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Guest editor's introduction: African perspectives to the question of life's meaning

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In most encounters with tragedy (such as a pandemic, or the death of a loved one), we come face to face with the most important question that we can ever ask ourselves – what is the meaning of my existence? It is even more interesting that this question springs from a place of clarity and yet, even in that moment of clarity, what we actually see is uncertainty and, sometimes, anxiety. The routine of existence can indeed be burdensome and absurd. And so, when we stop to think, or when we look at a cold, lifeless body, bereft of any striving whatsoever, we begin to wonder what the purpose of existence is, if all we can ever know is the pain of existing in an indifferent world, and destined to die.

This makes the question of life's meaning, first and foremost, a personal question. 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. Indeed, Camus (1955) calls this the most important philosophical question and the reason for Camus' declaration is not far-fetched. The seemingly pessimistic view that life is meaningless and consequently worthless affects the most prized possession of an anthropocentric existence – human life. For if life is not worth living, then one must not waste time living, and if one must not waste time living then suicide/death is most desirable. Not many philosophical questions have power over life and death.

While it is the case that some may find it difficult to resist the instinct of self-preservation in order to take the pessimistic stance to its logical conclusion, there is still no doubt that such pessimism still lurks in the back of their minds such that it may affect their relationships with others, and may ensure the willingness to let go at the slightest encounter with adversity. Interestingly, the pessimism that is associated with ideas of meaninglessness often serves as an equaliser of some sort. When Qoholeth declared that life is vanity, a consequent of that fact was his belief that, king or pauper, wise or foolish, all men encounter the same fate – meaninglessness (Ecclesiastes 2).

For philosophers, these permutations are more nuanced, analytic and systematic. The first step to answering the question of meaning would be understanding what the concept "meaning" implies (that is, what the question of meaning, itself, means), and what theories we can think about when trying to decipher what constitutes a meaningful life. What do we (not) mean when we ask "what is the meaning of life?"? In the first instance, we are not requiring ourselves to present some definition of life. In other words, we are not asking for a description of what life is. We are also not solely interested in a description of the nature and development of life. These matters are usually reserved for scholars in the life or biological sciences. This does not, however, mean that knowing what life is is not important to most answers to the question of life's meaning.

Also, when we ask about life's meaning, we do not necessarily question the value of life. Again, whereas the question of life's value may come into play when answering the question of meaning, it is not necessarily a direct answer to the question of life's meaning. When we talk about life's value,

we are mostly talking in terms of utility and importance. So when one says that in traditional African societies, there is value for human life, such an individual is not necessarily saying that there is a belief that life is meaningful. What the individual is saying is that in traditional African thought there is the belief that life is considered of great importance and utility. Such an individual is saying that life is considered priceless, and not that life is meaningful.

A further distinction is the one between the question of life's meaning and the idea of living well. One can easily mistake the latter as synonymous with the former, since living well or living a good life may, intuitively, sell the idea that one is living well. While there are some instances where living a meaningful life would involve living well, it is not always the case that living well necessarily presupposes living a meaningful life. By this admission, we can not truly conclude the question of life's meaning only entails questions about living well. Indeed, Qoheleth, in Ecclesiastes, gives a vivid description of his life that most individuals would consider to be a life that is going well. He states the following:

I said in mine heart...enjoy pleasure...I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine, yet acquainting myself with wisdom...I made great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards...I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings...I withheld not my heart from joy...then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun (Ecclesiastes 2: 1–11; King James Version).

From the above, we see that what can be considered as living well is precisely as vain and meaningless, in Qoheleth's subjective experience, as the life of another individual whose life is not going well. Indeed, one can be healthy, and in that sense living well, and yet find his or her life so meaningless that suicide is considered an option.

However, in those situations where living well involves some sort of transcendence over mere utility, meaning can be found. Take, for instance, Motsamai Molefe claims in his contribution to this special issue that the pursuit of moral excellence, a form of living well, can confer meaning on an individual's life. And this view is instructive as we begin to see clues to what constitutes the question of meaning. Since meaningfulness is not all these things that we have mentioned, understanding what the question means is directly tied to our understanding of the "concept of meaning".

