

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Death and meaning(lessness): re-examining the African view

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### Abstract

In much of the emerging literature in African philosophy on the question of life's meaning, little, if anything, has been said about the relationship between African conceptions of death and the question of life's meaning. Drawing from clues in the literature on African metaphysics/philosophy of religion, this article will argue that within the context of an African conception of death, life is ultimately meaningless. To do this, I will begin by curating an African conception of death that sees death as primarily the disembodiment of subjective consciousness. Through this disembodiment, the individual can approach death with meaning in life and pivot into meaning *after* life. However, I will show this view to be mistaken on several grounds – the implausibility of the metaphysics grounding the possibility of disembodiment; and the idea of a second death inherent in the African conception of death. Thus, I will conclude that the finality of death provides good reason to acknowledge that life is ultimately meaningless.

**Keywords:** Africa; ancestor; meaning; meaninglessness; death

### Introduction

Death bothers a lot of people, for in our intellectual encounter with death, we encounter an admixture of uncertainty and existential angst. We are uncertain about the possibility of an afterlife, even though our religious and (sometimes) philosophical views encourage us to take that possibility seriously. The lifelessness of a corpse and the plausibility of materialism suggest that death implies a plunge into nothingness. If we take death to involve nothingness (the total loss of consciousness) that would imply that our efforts (at least from a subjective perspective) empty into nothingness, what then are we to make of the meaning of life, if our consciousness and all our achievements empty into nothingness? This is the usual source of certain moments of existential anxiety, as the futility of our efforts begins to mirror the life of the mythological Sisyphus. In these discussions about death and meaning, the African philosophical perspective has been, by and large, silent on the matter.

Thus, I aim, in this article, not only to reveal a plausible conception of death and its relation to life's meaning from the African perspective but also to converse with the view. In my exposition of the African conception of death and its relation to the question

of life's meaning, I will explore the idea that death involves a disembodiment of subjective consciousness, such that the individual continues to exist (albeit without her physical body) either as an ancestor or as a spirit in limbo. Since becoming an ancestor involves achieving certain meaningful normative accomplishments (acquiring personhood and/or enabling communal flourishing), a total pursuit of meaning would involve the following: acquiring meaning in life in one's approach to death, a transcendence<sup>1</sup> to an after life through death, and a continued pursuit of meaning after life as an ancestor – a pursuit that determines the continued existence of the ancestor.

However, despite this proposal, I argue that death still implies meaninglessness, since one can plausibly argue against the idea that there is a non-material component of the human body that is disembodied during death and encapsulates subjective consciousness. Beyond this, I also show that even if we grant the plausibility of disembodiment the possibility of a second death (by being forgotten by those still alive) retains the problems associated with the finality of death since such a forgetfulness may be (at worst) ensured by the demise of the human species due to one cataclysmic event or the other. With this in mind, I conclude that even within the context of African metaphysics and philosophy of religion, life is ultimately meaningless since we die. To my knowledge, this would be the first systematic account of meaning(lessness) through death in African philosophy. Kwasi Wiredu's attempt comes close but his view is hardly systematic and does not focus on the question of meaning(lessness) through death in the way that I do (Wiredu 1992).

To argue for this thesis, I divide this article into three main sections. In the first section, I attempt to conceptualize the African notion of death, using clues from the literature on African metaphysics and African philosophy of religion. With this conception at hand, in the second section I curate an African concept meaning based on the African conception of death. In the last section, I interrogate this conception of meaning and conclude that there are plausible reasons to believe that the African conception of death itself presupposes the meaninglessness of life, based on the finality of death.

### **Oh death, where is thy sting? Death as transcendence**

Characteristically African metaphysical theorizing about death has mostly followed the same trajectory – that death is transitional, and that one can somehow survive bodily death (Mbiti 1970; Wiredu 1992; P'Bitek 1998). These fantastic claims emerge from a deeply religious and metaphysical perspective that is integral to the way that traditional Africans live their lives. Where do these belief come from, how did anonymous traditional African philosophers<sup>2</sup> come to establish these claims about something so elusive, and what is the view precisely? That is the main concern of this section.

For the anonymous traditional African philosophers, nothing was more apparent to them than the supreme expression of life that was available in something as intimate as subjective conscious experience. Subjective experience was at once real and at the same time spiritual. It was real because it was through subjective experience that the beauty of the world, as well as the terrors in it, were made manifest to the individual. It was this same consciousness that the individual seemed to perceive in others, who generally served as a mirror to his/her own being. In much the same way that the individual could move around, speak, and perform certain actions, so also could the other person, whom s/he was perceiving, move and act. It became increasingly obvious that the same thing that possessed his/her body possessed the body of others with whom s/he had necessary relationships. And it had to be a possession of some sort, for while the individual could readily perceive his/her body, s/he could not point to his/her consciousness in the same way s/he perceived his/her body parts, even though the individual could very well tell that she was a conscious entity. This consciousness was internal, within the body,

even though no amount of injury or willful dissection could ever reveal it in one's self or in others. More so, this thing, this consciousness, appeared to separate itself from the body it possessed once some catastrophe befell the body, or once the body became so frail that it could no longer handle being possessed by consciousness.

