

Is Attoe's Neutral Nihilism Neutral Enough?

James TARTAGLIA

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ft.v13i2.1>

Submission: May 31, 2024 Acceptance: Oct 25, 2024

Keele University, United Kingdom

Email: j.tartaglia@keele.ac.uk

ORCID: 0000-0002-5251-1908

Abstract

In this paper, I analyse and critique Aribiah David Attoe's position in *The Question of Life's Meaning: An African Perspective*. While highly sympathetic to his project, since I also defend an evaluatively neutral form of nihilism, I argue that the role of death and indifference within his theory is incompatible with thinking of nihilism in a neutral manner, and that his position wavers between the traditional view of Negative Nihilism and the Neutral Nihilism I recommend. In reconstructing his position, I begin by arguing, on historicist grounds, that the meaning-realism Attoe has adopted from Thaddeus Metz and others is implausible, and that Attoe's account of meaning in life appears in a much more favourable light when construed as a project of conceptual engineering. After explaining why Attoe thinks that death establishes nihilism and undermines the significance of meaning in life, I argue that the only real connection between nihilism and death is a historical one. I conclude that Attoe's neutrality about nihilism should not lead him to indifference about life, since it is only nihilism that he should be neutral about.

Keywords: Aribiah David Attoe, African philosophy, nihilism, meaning of life, meaning in life

Varieties of nihilism

Aribiah David Attoe's [*The Question of Life's Meaning: An African Perspective*] (ATTOE 2023) has the potential to reenergize discussions of both meaning within a human life, and the meaning of human life itself, by way of its fresh, African perspectives, combined with Attoe's creative new philosophical voice. What makes the book particularly attractive to me is that I agree about the meaning of life, since he defends Neutral Nihilism, the view that life is ultimately meaningless but that this is an evaluatively neutral state of affairs, not something to be either depressed or cheered by. As Attoe puts it, the meaninglessness of life is, "neither a pain nor a deprivation in itself. It is rather a realisation" (ATTOE 2023, 154), and as I once put it, "nihilism's implication that life is meaningless is best viewed as simply a fact about life" (TARTAGLIA 2016, 5). Apart from Attoe and my one-time co-author Tracy Llanera (TARTAGLIA and LLANERA 2021), I am unaware of any other philosopher defending Neutral Nihilism, so Attoe is a rare ally.

The standard view of nihilism, which I call Negative Nihilism, but which is so dominant it is usually just called ‘nihilism’, is that if nihilism is true then this represents a disastrous existential state of affairs. Negative Nihilism sees the possible truth of nihilism as so bad, in fact, that it might even make it impossible to carry on living. Or, if nihilism is not quite as bad as all that, then it is nevertheless the kind of truth so psychologically shattering to embrace that you might consider suicide, or be paralysed with inertia, or something of that ilk. Perhaps I am exaggerating a little, but Negative Nihilists certainly do like to portray their thesis very bleakly indeed; for examples, see any of the authors covered in Jon Stewart’s *A History of Nihilism in the Nineteenth Century* (STEWART 2023), or, for a contemporary and no less (melo)dramatic example, the Negative Nihilist and Antinatalist David Benatar (BENATAR 2017: chapter 3). And then, at the opposite end of the spectrum, there is the ‘Sunny’ Nihilism of Wendy Syfret (SYFRET 2022), according to which the fact that there is no meaning of life removes a great burden from our collective and individual shoulders, making nihilism something to celebrate. Negative Nihilism is the status quo, Sunny Nihilism has a popular online following among generations Y, Z and Alpha, as Syfret explains in her book, but Neutral Nihilism remains a rarity.

Still, despite my support for Attoe’s position, if Neutral Nihilism is to be developed, then its advocates need to try to agree over its nature and implications. It is in this spirit, then, that I am going to focus on my disagreements with the argument presented in Attoe’s excellent, innovative and refreshing book.

My two main areas of disagreement are over the role he attributes to death and his view that a Neutral Nihilist ought to be indifferent to life. It seems to me that this emphasis on death and indifference reveals a rather less-than-neutral attitude, despite his official stance. The tension I see is between a visceral reaction to nihilism, typical of Negative Nihilists, contrasted with Attoe’s intellectual awareness that there is something wrong with this reaction – he seems to know he should not react negatively but cannot help it in this book at least. As such, I think Attoe still has one foot in the gloomy swamp of Negative Nihilism, and that this explains his recommendation to be indifferent to life. Indifference is often a sign of negativity, as for instance, if the chef asks what you think of his meal and you say you are indifferent. And indeed, Attoe could hardly have signalled this negativity more conspicuously, since the indifference he has in mind is between life and death, Camus-style!

