

**Cosmic Purpose: An African Perspective**

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**Abstract:**

In much of the literature concerning African theories of meaning, there are certain clues regarding what constitutes meaningfulness from an African traditional perspective. These are theories of meaning *in* life such as the African God's purpose theory, which locates meaning in the obedience of divine law and/or the pursuit of one's destiny; the vital force theory, which locates meaning in the continuous augmentation of one's vital force through the expression and receipt of goodwill, rituals and the worship of God; and what I will call the transcendent communal normative theories, where meaning is located in the positive contributions one makes to his/her society, whether as a human being or as an ancestor. I contend that all these theories have one thing in common that unifies them – and that is the legitimization of God's existence through the continued sustenance of the universe. This, I will show, constitutes the meaning *of* life (in cosmic terms) from an African traditional religious perspective. To argue for this thesis, I will first tease out the basic tenets of the previously described theories of meaning. I will then analyse the metaphysical underpinning of the African relational ontology and how it reflects on the subject of *being*. Finally, I will end by showing the role of the universe in legitimizing the existence of God as a thing in the world, and how that constitutes the meaning *of* life.

**Keywords:** African; Cosmic purpose; God; Meaning of life; metaphysics; sustenance

**Introduction**

Perhaps the most difficult thing to attempt, in any discourse about meaning, is to attempt to provide an account of meaning at a cosmic scale. When one asks, "what is the meaning of life?", or, more poignantly, "what is the meaning of existence?", one is asking about something that appears to overwhelm the human intellect. Available evidence greatly supports the claim that man's place in this universe is not at the centre of it, for even if we were the only beings in the universe that had the capacity to express rationality from time to time, the overwhelming vastness of space places us as an insignificantly small speck in relation to the universe itself. With all our rationality, we can barely map out the oceans on our planets. How then can we know enough about the universe itself in order to propose the meaning of existence?

A careful observation of African views about meaning offers some clues. In recent times, African philosophers have been more interested in the question of life's meaning from an African perspective. Among the dominant views, with regard to the traditional African perspective, the focus has been on communalistic theories of meaning, the divine purpose view and the vitalist theory of meaning. For me, there is a common thread of thought that runs through these views, which, offers us a clue to the ultimate purpose of life. Drawing from African metaphysics (especially with regard to relationality), I see that the necessity of a first cause, the obedience of divine law, the pursuit of communal normative function and the augmentation of vitality, all point to sustenance/harmony that ensures continuous relationality. And so, I show, in this paper that the meaning of life (cosmic purpose), at least from a human perspective is the sustenance of the universe such that through a continuous relationship with God, God's existence is legitimised<sup>1</sup>. There are, of course, other views, such as the love view (MLUNGWANA 2020), the Yoruba cluster view (BALOGUN, 2020) and the personhood view (which can be subsumed under the communal view) (MOLEFE, 2020), but even these other theories of meaning in life all point to some form of flourishing, which does not contradict my main thesis.

To my knowledge, only one African philosopher, Ada Agada (2015; 2022), has provided a systematic account of the meaning of life (cosmic purpose) – meaning, here, thought of as the pursuit of unattainable perfection. Others like Wiredu (1992), Attoe (2020), Mlungwana (2020), Molefe (2020), Metz (2020), etc., have only considered meaning in terms of what accounts for meaning in a life (what accounts for moments of meaningfulness in an individual's life). This article offers the only other original account of the meaning of life in African philosophy, locating meaning in the sustained existence of the universe in pursuit of its mandate to legitimise God's existence.

Pursuing the thesis of this article is not an easy task and, to do it, I begin by first delineating what I mean by the "meaning of life" in order to set the stage for the subsequent discussions about the meaning of life. Next, I re-examine some of the more dominant theories of meaning in life, in the lead up to revealing the common thread that points towards the cosmic purpose that I envision. I do this in the second section. Finally, by extrapolating certain ideas about relationality in African metaphysics and combining that with insights from some of the more dominant African conceptions of meaning in life, I show how cosmic purpose involves the continued sustenance of the world, in order to legitimise God's existence.