These intuitions, combined with the desire/willingness to experience life as well as value their conscious experiences, led the anonymous traditional African philosophers to place life alongside community, at the pinnacle of human values (Nwala 1985, 144; Iroegbu 1994, 84; Okere 2005, 6; Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya 2011, 276–283); and also led the anonymous traditional African philosophers of the Bantu School of thought to value the vital force – on which this consciousness was domiciled (Kagame 1956; Tempels 1959). Thus more life (or a richer consciousness) meant as much as a meaningful life, while a decrease in life/vitality<sup>3</sup> (or consciousness that is lower in quality – riddled with pain, sadness, depression, etc.) meant as little as a meaningless life (Attoe 2020, 132–134).

Now, because this subjective consciousness was substantially different from the physical body in such a significant way (one appeared material and the other appeared non-material – or quasi-material, if one subscribes to Kwasi Wiredu's views), two possibilities emerge. First, one can say that by being stripped of the physical body, which houses it, the non-material component fades away, and perhaps dies as well. The second possibility would be that the non-material component could actually exist on its own, move into another inhabitable body, or return to its source – God. This latter point is the route that most anonymous and/or contemporary African philosophers take (Tempels 1959; Mbiti 1970; Wiredu 1992; Bikopo and Van Bogaert 2010). In fact, from this second point, it does seem to me that the anonymous traditional African philosophers could easily argue further that what we now call death is not predicated on particular body state(s), but that death is simply the unwillingness of the non-material component of the individual to continue to inhabit the body, for one reason or the other. So, rather than blame the primary cause of death on some organ failure or the inability of the brain to receive oxygen, one can rather put the blame on the subjective consciousness's unwillingness to possess a body. These may be wild metaphysical speculations, yes, but they follow from the matter–spirit interactionism that is so common within the context of traditional African philosophy of religion. Whether it is because the body can no longer house the subjective consciousness or because that immaterial consciousness wilfully denies itself a body, what generally follows from the interactionism described above is the fact that the lifelessness of the body, which we now call death, does not imply the death of subjective consciousness (in whatever way African philosophers believe it expresses itself – vital force, *ori*, *sunsum*, etc.) (Dzobo 1992; Gbadegesin 2004; Balogun 2007).

It is, of course, one thing to prove that a claim follows from a context, via the prevailing logic, but it is quite another thing to show manifestations of these claims in the real world in such a way that proves that the train of thought is the right one after all. Fortunately, traditional African thought is replete with claims/beliefs that project this line of thinking as true. Let me begin with the idea of *Ngozi* in Shona<sup>4</sup> metaphysics. According to Felix Murove (2007), Shona people believe that the lifelessness of a body, brought about by human-made, and intentionally malevolent, catastrophes, does not kill the subjective consciousness but only serves to enrage the subjective consciousness, deep within the individual, to a point at which that subjective consciousness becomes a *vengeful* spirit (an *Ngozi*) – one that brings upon the perpetrator of that malevolence untold hardship that might extend to his/her family. Clearly, this disembodied consciousness retains (at least) some of the emotions and memories that made it the subjective consciousness of a human being (specifically the victim of the crime) since the memory of the past and feelings like anger could so affect it that its primary concern, even after bodily

lifelessness, was revenge. Furthermore, Murove (2007) also suggests that being a disembodied consciousness does not stop the *Ngozi* from being able to interact freely (and, perhaps, more intently) with the physical world, for what was the point of vengeance if the disembodied consciousness – *Ngozi* – could not mete out its vengeance to the physical body of the living offender? Thus, following Murove, *Ngozis* do affect/interact with the physical world since they are able to inflict, on the embodied offender, a greater level of malevolence that not only devastates him/her but also his/her family and immediate community.

In the Yoruba and Igbo traditional metaphysical view, there is talk of *abiku* and *ogbanje* children, respectively, who invariably torment their parents with an incessant cycle of birth, premature death, and rebirth (Mobolade 1973; Maduka 1987; Sowande 2001). The thinking, in these situations, is that the possessor of the newly born body is a mischievous consciousness that is inherently malevolent and so wishes to torment his/her parents for no just cause. While I will not go into details about the metaphysical explanations undergirding these particular views, what I want the reader to take from this brief mention is the interactionism I spoke about earlier – that the body is possessed by a subjective consciousness that is substantially different from the body, but which also possesses the capacity to interact with the body/material realities.