So, I shall be arguing that Attoe needs to either give up on Neutral Nihilism and come out as a conventional common-or-garden Negative Nihilist, or else stick to his guns, but think again about his grounds for endorsing Neutral Nihilism and about what the view entails; I shall recommend the latter course. This course ought to be attractive to Attoe since it would allow him to stop being indifferent to life. I am not indifferent to life, I am as positive about it as I can be, I think this is a good attitude to nurture. Attoe might instead think that a more negative attitude is justified, and he might be right, but my point is this: *if you are a Neutral Nihilist, you do not think the truth of nihilism makes any difference to your attitude to life*. You think nihilism encourages neither a negative evaluation,

as per Negative Nihilism, nor a positive evaluation, as per Sunny Nihilism. That life lacks cosmic purpose gives us no more reason to condemn or celebrate it than do similarly neutral facts such as that life evolved on planet Earth.

A Neutral Nihilist is perfectly entitled to be positive about life, just as they are perfectly entitled to be negative about it – they think the nihilist claim that human life lacks any cosmic goal has no bearing on how we evaluate life, nor indeed on whether we evaluate it. From the point of view of personal interest, however, it is obviously better to be positive about life than indifferent, and better to be indifferent than wish you had never been born. David Benatar wishes he had never been born because he agrees with Schopenhauer about life being terrible, with his commitment to Negative Nihilism being a significant factor in his reasoning (BENATAR 2017, chapter 3). This is honest, possibly correct, but it cannot be pleasant – coming to such a conclusion sounds to me like finding yourself stuck in a Greek tragedy. If Attoe thinks himself capable of avoiding that fate, then nihilism will not stand in his way, or so I shall argue. And personally, I find it an easy fate to avoid: you just have to *not* be persuaded by arguments purporting to establish that the pains and sorrows of our eight billion and rising population outweigh the pleasures and other satisfactions ('outweigh' in what sense?), and that it has always been like that for human beings, and always will be. Nietzsche, that "first perfect nihilist of Europe," (NIETZSCHE 1883/8, 3) wrote that, "value judgements concerning life, for or against, can in the last resort never be true," that they are "stupidities," and that for "a philosopher to see a problem in the value of life thus even constitutes an objection to him, a question-mark as to his wisdom" (NIETZSCHE 1889, 40). Harshly worded, but I agree.

An overview of Attoe's position

Attoe's book provides an integrated account of both meaning in life and the meaning of life. This is unusual outside of religious accounts, where God's meaning of life is almost bound to have consequences for how we can attain meaning in life – if God made us to praise him, for instance, then going to church will no doubt help accrue meaning in your life. In presenting an integrated account in a secular context, Attoe bucks the trend of contemporary discussions, where meaning-in has dominated and meaning-of tends to be brushed aside as too religious, or just too big, a trend begun by Susan Wolf (1997), and which Thaddeus Metz (2013) cemented with a comprehensive, objectivist theory of meaning in life, a paradigmatic theory which others continue to react to; Attoe does so very conspicuously in this book.

The idea of meaning in life is of a positive quality our lives can attain, which is distinct from, although it may overlap with, moral goodness. For example, it might be said that an artist can make their life meaningful by painting, but not by eating hamburgers, even though neither painting nor eating is a moral achievement. Attoe spends about two-thirds of the book on this topic, on which he ultimately defends his memorably titled "Passionate Yearning Theory" – it is very similar to Wolf's account, since it is comprised of a subjective and objective condition, although Attoe is at pains to emphasise the differences. I think his

version is an improvement on Wolf's, for reasons to be explained. In the last third of the book, however, this account of meaning in life is overshadowed by his nihilism about the meaning of life. I say 'overshadowed', because as soon as Attoe's commitment to nihilism emerges, he continually downplays the importance of meaning in life, saying that although we can have it, it is no consolation for the overall meaninglessness of life. Then, in the memorable conclusion to the book, he compares life to a meal and our "moments of meaningfulness", as he puts it, to the ingredients. Thus, some might enjoy the ingredients individually, but without the cosmic recipe of the meaning of life, we cannot have a "good meal", he says, only a "bland" or "distasteful" one (ATTOE 2023, 199).

To set off on the journey to this conclusion, Attoe begins by defining the meaning of life and meaning in life. To this effect, he takes the unusual step of defining the common term 'meaning' within both expressions:

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; what received gestures of love and communion (within one's societal context) transcend normal relationality among human beings and/or elicit personal feelings of esteem and worthiness; and what overarching goal or purpose ties meaningful actions in a life, considered as a whole, together into one comprehensible and coherent whole. (ATTOE 2023, 19; italics original)

He then explains the difference between meaning-in and meaning-of mereologically, saying meaning-in applies to specific parts of a life, while meaning-of applies to the whole, "a cumulative totality of one's lifetime and perhaps beyond" (ATTOE 2023, 20). He illustrates this distinction by comparing the ingredients in a meal to the meal itself, the same comparison the book concludes with, saying that meaning-in is "more precise and definite" (ATTOE 2023, 20) because while meaning-of requires a general judgement about life as a whole (cf. judging the quality of the meal), meaning-in calls for more specific judgements about what may be making a person's life meaningful at any given time (cf. judging the quality of the ingredients).