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<sup>1</sup> I must state, at this point what I take to be legitimisation. Legitimation, for me, is an ontological recognition that a thing is an existent thing. A flying unicorn is not a legitimised being since there is no ontological recognition of its *being* a thing in the world. The legitimisation of the existence of a flying unicorn would involve that unicorn's relationship with other beings and/or a recognition of that relationship by the being with which the flying unicorn has a relationship. Without this, the flying unicorn would not exist or would be a being-alone – being-alone, itself, implying non-existence.

**The Meaning of Life: Some Clarifications**

What I do, here, is clarify precisely what I mean when I talk about the meaning of life. Such a clarification must, first, begin with a definition of what I take meaningfulness to entail. The concept of meaning (or the meaning of “meaning”), as Metz (2013) points out, aggregates what all (and only) talk of meaningfulness is about. In other words, it focuses on what all *conceptions* of meaning have in common.

There are many definitions of what meaning is all about, but one can congregate all these suggestions into two categories. First, is the “singular” category, so-called because these concepts of meaning usually point to one single idea as what encapsulates meaning. There are some who talk about purpose (MULGAN 2015; POETTCKER 2015), normative reasons for action (VISAK 2017), transcendence (METZ 2013), etc. However, there’s a problem with singular concepts of meaning. This problem lies in the fact that singular ideas are much too narrow to account for all, and only those things, that meaning is about (as I have explained elsewhere – see Attoe and Chimakonam [2020]). This then brings us to the pluralistic category. Within this category, meaning is defined in terms of a myriad of ideas or concepts (two or more), put together in order to fully account for the meaning of “meaning”. Metz favours this view, and you can see this in his family resemblance approach to meaning, where he speaks about meaning in the following terms: “[T]o ask about meaning . . . is to pose questions such as: which ends, besides one’s own 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). Metz’s account is attractive to me since it captures much of my intuitions about what talk of meaning entails, like I have said before. However, pluralist theories can also be narrow and inadequate, and Metz’s pluralist theory reflects this narrowness (see ATTOE & CHIMAKONAM 2020). This has led me to modify the Metzian approach in such a way that it incorporates subjective forms of meaningfulness, and the coherence of overarching goals needed to contemplate talk about the meaning of life, as follows:

*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, considered as a whole, together into one comprehensible and coherent whole. (See ATTOE & CHIMAKONAM 2020, 5. Emphasis in the original)*

Now that we have a sense of what I mean by “meaning”, it is important that I delineate what I mean by “meaning of”. In the past, I had stated that my preferred definition of the term ‘meaning of’ in contrast to “meaning in” is as follows:

Meaning in life generally refers to the moments of meaningfulness that occasion an individual’s life. The meaning of life involves the individual’s life, taken as whole, and whether that life can be considered meaningful. *It must be noted that this is different from*

*how the term “meaning of life” is usually used by a majority of philosophers of meaning. In existing literature, the term “meaning of life” usually refers to cosmic meaning (meaning of the universe) or the meaning of humanity as a whole. (ATTOE 2021, 183, emphasis mine)*

For this essay, I revert to the more popular definitions of the term “meaning of” among scholars, which view the term on a cosmic scale – that is, is there a purpose to the world and/or is there a purpose to humanity at large? This would be the concern of the next few sections.

### **African views about Meaning: A Roadmap to Cosmic purpose**

In this section, what I do is provide an overview of some prominent traditional African views about life’s meaningfulness, and situate them as clues to the cosmic purpose that I propose later on.

