. Finally, one gives account of one's life in the presence of God after death. This relationship, however, "must be based on certain rules and regulations for it to succeed".²⁹

Finally, it should be noted that a meaningful life in the African perspective is seen from the point of view of holism.

27 Cottingham, J. *On the Meaning of Life*. (London: Routledge, 2003).

28 Njoku, F.O.C. *Essays in African Philosophy, Thought and Theology*. (Owerri: Clacom, 2002), Pg. 167-168.

29 Njoku, F.O.C. *Essays in African Philosophy, Thought and Theology*. (Owerri: Clacom, 2002), Pg. 160.

The only bearer of final value is life as a whole. This, however, does not entail that there are strictly speaking no parts or segments of a life that can be meaningful in themselves. Both parts of a life and a life as a whole can be independent bearers of meaning, but the latter has lexical priority over the former. We must not forget the possibility of repentance by which a good man can change to worse and a bad man change to good.

Conclusion

This study examined the African perspective of the meaning of life given the glaring reality of death. To achieve this purpose, we highlighted briefly the African worldview. In line with this worldview, we attempted to provide an African conception of the meaning of life which is based on the African epistemological paradigm. It is observed that for the African, life is truly meaningful and as such the onus to seek meaning in life lies in the shoulder of every human being. *Nihilism*, therefore, is not true.

It is precisely God that confers meaning to life just as an artwork derives its meaning from the artist. Thus, fulfilling God's purpose by choice is the sole source of meaning. If a person failed to do what God intends him to do with his life, then, his life would be meaningless. But if one does what God intends for him, then his life would be meaningful. This role of God in giving meaning to life is also a pointer to the equality of meaning. No man's life can be more meaningful than another's, because each person is responding to God's purpose for him. Rather than measuring whose life is more meaningful, each individual should be thankful to God who is the ultimate reason for his/her meaningful life. Nevertheless, further research on this subject should focus on how to determine precisely the purpose God intends for each individual.

Bibliography

- Affolter, J. "Human Nature as God's Purpose," *Religious Studies*, (43) 443-455.
- Baloyi, L. & Maobe-Rbothata, M. 2014. "The African Conception of Death: A Cultural Implication." In L.T.B. Jackson, D. Meiring, et al (eds.). *Towards Sustainable Development through Nurturing Diversity: Proceedings from the 21st International Congress of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology*. 2007 https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/iaccp_papers/119.
- Cottingham, J. *On the Meaning of Life*. London: Routledge.
- Dahl, N. 1987. "Morality and the Meaning of Life." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, (17) (2003): 1-22.
- Frankfurt, H. "The Importance of what We Care About." *Synthese*, (53) (1982): 257-272.
- Gordon, J. 1983. "Is the Existence of God relevant to the Meaning of Life." *The Modern Schoolman*, (60) (1982): 227-246.
- Levy, N. "Downshifting and the Meaning in Life." *Ratio* (18) (2005): 176-189.
- Markus, A. "Assessing Views of Life, A Subjective Affair?" *Religious Studies*, (39) (2003): 125-143.
- Mbiti, J.S. *African Religions and Philosophies*. Oxford: Heinemann Educational, 1990.
- Metz, T. "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life" *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Plato.stanford.edu/entries/life-meaning/#Rel, 2007.
- Nielsen, K. "Linguistic Philosophy and the Meaning of Life." In E.D. Klemke (ed.). *The Meaning of Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.
- Njoku, F.O.C. *Essays in African Philosophy, Thought and Theology*. Owerri: Clacom, 2002.
- Nozick, R. *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books, 1974.
- Nsamenang, A.B. *Human Development in Cultural Contexts: A Third World Perspective*. Newbury Paark: Sage Publication, 1992.

- Quinn, P. 2000. "How Christianity Secures Life's Meanings." In J. Runzo and N. Martin (eds.). *The Meaning of Life in the World Religions*. New York: Oxford University Press, 200.
- Sartre, J.-P. *Existentialism is a Humanism*. London: Methuen, 1948.
- Seachris, J. "The Meaning of Life as Narrative: A New proposal for Interpreting Philosophy's 'Primary' Question." *Philo*, (12) 2009: 5-23.
- Singer, I. *Meaning in Life: The Creation of Value*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1993.
- Tarum, M. *To Be is to Be: Jean-Paul Sartre on Existentialism and Freedom*, 2017.
- Taylor, C. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Taylor, R. *Good and Evil*. New York: Macmillan, 1970.
- Wohlgennant, R. "Has the Question about the Meaning of Life Any Meaning?" In O. Hanfling (ed.). *Life and Meaning: A Reader*, 1987: Pg. 34-38.
- Thomson, G. *On the Meaning of Life*. South Melbourne: Wadsworth. 2003.
- Wolf, S. *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2010.
- Wong, W. "Meaningfulness and Identities." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, (11) 2008:123-148.