As with Metz, I think Attoe's conceptual analysis shows too little historical circumspection. Given the history of how today's philosophers have come to be discussing these issues, it seems to me that a combined analysis of 'meaning' is untenable, since meaning-of is a simple idea that history has delivered to us, while meaning-in is a new idea currently under construction.

It was only after Wolf's work in the late 1990s that it started to become conventional to distinguish meaning-in from meaning-of.¹ When Tolstoy (1880) first popularised the phrase 'the meaning of life', he took it for granted that unless there is a meaning of life, then everything within his life would be meaningless.

¹ They were first explicitly distinguished by Kurt Baier (BAIER 1957, 101).

As such the achievement represented by his novels seemed meaningless to him, despite the fact that contemporary philosophers would take this as paradigmatic of meaning in life – but meaning-of and meaning-in had yet to be distinguished, so Tolstoy naturally assumed that if life was meaningless, everything within it was too. The reason the distinction arose, I suggest, is that meaning-in appeals to people who find it hard, or impossible, to believe that there is a meaning of life, since they think this would require belief in God, and they are atheists, or agnostic. As such, rather than succumb to Negative Nihilism, the dreaded consequence of denying the meaning of life, they turn their backs on the older and bigger question to redirect their attention to meaning in life (TARTAGLIA 2016, 3-5, 53-6).

The meaning of life is one of humanity's oldest documented philosophical preoccupations. Although the terminology of 'meaning' it acquired through historical serendipity is somewhat opaque, the history of the phrase makes it clear enough that what has been intended, usually, is an overall purpose for human life, one which tells us the reason we exist – rather as the purpose of talking at a distance tells us the reason phones exist; Attoe himself talks of meaning and purpose interchangeably at one point (ATTOE 2023, 4), it is natural to do so. When most of the great Greek philosophers took a stand on what our *telos agathôn* is, in today's terms, they were theorising about the meaning of life.

Meaning in life, on the other hand, is a shiny new idea which acquires its sense from its contrast with the meaning of life, as well as from influential theories about what the meaning of life amounts to, such as the traditional Platonist view, found in Plato's *Theaetetus* and increasingly prominent from Middle Platonism onwards, which Attoe (following Metz) incorporates into his definition. This is that our *telos* is to transcend our animal natures (see SEDLEY 1999). In light of its recent emergence, then, I find it hard to believe that meaning-in is a real property out there in the world which has sat around for millennia, waiting for us to discover it through analysis (METZ 2013, 92-3, 234), or science (SCHNELL 2021). Rather, it is a new approach to assessing our lives, which is currently under development, with criteria that must be chosen rather than discovered. The choice will be made from properties we consider desirable in contemporary life, and which do not stray too far from the kind of properties that have traditionally been thought to characterise a life lived in accordance with our cosmic *telos*; the historical continuity is required for it to still seem that we are talking about 'meaning'. Given this anti-realist, constructivist view of this concept, then, I think Attoe's theory of meaning in life is best seen as a project of conceptual engineering. However haphazard the process, history has delivered us the idea of meaning in life – at present it is merely suggestive and points in incompatible directions, but it gives philosophers something to work with, to engineer.

Attoe motivates his Passionate Yearning Theory by considering, then dismissing as inadequate, three traditional African approaches to what he has defined as 'meaning in life'. The first follows directly from the world's favourite answer to the big question, namely that we are here to serve God's purposes. Obviously this idea is not uniquely African, but Attoe adds some African touches by specifying that our God-given purpose is of "ensuring the harmony that sustains the universe and legitimises God's existence" (ATTOE 2023, 47). Seeing

this through the contemporary lens of meaning in life, then, Attoe derives the view that we acquire said meaning by fulfilling God's purposes. He rejects the view, however, because he does not believe in this kind of spiritual, purpose-setting God, and because he thinks the theory is too instrumentalist, "exploitative" even (ATTOE 2023, 47); although on the latter point, he concedes that doing God's bidding could add meaning to the lives of those subjectively invested in God's cosmic purposes.²