Beyond this, there is also the suggestion that premature lifelessness/death leads to the proliferation of wandering disembodied subjective consciousnesses, which manifest as ghosts (in English terms), seeking bodies to inhabit through the process of procreation. Wiredu notes this point when he says:

In West Africa, indeed, living a full and meaningful life is a condition for becoming an ancestor. This is probably not universally the case in Africa, but in the view of some peoples, such as the Akan of Ghana, a person whose life is cut short by an accident or an ‘unclean’ disease or any other untoward circumstance does not gain immediate access to the country of the dead; he becomes a neighborhood ghost, an occasional source of frightening apparitions, until he can come back to be born again to try to work out a complete life. (Wiredu 1992, 143)

The reason why this return to the physical world via a newborn body is important is that a life cut short prematurely may not have made the sorts of communal contributions that lead to a life as an ancestor. So, that disembodied consciousness is stuck in limbo, unable to become an ancestor. Motsamai Molefe also makes this point when he notes:

The death of a child, however, in some sense, is considered a bad death, and is not treated with elaborate grieving and burial. . . . The normative reasons, I suggest, are associated with the fact that the child never had a chance to pursue a life of virtue. It is the absence of the ‘moral record’, of the life of the child, that explains why its life is not celebrated (Menkiti 2004: 325). It would be contrary to the spirit of the morality of personhood to celebrate such a life because the child has not attained any moral achievements. (Molefe 2020a, 113–114)

Dying early would, then, be a prime example of a ‘bad death’ since the individual does not spend a significantly long time in the physical world to make the sort of communal impact normally expected of an individual who lives a long and fruitful life on earth. Another type of bad death is suicide (Achebe 2009). Suicide is the ultimate resistance to the perceived value of life/living. By attempting to (especially prematurely) exclude one’s self from life and community through suicide, the individual makes a strong attempt to move from *being-with-others* to *being-alone* (already considered an unattractive form of

being in African thought) in the most superlative form. As a response, individuals who commit suicide, are often buried away from the normal burial sites in the community – a clear ritualistic indication that the individual involved had, in such a bad way, extricated himself/herself from the community. That individual, even when devoid of his/her physical form, is also not accepted into the community of ancestors since the act of suicide invokes a severance from the community that cuts through both the physical world and the spiritual world.<sup>5</sup>

If one dies a good death, then death is not a harm. For the loss of life in the physical world only liberates the individual from the limits of body function and allows the individual to influence both the physical world and the spiritual world as a disembodied spirit or ancestor. If one dies a bad death (especially a premature death), reincarnation is often the preferred route, although the literature is not particularly clear on the fate of individuals (in terms of reincarnation) who have committed suicide (Wiredu 1992).

So far, we have talked about the death of an individual in the physical world and what it means within the African philosophical context. However, I must draw our attention to what has been described by scholars like Ifeanyi Menkiti (2004) as the second death. Eternality or immortality is not an attribute of individuals who have transcended the physical world through death, as you would find in, say, most Christian religious and philosophical traditions. As an ancestor, one is expected to still contribute positively to society. Either by properly guiding family members or helping those left behind in times of need, or through some other way, ancestors are generally expected to seek the well-being of others in society. It is through affecting the society in this way, that the ancestor is 'remembered'. As Wiredu puts it, 'becoming an ancestor, as already pointed out, only enables one to help the living to realise human purposes' (*ibid.*, 143).

Beyond this, the reverence of ancestors by those still alive – like family members or the community at large – is also very important. John Mbiti makes allusions to this point when he describes ancestors in this way:

The appearance of the departed, and his being recognized by name, may continue for up to four or five generations, so long as someone is alive who once knew the departed personally and by name. When, however, the last person who knew the departed also dies, then the former passes out of the horizon of the Sasa period; and in effect he now becomes completely dead as far as family ties are concerned. . . . But while the departed person is remembered by name, he is not really dead: he is alive, and such a person I would call the living-dead. The living dead is a person who is physically dead but alive in the memory of those who knew him in his life as well as being alive in the world of the spirits. (Mbiti 1970, 32)<sup>6</sup>

It does seem, then, that memory (that is tribal memory) is the very life-blood of disembodied persons or ancestors. It is so because a collective amnesia, regarding an ancestor, enables a second death, where the ancestor loses his/her personality or personhood and becomes a nameless dead. At this stage, with his/her personality gone, the disembodied individual loses his/her potency and ability to affect the physical world as s/he joins countless number of disembodied individuals, who have been *forgotten to death*. As Ifeanyi Menkiti states:

For at the stage of total dis-incorporation marked by the *it* expression, the mere fragments that the dead have now become cannot form a collectivity in any true sense of the word. And since, by definition, no one remembers them now, it also does not make much sense to say of them that they are immortal either. They no longer

have any meaningful sense of self, and, having lost their names, lose also the means by which they could be immortalized. (Menkiti 2004, 328)