Any understanding of the "concept of meaning" would involve a definition of the term "meaning" that encompasses every conception of meaningfulness. 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..." (Metz 2013, 18–19). And so we see that any "concept" of meaning must be an overarching idea that points us to what philosophers mean when they talk about the meaning of life. A "conception", it must be noted, is different from a "concept". While the former merely describes an idea that tries to explain what a meaningful life might constitute, the latter is an extraction of what is common in all theories or conceptions of meaning in order to get to what is meant by the idea of meaning.

Now, some philosophers have not hesitated in telling us what meaning means, that is, provided us with a description of the concept of meaning. For Frank Martela (2017), 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" (2017, 244). 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.

Tatjana Višak (2017), on the other hand, understands the matter as follows: any question about life's meaning can be directly linked to questions about the normative reasons for our actions. Normative reasons for actions are simply those non-derivative reasons we use to justify our need for action. Meaning is found, on this account, when we begin to ask ourselves about those normative reasons that empower us to still engage in or with the world. In other words, what are those normative reasons for *living*?

While these views are interesting, I do not think that any concept of meaning can be captured in single atomic¹ retorts. The problem with such atomic ideas is that they are usually too narrow for ideas that are meant to be all-encompassing. Take Martela's view, for instance. If meaning is tied to the contribution that an individual has made, then if one studies hard and, finally discovers the "theory of everything", but is suddenly physically unable to share that discovery, then such a discovery, on this view, would be meaningless. A better example would be an individual who strives to become a musical virtuoso, and achieves this end, but never plays his or her music for an audience. It seems counterintuitive to regard the achievement of virtuoso status as not meaningful.² With regard to Višak's submission that the question of meaning entails our normative reasons for action, one can think of instances where meaningful acts are not accompanied by a subjective acknowledgement of a normative reason for action. So, for instance, if one were to lose control of one's cognitive abilities but by some luck was able to save another person's life or by chance was able to scribble down a profound equation that contributes to our knowledge of the Big Bang, such a disinterested achievement would not be captured in Višak's view, even though it could be captured within the purview of Martela's view.

From the foregoing, it would not be far-fetched for one to suggest that if one must possess an all-encompassing understanding of the concept of meaning, such an understanding would have to be pluralistic, rather than atomic (Seachris n.d.; Metz 2013). So, like Metz who favours what he calls a "family semblance approach" as opposed to atomic or stand-alone theories, a fusion of some pertinent ideas would best capture what we mean by meaning. This "family semblance approach", as Metz sees it, is one that considers the concept of meaning as roughly, a cluster of ideas that overlap with one another. "To ask about meaning [for Metz]...is to pose questions such as: which ends, besides one's pleasure as such are most worth pursuing for their own sake; how to transcend one's animal nature; and what in life merits great esteem or admiration" (Metz 2013, 34).

Immediately, we see some of the advantages of Metz's pluralist approach as it embraces most of our intuitions about life's meaningfulness, while excluding most things that may not count as purveyors of meaning. It embraces ends that are worth pursuing – and not instrumental values or means. It involves a transcendence of one's animal nature, thus ensuring that instinctive behaviours and pleasures such as sex, mere procreation, etc., do not count as meaningful acts. Rather, those things that transcend our natural instincts, such as loving a spouse, raising a child positively, etc., would count as meaningful acts. Metz's view also corrals those things that merit great admiration into the purview of meaning – and so the view accommodates objective types of meaningful acts that are observable and praised by others as meaningful.

However, Metz's clusters do not tell the full story as it fails to fully account for subjective theories or conceptions of meaningfulness, and theories about how life, considered as a whole, can be meaningful. And so, I add two more variables to his cluster. The first is inspired by the works of Ada Agada (2015) and his view that the universe (and objects in the universe) continues to yearn to achieve its purpose (perfection), and also the views of Susan Wolf (2010), who finds meaning in loving those things that are worthy of love. Thus, this first variable is a *subjective passionate pursuit or yearning* for those things that an individual finds worthy of love. This subjectivity, when understood in tandem with the other variables, resists the incorporation of ordinary subjective desires. Thus, if one merely subjectively desires sexual pleasure, that would not count as meaningfulness (even though it is subjectively derived) since such a pursuit does not transcend one's animal nature. Also, subjectively derived disvalues (like the passionate drive to become the best murderer) would not count as meaningful since such acts do not merit great esteem and admiration. The second variable is *coherence* and it speaks to individual life as a whole. In this sense, what is of utmost concern is what ties meaningful acts together such that one can point to an individual's life as a whole, as meaningful or meaningless. In another sense, we can say that coherence is the life story that expresses some purpose to which an individual's life is driven.