The second theory draws on traditional African ideas about vital force, the idea being that we acquire this force by meeting the criteria for meaning. As Attoe explains, acquiring vital force involves "engaging in activities that express an individual's creative power and productivity ... and/or an individual's moral obligations (especially) to his or her community, [so] individual moments of meaningfulness are thus captured" (ATTOE 2023, 56). While Attoe does not believe in traditional, supernatural conceptions of this vital force, which is thought to survive in the souls of ancestors, he does think the idea could be naturalised to mean a kind of "creative power", as exemplified in artistic creation, but also "child-rearing, productivity, confidence, strength of will" (ATTOE 2023, 77), and generally anything that contributes to a community. He ultimately rejects the naturalised vital force account, however, because he finds it insufficiently subjective, a criticism he illustrates with the example of Michaelangelo painting the Sistine Chapel reluctantly under threat of impaling – he would still be acquiring vital force, but since he lacks enthusiasm for his task, Attoe denies he is acquiring meaning (ATTOE 2023, 78). Here, we are introduced to Attoe's strong emphasis on subjectivity, which he later more loudly declares by saying that meaning is, "extensively, even if not exhaustively, a personal matter" (ATTOE 2023, 109). The concept of meaning in life Attoe wants to engineer is an antiauthoritarian one.

Third is the Communal Normative Function Theory, based on traditional African beliefs about living holistically as a community and contributing to the common good; Attoe's idea is that living in this way could be said to be what produces meaning in life. This account is rejected for the same reason as the previous one, however, namely its lack of subjectivity. This time, the example is of Nelson Mandela finding his family life more meaningful than his service to the community, while the community think it the other way around. In this scenario, Attoe thinks Mandela would be right and the community wrong (ATTOE 2023, 84). And so long as this does not have to be interpreted in terms of Metzian meaning-realism, then I think this is an attractive response. We can all understand the sense in which Mandela might think he received more meaning from his family life than his public achievements – this would hardly detract from the achievements themselves, and it would seem pompous and authoritarian to insist

² Attoe is a materialist (ATTOE 2023, 65-71), so you would certainly expect him to be an atheist; for the intimate historical relationship between materialism and atheism, see TARTAGLIA 2020: chapter 2. However, Attoe thinks "God is material" (ATTOE 2023, 68), and according to an anonymous referee for this journal, he is a Presbyterian. This may well make him the first non-atheist nihilist of all time! I am the other way around: I am an atheist but reject materialism.

that he was wrong about the meaning within his own life. So, Attoe has an understandable rationale for engineering in this direction.

Attoe next moves on to consider three contemporary African theories of meaning in life, the third being his own. The first is living a religious life, which Attoe says is different from Purpose Theory because “the focus is not on fulfilling one’s God-given purpose or destiny – the focus is on loving God by being religious” (ATTOE 2023, 91). It seems to me, however, that if God did have a purpose for us, then to love God and be religious you would have to work towards that purpose, so the two theories are not really so different. In any case, Attoe dismisses this account on the grounds that the “existence and mind of God cannot be established” – we cannot know how or if God wants to be worshipped, nor even that he exists.³ This was the view of the Epicureans – and it is notable that Attoe opens the crucial chapter on death with an Epicurean epigraph. Moving on, then, the second contemporary theory, Cluster Theory, sounds a lot like Communal Normative Function Theory again, since the cluster of virtues to be cultivated to earn meaning in your life are, “self-sufficiency, child-raising and accomplishing socio-cultural milestones and a high social status in the community” (ATTOE 2023, 93). Attoe never returns to this theory to criticise it, although by this point you can guess what he would say, namely that it pays insufficient attention to subjectivity.

Finally, we reach the Passionate Yearning Theory, with the idea being that to acquire meaning we must go through the following progression: yearn for an outcome, develop a passion to get it done, then strive to do it (ATTOE 2023, 113). This might sound fairly arbitrary, but frankly all accounts of meaning in life strike me as such, for the historicist reasons I outlined above – viewed as a creative conceptual engineering proposal, however, Attoe’s account has great potential. The objective requirements are that the passionate yearning must not be based on fundamentally false premises – passion for the goals of a God that does not exist, for example (ATTOE 2023, 120) – and also that the outcomes not be immoral, since Attoe likes Metz’s idea of “anti-matter” (METZ 2013, 64), according to which immorality can degrade or nullify the meaning in our lives. Attoe criticises Wolf’s original subjective / objective account for omitting these requirements (ATTOE 2023, 119-120), although it seems to me they are easily accommodated by her slogan that meaning “arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness” (WOLF 1997, 234) – delusional or immoral striving could hardly be said to be objectively attractive.