#### *God’s purpose*

God is seen, by most traditional African religious philosophers and metaphysicians, as the source of the universe, as well as its sustainer (WIREDU 1998; 2012; NKULU-N’SENGHA 2009; ATTOE 2022). The reason for this is not far-fetched. First off, the world is seen as mostly contingent, and, therefore, dependent on something else (or something prior) for its existence. However, this contingency cannot be universal. This is because, for the anonymous traditional African philosophers (like those of the Akan school of thought), nothingness is impossible and even incomprehensible. If nothingness is impossible, then the eternal existence of some thing(s) in the world is inevitable since some *thing* must continue to exist if nothingness must be avoided. This view leads us to the foundationalism that grounds popular proofs for the existence of God such as the cosmological arguments and the ontological arguments. Now, one can of course argue from a pantheistic perspective and conclude that it could well be the case that the universe itself is eternal and the contingency of things only applies to the interactions that happen within this universe. This route is *prima facie* plausible. However, the literature in African metaphysics and African philosophy of religions, clearly toe the line that there exists a distinct being and/or group of beings, which are eternal and/or responsible for the existence of contingent things-in-the-world. This Being, often referred to as the “supreme being”, is ultimately the first cause from which other things in the world emerge. This is the true power of the Supreme Being.

This supreme being, is mostly thought of as a personalised entity – a being that is conscious, a being that is superlatively rational, and a being that possesses personality/character. In other words, this supreme being is a *person*, in the highest sense of the word. While some have argued that this is not the case (ATTOE 2022), most mainstream African philosophers persist in thinking about God as a person. It is this mainstream view that allows African philosophers, while pursuing a God-driven account of meaning, to think of God as the sort of being that can rationalise purpose and imbue that purpose in the psyche of man, either directly or through mediums, and actually does so.

This view then leads us to the God's purpose or divine purpose theory that African philosophers have proposed (see: ATTOE,2020). According to this view, there are two interrelated ways in which meaningfulness can be achieved. First is through the fulfilment of one's destiny. This view is largely derived from theories of destiny, especially those proposed by Yoruba metaphysicians like Segun Gbadegesin (2004) and Oladele Balogun (2007). According to the view, there are two ways in which the pursuit of God's purpose would ascribe meaning to an individual's life. First, is through the pursuit of a God-given destiny. According to these Yoruba metaphysicians and religious scholars, prior to one's birth, the supreme being, called *Olodumare*, provides the individual with a destiny (GBADEGESIN 2004; BALOGUN 2007). While Gbadegesin (2004) mentions that there is no real consensus regarding how that destiny is conferred,<sup>2</sup> the fact remains that destinies are manufactured by God and the manner of conferment does not change that fact.

Destinies must be distinguished from fate, which generally involves some sort of supremely predeterministic trajectory for a life. Destinies are slightly different. Attoe (2020) defines destiny in the following terms:

Destiny, as I imagine it, is more akin to a preset end, that is intimate and specific to an individual and generally involves a lifelong pursuit of that end, or, at the very least, a pursuit that takes most of an individual's life. Destiny in this context would not involve a series of specific events that are meant to occur in the life of an individual, but would rather involve some predetermined purpose, which an individual may, as a matter of free will, decide to accomplish. (2020, 130)

Unlike fate, one can choose whether or not to fulfil one's destiny, and, as Gbadegesin contends, it is even possible to alter one's destiny, especially if it is discovered (through certain forms of divination) to be a bad destiny. Meaningfulness, for the individual, would then mean accomplishing, or, at least, pursuing one's destiny (ATTOE 2020, 131). The major takeaway from the destiny view, as far as this article is concerned, is not the fact that meaning is derived from pursuing a god-given destiny, but rather the fact that the supreme being, in all its superlative glory, is the sort of being that considers creating destinies for human beings as something worth doing. One must wonder the reasons why this is the case, and this question sets the stage for what I discuss later on in the last section of this article.