1 I use the term "atomic" in the sense of single viewpoint or single idea.

2 This example was used by Thaddeus Metz in a previous interaction with him. I find it quite apt.

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?

Thus, from the foregoing questions, we begin to have a clearer understanding of what we mean when we ask about the meaning of life. The answers to the question of meaning have been varied. In the mainstream Western philosophical literature, for instance, a lot has been said in response to the question of life's meaning. Indeed, there have been many systematic theories that have sought to address the question of life's meaning. Examples of such theories include supernaturalism, naturalism, nihilism, etc.

Supernaturalism is the view that meaningfulness involves some form of relationship with the supernatural, whether a supernatural entity or supernatural realm (Nozick 1981; Craig 1994; Poettcker 2015). We see this in God-purpose theories of meaning which locate meaning in a God and the fulfilment of the purpose that this God has laid out for its creations (Metz 2013). We also see this view manifest itself in a soul-based theory which locates meaning in the pursuit of those ends that edify the soul and/or ensure the soul's transition into some form of eternal bliss. Since the soul is often thought of as immortal, there is a fixation with life after death, and so, as Metz states, "one common argument for the soul-centred theory is that life would be meaningless if the injustices of this world were not rectified in another world" (Metz 2013, 124; see Morris 1992; Fischer 1994). Naturalism, on the other hand, does not require a supernatural entity or realm for meaningfulness to abide. Within this view, meaningfulness is thought of as either subjectively derived from the individual or objectively procured from a series of actions that are recognised as meaningful by communities of individuals. Nihilism as a theory of meaning actually stands as a theory of meaninglessness. The view suggests that living is an exercise in futility and achieving meaningfulness is impossible. Even though one can point to moments of meaningfulness (for instance, attaining a degree or raising a child), these moments fade away in the grand scheme of things, especially where life as a whole is considered. Popular nihilists include Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes), Arthur Schopenhauer (1851), Albert Camus (1955), and Raymond Martin (1993).

Now, while a lot has been said about the meaning of life in, say, the mainstream Western philosophical tradition, very little has been said about life's meaning in the African philosophical tradition – at least, in a systematic manner. For most African thinkers, there is no doubt that human life is extremely important and, even, sacred (see Nwala 1985; Iroegbu 1994; Okere 2005; Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya 2011). This is further emphasised by the value placed on procreation (Kyalo 2012), and the disvalue of suicide (Achebe 2009; Adinkrah 2016). Beyond this, clues are abundant in the African philosophical corpus about what a meaningful life entails. For instance, it is from these clues that Monday Igbafen (2017) concludes that life is meaningful in the context of fostering a communal relationship with others in society. It is also from these clues that Agada (2015) presents his consolationist perspective, where meaning is found in the yearning and pursuit of perfection.

The gap in the literature and the availability of clues create a potent mix that calls out to African philosophers to expose, criticise and systematise these views about what a meaningful life would entail from an African perspective. This was the motivation for a recent workshop at the University of Johannesburg on African conceptions of meaning, and this is the motivation for this Special Issue on African conceptions of the meaning of life. In this issue, the authors have done an excellent job in teasing out plausible conceptions or theories of meaning from an African philosophical perspective.

Oladele Balogun, in his article titled "The traditional Yorùbá African conception of a meaningful life", approaches the question of life's meaningfulness from the traditional Yorùbá perspective. In his view, meaningfulness is grounded on the following sufficient conditions: material comfort symbolised by monetary possession, a long healthy life, children, a peaceful spouse, and victory over life's vicissitudes. Interestingly, we see that Balogun's Yorùbá account is naturalistic in its constitution.