There are two significant differences, however. The first is that his theory is “more precise” (ATTOE 2023, 119) – not just any subjective attraction will do, there must be passion involved, which I find an attractive direction to take the concept; if there had been a meaning of life, then you would hope it would have been the kind to inspire some passion. And the second difference is that leaving aside delusion and immorality, Attoe places no other restrictions on what you can passionately strive for – Sisyphus’s life of pushing a boulder up a hill can be

³ Although as noted before, Attoe apparently has faith that a material God exists.

meaningful, as can spending your life counting blades of grass (ATTOE 2023, 120). To my mind, this latter difference makes for a big improvement on Wolf's original, where 'objective attractiveness' was always problematic – for who is to say that yoga and computer games (Wolf's examples) are not objectively attractive? Attoe gets around this difficulty by restricting his objective conditions to ruling out defeaters, such as passionate yearning by lunatics or murderers, and thereby avoids trying to smuggle in his own personal judgements about what we should passionately yearn for – Wolf's views on the latter are guided by aesthetics, he thinks, which is an interesting and original criticism (ATTOE 2023, 120). Counting blades of grass may be pointless to the community, but if the person in question is able to put some passion into it then we might indeed want to say that it adds meaning to their life, even if such an activity could never add meaning to mine or yours.

Having found an account of meaning in life he can get behind, a highly but not entirely subjective one, Attoe next turns to the meaning of life. This time we are not led through a variety of options, but are instead immediately introduced to Attoe's preferred account, Ratio-Structuralism, which he says is "somewhat motivated by traditional African thought" (ATTOE 2023, 128), and specifically, by the idea of an ideal "life-structure" by which you progress from birth to being an ancestor. The theory Attoe builds on this basis is that "the meaning of life must involve a certain coherence, structure and unified narrative of our various instances of meaning, tied together by some overarching goal" (ATTOE 2023, 129). Since this "overarching goal" is "God's purpose" or "some other cosmic purpose" (ATTOE 2023, 130), I think the African influence is irrelevant here, since Attoe is stating what the meaning of life is supposed to amount to within all philosophical traditions, namely a cosmic goal that makes our lives worthwhile. Attoe thinks the goal would draw all of the meaning in our lives into a rational structure, hence Ratio-Structuralism, but it is not clear why this should be. On Attoe's view, after all, someone can acquire meaning by counting blades of grass, but if God's reason for creating us was to worship him (e.g.), then that purpose will not impose structure on the grass-counting, only on worship and activities that relate to worship.

Attoe also makes lack of instrumentality a necessity condition, saying that the "overarching goal that guides our lives must also be subjectively derived / acknowledged" (ATTOE 2023, 130). Although a popular thought that is endorsed by most philosophers in these debates, I think it is a mistake in the context of the meaning of life, as opposed to the more creative project (as I conceive it) of engineering a concept of meaning in life. For as "highly unattractive" as Attoe may find the idea that God is using us for his purposes, that may just be how things are. I might not like the meaning of life, and I might not be subjectively engaged by it, but surely it could still be the reason I was put on this earth. Having learned this reason, I may start to wonder about the purpose of God's existence, and the purpose of worshipping him, but if I choose not to pursue this goal, because I find it unattractively instrumental or otherwise unengaging, then on the face of it, my life will be meaningless as a consequence (see TARTAGLIA 2018).

As such, I see no reason to think that the concept of the meaning of life is, or ever has been, the concept of a condition that we get any say over. Given its historical origins in religion, in fact, it seems clear to me that the intention was always that it could be imposed on us whether we like it or not. To insist that it must be something we approve of is to confuse it with the newer concept of meaning in life, one which arose, among other reasons, because the traditional concept was considered too authoritarian.

Now having got this far, you might expect Attoe to simply rely on his commitment to naturalism, and indeed materialism, to deny that there is a God-given or otherwise cosmically embedded purpose, thereby moving directly to nihilism. Instead, he argues that death prevents life from having a meaning, and that this devalues meaning in life, rendering life so “bland” and “distasteful” that we should be indifferent to it. Although the considerations about death are strictly unnecessary to the conclusion that there is no meaning of life, which under Ratio-Structuralism requires only a lack of cosmic purpose, nevertheless Attoe also placed a subjective condition on the meaning of life, to which death is indeed relevant. The relevance of death is that it prevents us from subjectively investing in an overall goal to draw all the meaning in our lives together into a coherent whole, thereby leaving the meaning fragmented and ultimately unsatisfying.

Attoe’s reasoning may be reconstructed as follows. Meaning of both the big ‘of’ and small ‘in’ varieties requires subjective investment, which ceases when we die. So,

because death is in our life’s equation, whatever instances of real meaning in life that we may lay claim to, those efforts only result in (and is equal to) nothingness, ultimately speaking. Death is what makes the temporal equation of our lives as a whole mathematically equal to meaninglessness. (ATTOE 2023, 150)

Individual death is not all Attoe has in mind, however, for he considers the collective death of human extinction “highly plausible to count as inevitable” (ATTOE 2023, 150) – at one point he just boldly states that it is inevitable (ATTOE 2023, 158). He says that “attempts at meaningfulness are not only lost to our subjective selves when we die, they are also lost at the communal level, as the community itself eventually dies” (ATTOE 2023, 152). Given this (almost?) inevitable extinction, then, he finds it “hard” to “see the point of our existence or enjoy the permanent satisfaction needed for the meaning of life to make sense, and it is this pointlessness that accounts for the meaninglessness of our lives” (ATTOE 2023, 153). So, the idea seems to be that because humans will become extinct, the meaning individuals accrue in their lives can never add up to a permanent achievement, so we must consider our finite moments of meaningfulness against the backdrop of an infinite and cosmically pointless existence – in which context they become mathematically insignificant.