This is the second and final death, and it one that can only be brought about by a tribal forgetfulness. If the tribal memories of the individual remain intact, then the individual continues to live. Given this view, it does not make sense immediately to talk about a 'good' death as a harm of some sort. First, there is no deprivation of life since death only subsists as an event that signals a transcendence from the world of the living to the world of the living-dead, and a transformation from a *person* to an ancestor. With a bad death, the situation is trickier. The word 'bad', used as an adjective in 'bad death', suggests that a bad death is harmful. The harm here can be curiously forward-looking in that the deprivation is based on what the individual could have accomplished. The type of harm that suicide entails affects the individual as the individual is wilfully attempting to be a *being-alone*, which, according to Iroegbu (1995) is the worst form of existence. Beyond that, there is the harm that such a violent exclusion places on the community, which the individual does not escape as the harm of exclusion invariably follows him/her into the afterlife. Despite this, the possibility of reincarnation, another chance at life, waters down the harm caused by a bad death – although it is not clear whether committing suicide, a serious taboo, precludes one from reincarnating.

### Meaning and death in the African context

I have previously defined meaning, as a *concept*,<sup>7</sup> 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, taken as a whole, together into one comprehensible and coherent whole. (Attoe and Chimakonam 2020, 5)

This definition borrows from Thaddeus Metz's family resemblance approach (albeit with a few changes and additions), which is a pluralistic account that tries to plug the gaps that singular concepts of meaning (concepts that employ one idea or variable – like purposiveness, transcendence, etc. – to define what all talk of meaning is about) have (Metz 2013).

Now, the question of death sometimes invokes feelings of meaninglessness/existential angst, the type of condition that Viktor Frankl (1984) calls a 'noogenic neurosis', since, for some, death (in humans) means a permanent and irreversible loss of consciousness or subjective experience. This normally comes through brain death, when the brain is starved of blood and oxygen and, as a result, brain cells begin to deteriorate and decompose. If death implies the loss of the subject, then the individual's memories of his/her moments of meaning are lost. Even when their accomplishments are acknowledged by those members of society who outlive the individual, that means nothing to the individual who is dead. What then is the point of life or *living*? Despite these points, one can respond by saying that death, in itself, provides the appropriate impetus to live life to the fullest. Wasting life, is true pointlessness, for in this brief moment of life one ought to savour and seek out experiences and moments of meaning as death is on the horizon. With such a response, however, one wonders whether such an intense attempt at living only intensifies the pointlessness that death brings since all that effort still comes to nought.

The general response to this problem from an African perspective draws from the idea that death is an event that represents transcendence and transformation. At this point, one need not talk about the nothingness that the finality of bodily death (earlier intuited) brings since death itself does not represent a finality but a transcendence and transformation. Death, within the context of African thought, begins with a disembodiment of subjective consciousness; a minor apotheosis from embodied consciousness to disembodied consciousness and finally to ancestor;<sup>8</sup> and finally a transcendence from the physical world to what I now term the *non-physical material world*. The term ‘non-physical material world’ pays homage to both the idea that the disembodied consciousness and its particular domain of existence cannot be perceived (for the most part) by the senses (and, therefore, non-physical – since I take the term ‘physical’ to mean the capacity of a thing to be perceivable by the five senses), and the idea that since these disembodied spirit are thought of as being able to affect the world, they must be material entities. This plays into my definition of materiality from elsewhere (Attoe 2022, 33), where I defined it in the following sense:

Materiality lies in a thing’s capacity to impress itself on the conscious mind. This capacity to impress is of two kinds, viz. direct impressionability and indirect impressionability. Direct impressionability is a thing’s ability to make itself known to the senses, which then feeds our conscious awareness. Indirect impressionability is a thing’s *capacity* to impress itself on a conscious mind through its effect on other things in the world and its capacity to impress itself on the conscious mind through logical necessity.

Thus, at the barest minimum, once a thing can interact with the world, it expresses (at the very least) the potential to be itself detectable to the conscious mind since the conscious mind can (come to) detect that effect on reality. This is what, for me, makes a thing material.

By entrenching a continued *living* through disembodiment, the individual’s memories, accomplishments, moments of meaningfulness, etc., continue uninterrupted. Not only is the subject conscious after death via disembodiment, but the individual also remains a participant in the affairs of life whether in his/her non-physical material domain or in the physical world of the living. And so, *accomplishing* and pursuing meaning by helping the living, are all part and parcel of life as a disembodied ancestor. In this way, the pursuit of (at least) meaning in life is sure.

Following this, I must, therefore, bring to the reader’s notice the point that within the context of African thought, however, death is actually a fulcrum that allows the individual to pivot successfully from meaning in life to meaning after life. In this instance, one must approach death with meaning and exit death with meaning. Failure in a *meaningful approach* to death usually means a bad death (and may require a repeat of life in the physical world). Failure in exiting death and continuing a meaningful life by staying relevant to those left behind ensures a quick encounter with the second and final death – where the individual becomes (what Menkiti calls) a nameless dead. In this way, meaningfulness runs through life on earth, death, and life after death.