The second way in which pursuing God's purpose confers meaning is through the obedience of divine laws. Unlike the Abrahamic religions, the dictates of God's laws, are not written in sacred texts, as far as most African religions are

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<sup>2</sup> There are some who believe that the individual chooses his/her destiny from a myriad of choices, while others believe that destinies are imposed on the individual by the supreme being and/or other smaller deities

concerned. They are, instead, made known through intermediaries, usually passed down from God to lower deities, and then to the appropriate diviner and/or priest.<sup>3</sup> These diviners stand as the vital link between the physical world of humans, and the more spiritual aspects of reality. They communicate these laws to their respective societies, and these laws become part of the norms and cultures of that society. These laws usually involve specific moral injunctions, useful rituals, taboos that must be avoided, etc. Pursuing these divine laws mostly engenders flourishing – not only flourishing for the individual but, also, the flourishing of the community in which the individual belongs.

The disobedience of divine laws, on the other hand, often leads to an imbalance or disharmony, not only communally speaking but even cosmically speaking as well. And so, in the face of imbalance, the universe must restore itself in some way. This is why the disobedience of a divine law may involve things like fines, sacrifices, or specific forms of catastrophe, meant to reverse the disruptions caused by such disharmonious acts. Thus, within this context, meaning or meaninglessness is achieved in relation to the obedience or disobedience of divine commands, respectively. These laws are part of God's purpose since divine laws emanate from God and are not arbitrary. It would seem, then, that harmony-in-the-world is important enough to elicit divine laws from the supreme being.

### *Vitalism*

The vital force theory offers us another perspective on life's meaning that would be relevant to the aims of this essay. To understand vitalism as a theory of meaning in/of life, we must first understand what vitalism, itself, means. The idea of vitalism is this: at the top of the hierarchy of being is the supreme being. Apart from the fact that all contingent things emerge from this supreme being, there is the belief that there exists some ethereal life force that emanates from the supreme being and permeates all that exists, and in varying degrees. For human beings, this force is what animates us, imbues us with creative power, and signals our wellbeing. It is, perhaps, for this reason that some African scholars, like Maduabuchi Dukor (as quoted by Wilfred Lajul), submit that this vital force is what is called "soul" in other philosophical traditions (LAJUL 2017, 28).

This life/vital force must not be mistaken with substance or essence (in the Aristotelian sense of the word). The reason for this is simple. As Attoe (2020, 133) notes:

Force here must be distinguished from the Aristotelian idea of substance. Whereas substances indicate the essential property of a thing (i.e. what continues to endure as the thing-in-itself) that may differ from reality to reality, force (vital force) is thought of as an all-pervading ethereal entity, emanating from God and simply present in all of reality.

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<sup>3</sup> It is important that I point out that in Yoruba religion, the ifa corpus exists as (oral) religious literature, used by diviners and priests for discernment. This does not however change the fact that these priests also received divine instructions for their communities.

What is interesting is that whereas vital force is present in all things, and in humans specifically, this force can be diminished. And, so, certain forms of encounters that are deemed negative – such as an encounter with sickness, malevolent spirits, ill-will, etc., - are thought of as being capable of diminishing one's vitality. beyond negative encounters, certain forms of negative actions – such as being the bearer of ill-will, failing to worship the appropriate deity or failing to perform a certain ritual at the appropriate time – are the sorts of actions that enable a reduction in one's vital force. It is this reduction of vital force that expresses a reduction in individual wellbeing. When unchecked, a drastic reduction of an individual's vital force leads to eventual death. The controversial<sup>4</sup> Placide Tempels captures what I am saying quite succinctly:

Each being has been endowed by God with a certain force, capable of strengthening the vital energy of the strongest being of all creation: man. Supreme happiness, the only kind of blessing, is, to the Bantu, to possess the greatest vital force: the worst misfortune and, in very truth, the only misfortune, is, he thinks, the diminution of this power. Every illness, wound or disappointment, all suffering, depression, or fatigue, every injustice and every failure: all these are held to be, and are spoken of by the Bantu as, a diminution of vital force. Illness and death do not have their source in our own vital power, but result from some external agent who weakens us through his greater force. It is only by fortifying our vital energy through the use of magical recipes, that we acquire resistance to malevolent external forces. (Tempels 1959, 23-24)