So how should we respond to this realisation? We should “avoid a response”, he says, both because nihilism is “value-neutral”, and also for the more prosaic reason that any response to a predicament we cannot alter is futile

(ATTOE 2023, 176); on the latter, I once said much the same thing (TARTAGLIA 2016, 185, note 11). As such, Attoe rejects responses such as taking a “leap of faith”, or Camus’s show of defiance, or Ada Agada’s ‘consolationism’ (ATTOE 2023, 165-84). He instead recommends indifference, and, like John Marmysz, laughter (ATTOE 2023, 185-9; MARMYSZ 2003).

In calling the latter a “valueless response” (ATTOE 2023, 188) Attoe might seem to be contradicting himself, since he is supposed to be avoiding all responses, but the contradiction is removed by his distinction between “response to” and “response because of” – the former is intentional, like deciding to move your leg, whereas the latter is automatic, like the reflex when the doctor taps your knee (my example; ATTOE 2023, 175-6). Thus, when Attoe describes his philosophy of indifference by saying that, “As is the case with all pointless affairs, continuing is as much a valid response as not continuing” (ATTOE 2023, 186), he is not saying that we must choose between life and death since he has in mind a “response because of”. He is saying that, as a matter of fact, nihilism will drive some to suicide, with this being the “bravest and most visceral form of accepting the inevitable” (ATTOE 2023, 180-1), while others will just as naturally carry on living. Similarly, he seems to think laughter is an appropriate response to our situation that will come naturally to some but not to others.

Since bravery is admirable, Attoe seems to be expressing admiration for those who find themselves unable to live under the burden of nihilism and hence are driven to suicide, which strikes me as very odd indeed. If such people existed, surely pity would be the appropriate attitude to take to them. However, I am not so sure they do exist, because suicide is usually a very well-considered and tragic decision, and even in the most impulsive cases of suicide I find it hard to believe that a mechanical response to meaninglessness is taking place – and even if it was, how could Attoe tell? Perhaps he was thinking of a fictional species of existentialist lemmings rather than real human beings, although I find it baffling that anyone would admire lemmings. I think the source of confusion here is that Attoe realises he needs any negative reaction to nihilism to be a merely mechanical “response because of”, otherwise he would violate his official Neutral Nihilist stance that we should “avoid a response”, and he wants to affirm these negative reactions because he still thinks negatively about nihilism himself. As such, he invents, and subsequently admires, a race of fictional lemming people who cannot carry on because they feel meaninglessness in their bones.

The other supposedly mechanical response he describes is laughter, which is just as spurious, and would seem to require the pseudoscientific hypothesis that an instinctive awareness of nihilism can sometimes be a factor in making people laugh. Laughter cannot be an actual response to nihilism, rather than a merely mechanical “response because of”, because otherwise Attoe would be violating the requirements of his Neutral Nihilism. But I cannot see any reason to believe that laughter ever actually is a mechanical “response because of” nihilism. Why would it be? Attoe never says. Perhaps the problem here is that Attoe thinks of laughter as a sign of indifference, and hence neutral, but it confuses real indifference with a show of indifference. If I am genuinely indifferent to something, like a leaf or pebble lying at my feet, then there is

nothing to laugh at. If I think nihilism is a terrible thing, on the other hand, then I might want to make a show of indifference by laughing at it - with laughter I express my defiance, resilience and good humour in the face of the terrible void of meaning. Nobody who had fully grasped the claim of Neutral Nihilism would find it remotely funny, however, nor indeed want to laugh in its face, because it is an evaluatively neutral metaphysical claim. It is about as funny, or worthy of defiance, as the claim that mind and body are distinct substances.⁴

The irrelevance of death and the proper target for indifference

Let us grant to Attoe that humans will become extinct; I cannot see that he does nearly enough to justify such a strong assumption, but let us grant it anyway. On that assumption, then, all human meaning may one day be forgotten – it might not be, it might be remembered by other beings, but let us assume it is indeed forgotten. Why should that make life meaningless? Unless you define the meaning of life as something which must be remembered forever, which Attoe does not, then it could be a goal that is achieved then forgotten. For example, perhaps God made us to worship him for a set amount of time, we fulfilled our purpose, which we were all subjectively invested in, and then God forgot about us and we went extinct. Or maybe our purpose was to create artificial intelligence, since AI has a role to play in God’s cosmic plan – we did so with subjective enthusiasm, thereby making human life cosmically meaningful, then the AI exterminated us and forgot that we ever existed. In these scenarios we fulfilled the meaning of human life according to Attoe’s criteria: the existence of our species had a cosmic significance, and the fact that our achievement was later forgotten seems irrelevant. No doubt goals have been scored in football matches that are now irrecoverably forgotten – the goals were still scored.