But how does this point manifest itself in the life of the individual? Well, one way to acquire meaning in life, within the African communal context, would be by either acquiring personhood or contributing to communal flourishing or the common good (both of which are interrelated) (Attoe 2020; Molefe 2020b). Personhood is a particularly interesting concept. In the first instance, individuals (children) are born moral blank slates; an ‘it’, Menkiti (2004) calls them. As evidence to this strong claim, Menkiti (2004) invokes the way children are treated when they die as well as the linguistic pronouns used when

referring to children.<sup>9</sup> In this way, one can distinguish between two types of human beings, namely an individual (who is yet to acquire personhood) and an individual *person* (one who has acquired personhood). Throughout their lives, individuals, then, build moral experiences and eventually become moral geniuses as they grow older and encounter life. Thus, in the race to become a moral genius, or to become morally excellent, time is an indispensable factor. As Menkiti notes:

although we would not have a great deal of difficulty talking about an 18-year-old mathematical giant, we would have a great deal of difficulty talking about an 18-year-old moral giant. The reason for this is that morality and the maturation of the human person are so intimately bound up that a still evolving specimen of the person, lacking a full record in the area of lived experience, would be hard-pressed to present the sort of personal history needed for an elevation into the status of a moral exemplar. (Menkiti 2004, 325–326)

It is precisely for this reason that a life cut short prematurely constitutes a bad death since the individual loses the time on earth that would have been necessary in order to acquire the type of meaning with which to adequately approach death.

So, as the individual deals favourably, rather than treacherously, with others in the society, the individual begins to acquire the moral experience needed to acquire or earn personhood. The acquisition of personhood – which is communally conferred through recognition from other members of one’s community – is not an endpoint since personhood is the sort of thing that can be continually developed. And so, when one becomes an elder it is presumed that this individual had spent a long time acquiring and developing his/her personhood. This is why elders are so revered in many traditional African societies. It is at this stage that the individual’s life is considered meaningful, or that the individual has acquired some meaning in life (at the very least) (Attoe 2020; Molefe 2020b). It is also at this point that the individual is ready to approach death and transit to the next life as an ancestor.

Conversely, it is possible that individuals fail at the pursuit of personhood or that individuals lose an already acquired personhood. In the first instance, individuals who spend much of their life undermining communal flourishing by consistently sowing discord and ill-will do not acquire personhood. In the second instance, individuals who may have acquired personhood could conceivably lose the plot and begin to act in ways that grossly undermine social harmony. Such acts immediately chip away at their personhood until that personhood is lost. Either way, undermining communal flourishing (or social harmony), whether from the early stages of one’s life or the latter stages of one’s life, can undermine the acquisition and sustenance of personhood. Such a life meets death unprepared, and while there would still be a transcendence and transformation occurring, such individuals do not become ancestors. They only remain disembodied spirits, some in limbo (perhaps needing reincarnation) or as evil spirits of some sort. In this way, death becomes a fulcrum that pivots meaninglessness in life to meaninglessness after life.

Very much related to the idea of personhood is the idea of communalism or Afro-communitarianism in African philosophy. This is the idea that reality is interrelated – for some, necessarily so (Attoe 2022). This metaphysical fact often leaps over the is/ought gap to prescribe that human beings ought to act in a relational manner. For if relationality is the sort of thing that certain beings (like human beings) are metaphysically capable of doing, and harmony/perfection is the sort of thing for which the universe aspires, then it is reasonable to *expect* human beings to be relational and pursue (social) harmony since this relationality aligns with universal aspirations.<sup>10</sup> So while the human being has a wide range of capacities, one of which is the capacity to be relational,



it is reasonable to prescribe that the individual uses those capacities that allow for relationality rather than those that enable disharmony since the former best aligns with the aspirations/purpose of the universe.

So this is the basis of the various iterations of the idea of communalism that proliferate in African philosophy. From Kwame Nkrumah's Consciencism (1970), to Mogobe Ramose's conception of *Ubuntu* (1999; 2003), Felix Murove's *Ukama* (2007), Innocent Asouzu *ibunyidanda* metaphysics (2004; 2007), to Jonathan Chimakonam and Lucky Ogbonnaya's *nmeleka* (2021) and down to Aribiah Attoe's singular complementarity (2022), relationality/communalism pervades the discourse on African philosophy. In communalism, there is an obligation to ensure communal flourishing since communal flourishing is the ultimate goal of human social life. It is this pursuit of communal flourishing that eventually confers personhood on the individual. Thus, as Ramose (2003) opines, virtues such as respect, mutual care and recognition, etc., are prized within this worldview, and, as Thaddeus Metz (2022) intuitively, goodwill to others and a sense of shared identity is what identifies an action as right action within the context of this communalism.