What Tempels says above also tells us that beyond the diminution of one's vital force, it is possible (perhaps, necessary) for one to augment one's vital force in a bid to achieve higher levels of wellbeing and avoid untimely death. This is done by performing certain rituals (what Tempels crudely calls "magical recipes") or reverencing the supreme being (who is the ultimate embodiment of vitality), engaging positively (not malevolently) with others and also exercising one's creative genius.

It is on the basis of this that Attoe argues for a vital force theory of meaning that sees meaning in terms of supremely augmenting one's vital force, and meaninglessness in terms of diminishing one's vital force or those of others. According to him:

Meaningfulness would then imply performing those acts that habitually improve one's own life force, as this would mean an

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<sup>4</sup> The controversy surrounding Tempels lies in his tendency to unanimism, with regards to how Africans view the world, and, of course the fact that the Bantus remained objects in his philosophical work (since his work was mainly addressed to a Western audience, seeking to prescribe how best to civilise and christianise the Bantus).

improvement in the quality of life. Conversely, a meaningless life would involve *not* performing those acts that improve one's vital force (at the very least) and/or performing those actions that do act against the habitual improvement of one's vital force (the gravest of this, in the African context, would most likely be suicide). (ATTOE 2020, 134)

While we may consider the increase of one's vital force as an end-in-itself, I am convinced that this goal dovetails into a grander more cosmic purpose that cherishes the sustenance of the entity that possesses this vitality, as opposed to its death. Again, I explore the reason for this in the last section.

#### *Communal Normative Function Theory*

The African philosophical scene is famous for its emphasis on communality, whether metaphysically speaking, ethically speaking or even politically speaking. Indeed many philosophers across sub-Saharan Africa, such as Mbiti (1990), Ramose (1999), Menkiti (2004), Asouzu (2004, 2007), Murove (2007), Ozumba and Chimakonam (2014), Metz (2017), Attoe (2022) etc., have all propounded their own versions of communalism or built some of their ideas on that communalism.

*Being* within the context of African communalism, is always understood as being-with-others and never as *being-alone*. In this way, for reality to gain full expression, it must remain in a relationship with other beings in the world. This is why Asouzu (2004, 2007) believes that there is a mutual relationship of dependency that exists between and among realities. One cannot fully grasp reality as a whole, or being in particular, without recognizing the relationships that characterise the existence of that being. This is why Asouzu confirms that all that exists, serves as a missing link of reality.

This general metaphysics and understanding of existence trickle down to much of African ethics and value theory as well as theories about social relationships. Mbiti's ubiquitous dictum "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am" (MBITI 1990, 106), possibly one of the most quoted phrases in African philosophy, encapsulates the thinking that one ought to act relationally and in a way that ensures the community (the "we") is sustained since it is that community that ensures the individual's identity and well-being. This is the same thing that is expressed by the Ubuntu maxim (roughly translated as: "a person is a person through other persons". Also, take the normative idea of personhood, as another instance. According to Ifeanyi Menkiti (2004), the achievement of personhood is nothing more than the achievement of moral/normative excellence. But what does this normative excellence entail? It usually entails engaging in morally relevant activities that allow for the flourishing of others in the society, not just for the sake of one's personhood (or the achievement of it) but for the sake of the other individual/person whose wellbeing is also at stake. Beyond moral engagements, other normative engagements are also important. Individuals must engage in certain rites that, for the most part, engender a sort of camaraderie between members of a society in general, or among specific members of a society (such as an age grade). Here, certain festivals and rites of passage are relevant.

This is where Metz's version of African relationality comes to play when he says that "[a]n action is right just insofar as it produces harmony and reduces discord; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to develop communion" (METZ 2017, 111). Where harmony entails a sense of shared identity and solidarity.