Attoe speaks of “the permanent satisfaction needed for the meaning of life to make sense” (ATTOE 2023, 153), but such a requirement is incompatible with thinking of the meaning of life as a goal or purpose. Goals are finite, we achieve them and move on. An infinite goal could never be achieved, only endlessly worked on; so it is not even clear that ‘goal’ is the right word in such a case. Sisyphus’s life is a paradigm of meaninglessness because he can never achieve the goal of rolling the boulder to the top of the hill, he must forever try and fail. In human life, however, we achieve our goals regularly.

So, given that Attoe conceives the meaning of life as a goal, and goals are finite and forgettable, where does the idea of “permanent satisfaction” come into it? From the fact that he adds a subjective component to his criteria for the meaning of life, which I suggested above is the result of conflating traditional meaning-of, with the more contemporary, individualistic aspiration of meaning-in. This conflation is encouraged by his unusual procedure of providing a unified account of both within a secular context. For it is because Attoe thinks of the meaning of life in this way, namely as a kind of subjective, passionate, yearning

⁴ These last two paragraphs were inspired and guided by some very perceptive comments from an anonymous reviewer for this journal, to whom I am grateful.

accompaniment to mankind's cosmic utility, that he thinks "permanent satisfaction" is required, and hence that human extinction would obliterate the meaning life once had. But this does not follow. Even if you assume that meaning of both kinds requires subjective engagement, this only means that when the individual dies, or the race becomes extinct, then the meaning will end – not that it is will somehow be retrospectively deleted. Holidays come to an end, but they can still be fun while they last – why should meaning be any different in this regard? Meaning needs a "subjective individual *that exists*," says Attoe, someone to "acknowledge" the meaning (ATTOE 2023, 150, his italics). Well, yes it does at the time, on his account, but once that time has passed it surely just becomes past meaning, that is, meaning that was acknowledged at the time, whether or not it still is now.

The reason to think nihilism is true, in my view, has nothing to do with death, although nihilism and death do have a strong historical association. The reason for this association, ever since the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, is that reflection on mortality raises the question of the meaning of life – of what we should be doing with our lives, given that we only have limited time. King Gilgamesh's primordial reaction was to abandon his everyday goals to go on a quest for immortal life, one which fails (TARTAGLIA 2016, 61-3). Religions that promise immortal life follow essentially the same reasoning as the king, namely that the most important thing you can do is avoid death. It makes sense: if my main goal in life is X, but unless I achieve Y in the next week I will die, then I will put aside X and focus on Y. Nevertheless, it simply does not follow that since we die "all is futile" as it says in *Ecclesiastes* – it may be futile for the purposes of achieving eternal life, but that is only one goal we can pursue, whether or not it is the most important one.

The reason I think nihilism is true, whether nihilism is interpreted neutrally, negatively or positively, is that I can see no good reason to think that human beings are here to fulfil a cosmic purpose – barely any more reason than to think capybaras are. We have simply taken our human obsession with goals and falsely projected it onto the cosmos; people *have* goals, they do not exist for the sake of a goal. I cannot believe that we are psychologically driven on by a cosmic purpose either, especially when the people who believe in one cannot agree on what it is. Rather, I think we are driven on by what we want, and that the epistemic structures we have built around these desires are not dependent on belief in cosmic meaning. Note that this reasoning would be completely unaffected if I belonged to the first generation of immortals after science had found the cure for death.

My nihilism is neutral because I do not think that to deny cosmic purpose is to evaluate life in any way. To see it as an evaluation is to fall in with an essentially religious way of thinking, according to which if God has a purpose for us, then the nihilist who ignores and denies that purpose is worthy of condemnation. If God does not have a purpose for us, however, then the nihilist is just stating the facts, they are not evaluating at all. To say that something is 'pointless' is often to make a negative evaluation – but only within the goal-directed context of human life. The Neutral Nihilist does not think there is any wider context of evaluation than human life, so they are not condemning it when

they say that life is pointless or meaningless. This belief has no effect on the Neutral Nihilist's life (with the trivial exception of those like me who end up spending lots of time writing about it).