What, then, does meaningfulness entail within the purview of Afro-communitarianism? I provided an answer in an earlier work as follows:

Meaning in this sense would therefore consist in the individual's ability to acquire humanity in its most potent form through a sustained performance of those acts that foster harmony, avoid discord and promote the common good. Meaningfulness in this sense would involve a transcendent mindset that goes beyond our animal instincts to shed the pettiness of our animal desires. The purpose of human existence and what would be most desirable would be the attainment of full human flourishing . . . And while the quality of one's life improves by performing one's communal normative function, meaninglessness would involve performing those acts that inform disharmony and/or discord – a constant striving towards this negative end only leads to a disastrous loss of one's humanity and possibly an ostracisation from the community of real persons. This would, in traditional African settings, be the ultimate representation of a meaningless life. (Attoe 2020, 136)

What is interesting is that this route to meaningfulness also applies to those who have encountered and transcended death, and for whom the expectation continually to remain communally active (by helping the living) is important. The inability to express one's communal capacities allows one to lose personhood. It leads to the second death.

### **○ death, there is thy sting: the finality of death and the meaninglessness of life**

So far, I have presented an account of death and an account of meaning in tune with death that can be drawn from some traditional African perspectives on death and meaning in life. One would think that the earlier concerns about the finality of death and the inevitable achievement of nothingness (from the subject's perspective), and how that reveals meaninglessness, would be laid to rest given the interpretation of death from the African perspective that I favour in this article.

However, if we were to truly converse with the African view, the same problems associated with the finality of death only begin to re-emerge. The problems begin with the assumption that within the human individual, lies a human spirit – the (dis)embodied subjective consciousness that possesses the power to live on after one's bodily demise. This subjective consciousness is understood in different ways and with different terms – *sunsum*, *okra*, vital force, *emi*, *ori*, etc. Whatever term is chosen to describe it, the common thread in all these ideas about subjective consciousness is that it is not a physical/

material entity but a non-material/spiritual thing. God, the very embodiment of spirituality and spiritual power, is often seen as the source of this spiritual component of the person, either via creation or via a flowing through of spiritual power into material things (see Tempels 1959; Mbiti 1970). It is this subjective consciousness that is responsible for the animation of the human body, the ability to think, will, understand and pursue destiny, etc., and it is what influences the physical world, after the physical demise of the individual. While this is the view, some of its core tenets begin to crumble in the face of certain advances in neuroscience. It is becoming increasingly clear that in our explanation of human consciousness and acts of consciousness, models of explanation are shifting away from talk about a non-material inhabitant of the body (sunsum, okra, vital force, etc.) to talk about the power of the human brain/nervous system. What animates the human body is plausibly cited to be a conglomeration of various factors including the existence of a brain that works, a nervous system, electrochemical impulses, etc., and how they specifically interact with each other (Churchland 1981; *Idem* 2002; Chimakonam et al. 2019). Thus, when I raise my hand, it is not that a non-material mind has willed it is so, it is that signals generated in my brain have influenced certain muscles, and my skeletal framework, to act in certain ways. Even memories, the recollection of past events, are domiciled in the brain. And so when there is some damage to the brain/brain cells, we lose some, if not all, of our memories from the past. Even our very personalities are now thought to be domiciled in the brain, and, as the curious case of Phineas Gage shows, damage to/in the brain can mean a change in personality (Jarrett 2018). It is these very ideas that allow me to question the view that there is more to human consciousness beyond the human brain.

If there is nothing non-material (or spiritual, as African philosophers often say) to human consciousness, then one must also conclude that death, which typically means irreversible brain death, ensures the end of a subject's ability to will, think, act, and have/recall memories. Death would ultimately mean nothingness – the end of the *subject* pure and simple. What does this mean for the African view? It means that the idea of death as a fulcrum for pivoting from meaning in life to meaning after life, is a mistaken view. If anything, the permanent loss of consciousness that death entails invokes the meaninglessness of life experience, since life eventually comes to nought. It is a point that Leo Tolstoy, long ago, captured quite sadly:

I could not help imagining that somewhere there was someone who was now amusing himself, laughing at me and at the way I had lived for thirty or forty years, studying, developing, growing in body and soul; laughing at how I had now completely matured intellectually and had reached that summit from which life reveals itself only to stand there like an utter fool, clearly seeing that there is nothing in life, that there never was and never will be. And it makes him laugh . . . I could not attach a rational meaning to a single act in my entire life. The only thing that amazed me was how I had failed to realize this in the very beginning . . . sickness and death will come (indeed, they were already approaching) to everyone, to me, and nothing will remain except the stench and the worms. My deeds, whatever they may be, will be forgotten sooner or later, and I myself will be no more. Why, then, do anything? How can anyone fail to see this and [continue to] live? . . . It is possible to live only as long as life intoxicates us; once we are sober we cannot help seeing that it is all a delusion, a stupid delusion! Nor is there anything funny or witty about it; it is only cruel and stupid. (Tolstoy 1905, 29–30)

While, as I said earlier, the usual response would be taking advantage of the time one has to *live more*, my take is that living more (that is, achieving more things in life, pursuing

more claims to meaning in life, etc.) intensifies the meaninglessness of life, since more of such exercises pour into the nothingness that death brings.