Also, engaging in rituals, whether community-wide or individual-based, is another form of pursuit that leads to personhood. Here, the emphasis is on a relationship with the divine – whether ancestors, spirits or, ultimately, the supreme being. These rituals become a way of acknowledging the supreme being and the relationship that one might have with the supreme being. It also becomes a way of ensuring that, beyond augmenting one's vital force, the individuals that make up the community are, at least, sustained by the magnanimity of the supreme being. And so, in communalistic philosophy, the emphasis is always on the sustainability of the community or the harmony that sustains that community.

### **Cosmic Purpose**

All I have said so far have led to the ideas that I would present in this section. What is the purpose of existence and what is the place of the human individual in this purpose? One would think that answering this question is impossible for the human intellect since it is the case that our knowledge of the known universe is limited and we have no full grasp of the universe in totality – at least, scientifically speaking. How would one claim to know the purpose of a thing s/he barely understands?

While it is true that we don't know much about the universe, it is not always the case that one must fully grasp a thing before one can understand its purpose. From a relatively young age, I could deduce that the purpose of a car was to transport human beings and certain goods from one place to another. This seems fairly obvious, yes, but I did not need to be a mechanical engineer – who not only knew every single component of the car but also understood the way each part worked and related to each other – to understand this purpose. So, it does not seem immediately apparent that one must understand every facet of the universe in order to know its purpose. However, this point is not sufficient as it does not tell us about that purpose precisely. What is the purpose of the universe? African religions and the philosophy/metaphysics undergirding them, provide clues that may just answer the question.

To understand the meaning of life (in terms of cosmic purpose) from an African philosophical perspective, one must begin from the metaphysics that forms its foundation and work through the conceptions of meaning that I have just outlined above. African metaphysics is mostly a relational metaphysics, from the literature that much is clear. Whether it is a relationship between the material world and the spiritual/immaterial or just a relationship among "missing links", the interplay among things in the world is a supremely important aspect of African metaphysics. What is more interesting, though, is the suggestion that relationality is a necessary aspect of reality. The first clue to this necessity is the lack of belief in the idea of absolute nothingness and the attendant idea that something must always exist in place (see: WIREDU 1998, 29). Nothingness loses the battle of existence because it simply characterises an empty set – a thing conceivable only in relation with somethingness. When we say there is nothing, we only point to a partial non-existence of things within a particular space or place. Remove space

and place and what you are supposed to be left with is absolute nothingness, which, in truth, is inconceivable. It is inconceivable because for nothingness to exist (already an oxymoronic statement), not only would things, space, place, etc., cease to exist, even the conscious mind for which such emptiness must make sense, must necessarily cease to exist. Nothingness cannot be conceived by a conscious mind. And if Attoe's (2022) conception of existence is to be believed, this absence of a conscious gaze at something precludes the existence of that thing. So if nothingness does not exist, somethingness must replace it, no matter how mundane, and this somethingness must exist within space, time or place – as the anonymous traditional African philosophers of the Akan school of thought so long ago intuited. That somethingness, if it must always exist, must also necessarily be eternal. Whether we are thinking about a static eternal thing or a thing in eternal flux, it does not matter, that thing must always exist eternally, if somethingness is always around. Here, we catch a glimpse of the realm in which God exists – as an eternal thing that is beyond contingency, which must always exist if somethingness is necessary. This eternal thing, whatever it is (call it God, if you wish), must also necessarily be in a relationship with other things in the world - at the barest minimum, it is a God in relation to space, time and/or place. Just like the anonymous traditional African philosophers intuited (WIREDU 1998; ASOUZU 2004).