Thaddeus Metz, in his article “African theories of meaning in life: A critical assessment”, evaluates two theories of meaningfulness that are grounded on some indigenous African (specifically sub-Saharan African) philosophical traditions. The first of these theories is the communal view, which locates meaning in the promotion of communal relationships, especially with other persons. The second theory is the vitalist view. Within this framework, meaningfulness is located in the promotion of one’s life force and the life force of others. Interestingly, Metz criticises and finds both theories too narrow to successfully account for certain claims to meaningfulness.

Motsamai Molefe, in his “Personhood and a meaningful life in African philosophy”, explores the relationship between the African conceptions of personhood and the question of meaning. In the context of African philosophy, personhood is usually earned, and normatively so. Thus, what makes an individual a person is either the capacity to be a good person and/or the striving to live a virtuous life (usually according to a communal standard). Thus, Molefe ultimately locates his plausible account of meaningfulness in the pursuit or achievement of moral excellence and the expression of moral virtues.

In Attoe’s contribution to the special issue titled “A systematic account of African conceptions of the meaning of/in life”, he attempts to present four systematic accounts of African theories of meaning that he has put together from clues in the literature. These accounts include: the African God-purpose theory, which locates meaning in fulfilling one’s destiny or obeying divine law such that the harmony that legitimises the existence of the Supreme Being is sustained; the vital-force theory, which locates meaning in engaging positively with others and engaging in those rituals that improve one’s level of vital force; the communal normative function theory, which locates meaning in ensuring communal harmony and having a positive relationship with others in the community of persons; and the consolationist theory, which concludes that a meaningful life involves the yearning for and pursuit of perfection.

For Charles Okolie, the question of meaning is the question of the fundamental goal of human life on Earth. In his article titled “Living as a person until death: An African ethical perspective on meaning in life”, he opines that this fundamental goal is tied to personhood, and so for one to achieve meaningfulness, one must live as a person (as construed in the African sense of personhood) until death. Borrowing from Metz’s (2017) view about African ethics, Okolie submits that “living as a person” involves establishing harmonious relationships with others through identity and solidarity, such that human flourishing is promoted.

Yoliswa Mlungwana, in her article titled “An African response to absurdism”, tackles Albert Camus’ view that human existence is absurd. For her, Camus’ absurdism is immediately at odds with the African traditional religious views about human existence. Thus, she presents a strong critique of Camus’ position from the point of view of African traditional religion. Yolanda Mlungwana, in her article titled “An African approach to the meaning of life”, attempts to answer the question of life meaning by presenting some African theories of meaningfulness, namely the life, love and destiny theories of meaning. She concludes that the destiny view is the most plausible African theory of meaning.

Benjamin Olujohungbe, like Balogun, offers the Yorùbá perspective on the question of meaning in his article “Situational ambivalence of the meaning of life in Yorùbá thought”. Drawing from anecdotes, proverbs, and excerpts from the *Ifa* literary corpus, Olujohungbe informs us that meaningfulness is tied to social status, moral conduct and the type of death (whether it is a good death or a bad death) that an individual encounters.

Munyaradzi Murove, in his article “An Afrocentric conceptualisation of life and immortality of values: A critical investigation on the paranormal and human dignity in southern Africa”, does not present a systematic account of meaning, but a conception of life from the southern African philosophical point of view. His conception of life presupposes that life is both a physical and a spiritual phenomenon.

Finally, Ada Agada, in his contribution titled “The African vital force theory of meaning in life”, attempts to defend two African theories of meaning, namely the vital force theory, and the consolationist theory. He further discredits the non-teleological standpoint that makes the individual

the guarantor of meaning, since it leads to nihilism – nihilism being inconsistent with the traditional African view.

While these are interesting contributions, and while they have opened new vistas of thought, more work still needs to be done. The African theories presented by these scholars offer plausible accounts of meaning that deserve critical assessments from philosophers both within and outside the African philosophical space. Indeed, expanding African philosophical literature on the question of meaning would require this next step.

Another gap, which must be considered, is the non-exploration of North African theories (like the theories of traditional Egyptian philosophers) on the meaning of life. Despite Arabic influences in North Africa, these influences have not always been present in traditional African philosophy. And so, traditional Egyptian philosophical thought, for instance, may provide some novel insights about the meaning of life that may count as important rediscoveries or provide inspiration for some novel accounts of meaningfulness from an African perspective. This would be an interesting point to consider for future research.

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