There are a few responses that one can make to the present issue from the African view and I will examine them closely presently. First, one can argue that meaningfulness, within the African communal context, is the sort of thing that is conferred on the individual by members of the community. And so, there is a shift of primary focus from the individual to the community – that is, whereas the individual might try to act in certain ways that are meaningful, the primary aim for acting that way is not the individual's hope for meaning, but rather communal flourishing. It is then the community that confers meaning on the individual's life, and, while that might elicit some satisfaction and pride in the individual who is the subject of this conferment, it is still the community that ultimately understands and sustains that meaningfulness. Thus, meaning is purely external to the individual – not only is it conferred because of the pursuit of certain objective/communal values, but it is also primarily understood and acknowledged by the community (beyond the individual). Thus, if it is the case that death implies the irreversible loss of subjective consciousness (leading to nothingness), such a loss plays no role in destroying the meaning of an individual's life, since meaning is externally conferred, understood, and acknowledged, primarily by the community. So, insofar as the community continues to flourish and also continues to acknowledge and understand that an individual's life is/was meaningful, then that individual's life remains meaningful. This last point is crucial, for, in response to this view, one can challenge the immortality of the community. Hence, assuming that such an externalist conception of meaning is a plausible one, one only needs to point to the array of possibilities that are available to us when thinking about communal mortality or communal death.

For instance, as we have seen time again, many civilizations have generally come in and out of existence. Beyond this, large chunks of human history have been lost due to factors like non-documentation of history, conflict, natural disasters, etc. More often than not, the fragments of that history are so thin that individual accomplishments of a large section of that community are invariably lost. Thus, there is no guarantee that communal acknowledgement of a life's meaning, sustained after the death of the individual, would be a constant since it is possible for societies to come in and out of existence. In this way, the problem associated with the finality of death still remains. Second, specific societies are not the only things with the potential for extinction, humanity is also largely at risk. From asteroid strikes, climate/environmental problems to the threat of super volcanoes and disease, there are more than a few things that can bring about the demise of the human species. In this case, the meaninglessness that comes with the finality of death cannot be mitigated by persistent communal acknowledgement since humanity is at risk of extinction (Jones et al. 2007; Pouloupoulos 2016; Trisel 2016). Of course, one can argue that these factors remain hypothetical factors. It could very well be the case that humanity continues to escape these apocalyptic encounters *ad infinitum*. However, history shows that this is unlikely. Finally, there is the suggestion that our sun will eventually become a red giant, pulverizing our planet, and also the suggestion that our universe is destined for either a big freeze or a big crunch (Carrington 2000; Schröder and Smith 2008). Thus, despite the other challenges to human existence, a cosmic *coup de grâce*, facilitated by time, awaits, and from which escape is unlikely. And so, what is plausible is that at one point in the future, humanity will cease to exist. Consequently, in spite of the externalist/communal argument, meaninglessness still reveals itself since the human being and humanity as a whole is bound for extinction.

Another argument can also be made that perhaps the transcendence that comes with death (and which enables a pivot from meaning in life to meaning after life) does not lead to a spiritual existence as an ancestor – it is rather a pivot from life to legacy. John Mbiti

(1970) first made that suggestion, but not quite explicitly. He describes that in most traditional African societies, there is the belief in ancestors and that ancestors do possess the capacity to manifest themselves in the physical world. However, he goes on to focus on an account of ancestorhood where ancestorhood is determined by tribal memory – that is, how much an individual is remembered by those s/he left behind (Mbiti 1970, 32).

What we can glean, from Mbiti's view, is that what lives on after the death of the individual is what is remembered about the individual by those still alive. The individual is remembered in relation to his/her contributions to communal flourishing, and so, in essence, what lives on (what is remembered) is the individual's legacy. A weak legacy does not last long but a strong legacy is sure to keep the memory of the individual alive for a reasonably long time. Ifeanyi Menkiti (2004) takes the argument even further in his description of normative personhood. He relegates the spiritual components of the ancestors to the background and focuses on the normative contributions of the individual as the very embodiment of the individual as an ancestor. Thus, the ancestor's influence on the life of those still alive lies in the ability of that ancestor's legacy to inspire and influence others positively. In this way, death involves disembodiment, not of subjective consciousness, but of legacy. So, pursuing meaning in life (which would mean building a formidable and potent legacy) pivots, through death, into meaning after life (through the influence of legacy).