At this point, I will ask my readers to bear with me as I take a metaphysical leap. In my previous writing, I had, for good reason, envisioned a God lacking personality – an unconscious material God. However, my aim in this article is not to show what type of God really exists, but to find an African-inspired answer to the question: what is the meaning of life. Since this is the case, I would follow the trajectory of many African metaphysicians and take a leap, assuming that this eternal and necessary being, which we may call God, is a conscious being (perhaps at a higher level of consciousness and vitality than any other being, like most African metaphysicians are ready to believe) (MBITI, 1990; NKULU-N'SENGHA, 2009). With this understanding of God in place, we can proceed further.

Now, also important in African metaphysical belief systems is the idea of relationality and the importance of that relationality in elevating/legitimising/authenticating *being*. Pantaleon Iroegbu (1995) says as much when he confirms that being-alone is the worst form of being – indeed it is the closest to nothingness. So, beyond the most basic form of relationship – the relationship between a thing and space/time/place – something more is expected. That something more, for me, is a relationship between a (conscious) being and another conscious being because it is consciousness that grants/acknowledges existence. One can further imagine that the more conscious a being the stronger the type of relationship it can foster. That is why a relationship with certain types of animals (say a dog, dolphin or elephant) may be considered more fulfilling than a relationship with certain other types of living things like microbes or plants. It is also for this reason that human to human relationships, or human to ancestors relationships, are also prized. It is for this reason that, according to Menkiti (2004), a positive normative relationship with others and one's community is what legitimises an individual as a *person* (in the normative sense of the word). Of course, with conscious beings, relationships can be positive, negative, indifferent

or a mixture of all three. Hence, the emphasis on normativity as a way of ensuring that relationships remain positive and person-affirming rather than person-degrading.

If we agree that conscious beings require other conscious beings to achieve certain level of existential legitimisation and we also agree that God is consciousness (as per our initial leap), then we must also admit that to gain a concrete level of legitimisation then God must go beyond a relationship with certain inanimate things and have a relationship with other conscious beings. If God created the world in the sensational way (in the ultimate show of power and glory) that most Africans believe, then one must imagine that the only reason that conscious beings exist in the world is to acknowledge and legitimise the existence of God.

If you do not believe me that is fine but let us take a second look at the conceptions of meaning that I outlined earlier and you will begin to see something that ties all three views together. With the divine purpose theory, we find that individuals have destinies, which they must try to accomplish and/or divine laws that they ought to obey. Especially with regards to divine laws, we find that these laws often attempt to ensure that individuals act in ways that sustain the *life* of the community in which they belongs. These divine laws are usually moral norms or ritualistic norms that aim to sustain the community or correct/mitigate against any imbalance/disharmony that may accrue with regards to everyday life. Even destinies, whether good or bad destinies, are usually given for these same purposes. Even when an individual's destiny is to pay the supreme price of self-sacrifice, it is usually for the benefit of the community in the long run.

In the vitality view, meaning resides in increasing one's vital force. How is this done? By expressing one's creative genius, acknowledging God through worship and/or certain rituals, and being good to other people in one's society. One's creative genius usually serves the community in some positive way or the other, and being good to others not only ensures the increase in vitality in both individuals in that relationship but also ensures the flourishing of all individuals involved. All these acts point to the sustenance/flourishing of the community of persons – to ensure that conscious beings continue to exist, sustaining the relationship that legitimises God's existence. For if there was nothing left in the world except God, then God would cease to *be* since *being* involves a relationship with something else, no matter how basic. Even acknowledgment and worship of God through rituals clearly express this desire to acknowledge God, legitimise God's existence and enable God's flourishing. Beyond that, the fact that vitality increases, combined with the fact that the higher the level of consciousness the better the relationship among beings, only shows that this route to meaning specifically exists as a mode of legitimising God's existence in the best way possible.