So, what is the target of Neutral Nihilism? What are we being neutral about? For Attoe, it is both life and nihilism: nihilism is neither good nor bad, as he recognises, so he develops an attitude of neutrality to life – we are to recognise its pointlessness and so become indifferent to it (ATTOE 2023, chapter 11). But this presupposes that if there were a meaning of life, then life would be better, so Attoe oscillates between Negative and Neutral Nihilism. I would suggest that if *nihilism* is indeed neither good nor bad, then it is *nihilism alone* that we should be neutral about. Life is meaningless, but since this reflects neither badly nor well on our lives, it is a fact we can afford to be indifferent about – nihilism, and nihilism alone, is the proper target for Attoe's "philosophy of indifference". The correct response to realising the neutrality of nihilism is not to be indifferent to life. And so, if my reasoning is correct, Attoe can breathe a sigh of relief. Indifference to nihilism is an attitude I recommend wholeheartedly: I could not care less that life is meaningless, it does not bother me in the slightest, never did, although I do find it a very philosophically potent fact, one which leads in all kinds of interesting directions.

Of course, others may question whether life really is meaningless, and they may also question the neutral interpretation, thinking that anyone who truly understood and believed nihilism would consider it a terrible state of affairs, something to be depressed by, even if we can succeed in laughing it off. Attoe, however, seems to agree with me about both components of Neutral Nihilism – he is 100% convinced by nihilism, there is no doubt about that, and the book contains some very clear commitments to the neutral interpretation. The only problem is that he backslides, and very prominently in the final pages. This suggests to me an instinctive distaste for nihilism, which I myself have never had, a distaste that is probably due to Attoe's religious faith, despite its highly unorthodox nature. If this instinctive distaste has no basis in reason and is undermining the consistency of his philosophy, then he needs to overcome it. I think that would make him better able to progress the Neutral Nihilist position into hitherto unknown areas of philosophical understanding, if that is possible, as I trust it is.

Declarations

*The author declares no conflict of interest or ethical issues for this work

Relevant Literature

1. ATTOE, Aribiah D. [The Question of Life's Meaning: An African Perspective], 2023. Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, Switzerland. Ebook.
2. BAIER, Kurt. "The Meaning of Life," [The Meaning of Life: A Reader, E. KLEMKE & S. CAHN Eds.], pp 82-113, 1957/2008. Oxford University Press: Oxford. Paperback.
3. BENATAR, David. [The Human Predicament], 2017. Oxford University Press: Oxford. Hardback.
4. MARMYSZ, John. [Laughing at Nothing: Humor as a Response to Nihilism], 2003. SUNY Press: New York. Paperback.

5. METZ, Thaddeus. [Meaning in Life], 2013. Oxford University Press: Oxford. Hardback.
6. NIETZSCHE, F. [The Will to Power, W. KAUFMANN & R.J. HOLLINGDALE Trans., W. KAUFMANN Ed.], 1883-8/1976. Random House: New York. Paperback.
7. NIETZSCHE, F. [Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ, R.J. HOLLINGDALE Trans., Michael TANNER Ed.], 1889/1990. Penguin: London. Paperback.
8. SCHNELL, Tatjana. [The Psychology of Meaning in Life], 2021. Routledge: London. Paperback.
9. SEDLEY, David N. "The Ideal of Godlikeness," [Plato 2: Ethics, Politics, Religion, and the Soul, G. FINE Ed.], pp 309-328, 1999. Oxford University Press: Oxford. Hardback.
10. STEWART, Jon. [A History of Nihilism in the Nineteenth Century: Confrontations with Nothingness], 2023. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge. Hardback.
11. SYFRET, Wendy. [The Sunny Nihilist: How a meaningless life can make you truly happy], 2022. Souvenir Press: London. Paperback.
12. TARTAGLIA, James. [Philosophy in a Meaningless Life], 2016. Bloomsbury: London. Hardback.
13. TARTAGLIA, James. "Ayer and the Meaning of Life," [The Meaning of Life and the Great Philosophers, J. TARTAGLIA & S. LEACH Eds.], pp 237-244, 2018. Routledge: London. Hardback.
14. TARTAGLIA, James [Philosophy in a Technological World: Gods and Titans], 2020. Bloomsbury: London. Hardback.
15. TARTAGLIA, James & LLANERA, Tracy. [A Defence of Nihilism], 2021. Routledge: London. Hardback.
16. TOLSTOY, Leo. "My Confession," [The Meaning of Life: A Reader, E. KLEMKE & S. CAHN Eds.], pp 7-16, 1880/2008. Oxford University Press: Oxford. Paperback.
17. WOLF, Susan. "Meaning in Life," [The Meaning of Life: A Reader, E. KLEMKE & S. CAHN Eds.], pp 232-235, 1997/2008. Oxford University Press: Oxford. Paperback.