Furthermore, one can put up a third argument that preys on the possibility that neuroscientists and neurophilosophers may be wrong after all, and that human consciousness cannot be reduced to the physical human body. The famous 'hard problem' of consciousness immediately comes to mind – the fact that subjective experiences or qualia do not seem to be the sort of thing that displays physical properties (Dennett 1991; Chalmers 1996). How does one reduce the experience of redness, for instance, to a physical thing (when one looks at a red apple)? Perhaps there is more at play here than meets the eye. Perhaps the hard problem of consciousness is proof that reductionist and eliminativist accounts of consciousness do not fully capture the human being in totality. So, let us grant, for the sake of argument, that it is true that there is something more to human consciousness than the physical components of the human person and that the anonymous traditional African philosophers were right after all – that subjective consciousness could live on after disembodiment. Does this then solve the problem of meaninglessness as derived from the finality of death?

My response to this last question tackles the last two objections that can be made from the African perspective. My response draws from the views of Mbiti and Menkiti, which points to a second death for our ancestors. According to both scholars, through a lack of remembrance, an ancestor pivots, yet again, from meaning after life to *nameless dead*. At this point, the ancestor is lost to history, never to return as a *person*. In Menkiti's words, the ancestor becomes an *it* yet again, this time permanently and with his/her personhood dissolving into nothingness. If this is true, then death makes a return. This time, death is not a process of disembodiment and transcendence but a devolution into nothingness, pure and simple. This has been the fate of many individuals in many African communities whose great deeds are no longer remembered. Thus, while there are a handful of ancestors who are still remembered today (and are, therefore, alive and well) like Oduduwa and Sango in the Yoruba traditions, King Shaka in the Zulu tradition, Queen Amina in the Hausa tradition, etc., there are countless others who may have achieved great moments of meaning, but whose lives are now lost as they encounter the second death. While there is no guarantee that the handful of ancestors who are still alive would never be forgotten, there is also no guarantee that achieving moments of meaning in life and moments of meaning after life exclude one from facing a second death since tribal memory may become short and the tribe would eventually face its extinction (as I have

previously stated). If the above is true, then the meaninglessness that comes with the finality of death raises its head again, this time more potently, since efforts at meaning in life and meaning after life all come to nought.

## Conclusion

What we have seen, from the African view, is an idea of death and meaning that is at once optimistic and pragmatic. It is optimistic because it assumes a continuation of life after death, thus moving against the pessimism that comes with the idea of the finality of death. The idea is also pragmatic as it places utility as the yardstick for measuring life after death. Thus, the pursuit of meaning continues even after death; once the individual approaches death, having lived a meaningful life, they can become an ancestor, helping those whom they have left behind in their pursuit of a good life. As I have shown, however, this optimism is largely misguided. It is either the case that life after death is impossible since there is no subjective experience to speak of once brain death occurs, or the idea of a second death (through communal forgetfulness or extinction) reintroduces the finality of death – and, by extension, the meaninglessness of life. If true, then one interesting question for African philosophers to think about would be African perspectives on the question of how to live, since life is ultimately meaningless. Perhaps a middle ground exists, but I am doubtful.

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## Notes

1. Death implies a transition from this world to the world of the 'living dead' or ancestors, and it is a transcendence because through disembodiment and existence as an ancestor, different powers, previously unavailable to the individual, are unlocked (take the case of *Ngozis* for instance, where such a disembodied consciousness can inflict harm such as death and illness on the living, or take the example of the capacity to reincarnate).
2. 'Anonymous traditional African philosophers' is a term used by Innocent Asouzu (2004) to designate the unknown philosophers of precolonial Africa, whose views persist in the communal values, art, written and oral literature that still persist today and form an important aspect of traditional African philosophy.
3. In African metaphysics, there is the view that rationality, animation and creative power, the very expression of consciousness, is imbued in vital force.
4. The Shona are one of the major tribes in Zimbabwe in southern Africa.
5. Other forms of bad death would involve suffering (usually in terms of being ravaged by an extremely painful or visually repulsive disease). Here, shame (as my private discussions with Molefe revealed) is the catalyst. If the cause of this version of a bad death is not thought to be a consequence of some grave sin, the individual would still transcend that death and become an ancestor. So, unlike suicide and premature death, there is no exclusion from the world of ancestors here.
6. To be sure, in one traditional African conception of time (as presented by Mbiti), the *Sasa* period encompasses the near future, the present, and the immediate past. The *Sasa* period overlaps and dovetails into the *Zamani* period, which connotes both the immediate past and the remote past.
7. Metz (2013) considers a concept of meaning to be what encompasses what all talk of meaning is about. Conceptions or theories of meaning would generally involve talk about any or all of the variables involved in a preferred definition/concept of meaning.
8. Sometimes, in the case of a bad death the transformation ends at the point of disembodied consciousness

9. Now, whether one agrees with Menkiti that we are born as moral bank slates or we prefer to adopt Kwame Gyekye's opposing view that individuals are born with some moral capacities, the point still remains since in both views that personhood ought to be developed.

10. While Metz (2022) argues that this gap is one that is a crucial critique of African ethics, he has admitted (in private conversations) that an aspiring or teleological universe can help in bridging the is/ought gap in the way I explain it here.

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