Finally, we have the communal normative function theory, which locates meaning in performing acts that are morally good/uplifting in respect to others in the society and acts that sustain the balance/harmony in the community such that that community flourishes. This need to continually sustain the community of conscious beings (or, at least, conscious human beings), combined with the idea that it is conscious beings that legitimise God's existence, immediately points us to the idea that the legitimisation of God's existence undergirds this route to

meaning. It is no mistake, for instance, that some like Menkiti (2004) and Mbiti (1990) before him, have claimed that it is tribal memory, the mere remembering of ancestors, that sustains the very existence of said ancestors. A simple collective forgetfulness by one's relatives (and the community at large) left behind, suddenly imposes on that unfortunate ancestor a second and final death. If all this is true, then the meaning *of* life becomes apparent. For a being, God, to fully announce itself as an existent thing, and for God to avoid the worst type of existence (being-alone) it became important for a universe of other things to exist, and not only that but that conscious beings also exist and continue to do so. This is why the creation process (in whatever guise) had to happen, for what would have been more terrible for the supreme being than to be a being-alone? And so, in following routes to meaning that encourage the sustenance of the universe and the flourishing of the community of conscious beings, the individual legitimises God's existence.

What then is the meaning of life in cosmic terms? The meaning of life from an African philosophical perspective is the sustained legitimisation of God's existence. The desire to preserve our lives, the value we place on marriage and procreation, the meaning we find in contributing to human flourishing or creating beings that contribute to human flourishing, our desire to augment our vitality and the vitality of others, even our worship of God, the very idea of survival and self-preservation, all point to this one purpose. When an individual acts in a sustained disharmonious way, his/her life becomes meaningless since acting in a disharmonious manner undermines the sustenance of the existence of the universe (and the conscious beings in that universe) that legitimise God's existence. Much of human life, and much of our pursuits of meaning in life (at least from the African perspective) all dovetail into this grand purpose.

*Some objections:* two major objections arise, with regards to this view. First is the more obvious objection, which is that the traditional African vision of the attributes of God, especially as a conscious being, that is found in extant literature, is actually hinged on no real evidence (whether material or logical). If there is no reason to believe that God is a personalised conscious entity, like I have argued elsewhere, then this whole edifice collapses. The response from friends of the traditional African view would be that it is, at least, conceivable that the supreme being is a conscious being, if one must take the intelligent design theory seriously (WIREDU 1998). If so, then the view can be entertained since it is conceivable that the world was created by an intelligent (and, therefore, conscious) being. This conceivability would allow us, and friends of the traditional African view, to take the leap I made earlier seriously.

The second objection lies in the idea that this route to meaning considers human beings in only instrumental terms, as means to a divine end, and so the idea does not count as an attractive route to meaningfulness. While this may be true, one can plausibly argue that the rules that guide discussions of cosmic meaning may be different from those that guide moments of meaning in an individual's life. It could well be that the cosmic purpose ought to resist human emotions, morality and ego, and places its focus on the desires/pursuits of the first cause, or even the Universe at large. Beyond this, the end of sustaining the universe is mutually dependent on the legitimisation of God's existence. In this way, while the cosmic purpose described here might seem like an instrumental end, it actually is an end-

in-itself. If this is true, then this critique fails. Nevertheless, were we to agree to this idea of instrumentality, the feeling that the route is an unattractive one mostly taints it as a *desirable* route to meaning, and not necessarily as a route to meaning that is intuitively untrue.

### **Conclusion**

So far, we have tried to draw out a cosmic purpose from traditional African views about meaning, and from our analysis we have seen how the universe must exist as a way of legitimising God's existence. While this might be a plausible claim about the meaning of life, it does raise certain important questions that would be relevant for further philosophical reflection. For instance, of what value are human beings in cosmic terms, and in the eyes of the African God? Is the universe dispensable if other universes can be created by the supreme being in just the same way that this one was created? If not, is this universe a necessary derivative from the first cause, in much the same way that other effects necessarily derive from other causes? Are there other ideas about cosmic purpose that can be derived from African religious thought? All these questions are important questions for African metaphysicians and philosophers of religion to consider for future research.

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