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An Inquiry into African Conceptions of the Meaning of Life

by

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

PHILOSOPHIAE DOCTOR

in the

Department of Philosophy

of the

Faculty of Humanities

at the

University of Johannesburg

supervised by

Distinguished Professor Thaddeus Metz

30th June 2019
Statement

This Thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated in the text.

This Thesis contains 72043 words excluding references.
Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my supervisor, Distinguished Prof Thaddeus Metz, for his rigorous, interesting and eagle-eyed supervision – working with you has made me a better person. I am equally grateful to Prof. Jonathan Chimakonam whose mentorship has guided me and my philosophical outlook for most of my academic life. Special thanks to Segun Samuel (University of Johannesburg), Victor Nweke (University of Koblenz-Landau), Mihlali Faltein (University of Johannesburg) and elements of the Conversational School of Philosophy (University of Calabar Circle) for their useful critique of some of the ideas contained in this work. I am grateful to Profs. Hennie Lotter, Veli Mitova and Rafael Winkler for their advice, clarifications and reviews respectively. I am also indebted to the University of Johannesburg for providing the means to carry out this research (via the Global Excellence Stature Scholarship) as well as her Department of Philosophy for creating an incredibly good atmosphere for learning. Final thanks to my wife, Mrs Ikike A. Attoe, for her love/support and for always providing the necessary motivation to finish up this research in record time.
Abstract

In African philosophy, not much has been done in addressing the question of the meaning of life from an African perspective. Thus, in this thesis, I attempt to bridge this intellectual gap and proffer answers to the questions: what are the African conceptions of the meaning in/of life? Which one, if any, is defensible? And what does the most defensible account of meaning entail for how to live?

To do this, I first distinguish between meaning in life, which involves those moments of meaningfulness that may dot a person’s existence, and the meaning of life, which involves the meaningfulness of the entirety of a person’s life considered as a whole. From clues in the literature, I present four salient accounts of meaningfulness viz. the African God-purpose theory, the vital-force theory, the communal normative function theory and the consolationist theory. Finding them inadequate because of the legitimate scepticism about the metaphysical foundations on which they are built as well as the fact that some other types of meaningful acts and some criteria for meaningfulness are not fully captured by the most plausible versions of these theories, I propose the passionate yearning theory, which involves a clear devotion to an intrinsically determined object of meaning, and ratio-structuralism, which involves creating and making sense of an enduring structure and rationale with regards to the entirety of a person’s life even after death, as an alternative to the African theories of meaning in life and as a theory of the meaning of life respectively. However, while factoring in the finality of death, I insist that life as a whole is ultimately meaningless and therefore propose the philosophy of indifference, which is a philosophy that adopts suicide and living for living sake, as a viable mode or mood of living with the meaninglessness of life.
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CONCLUSION

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Chapter 1.

1.1. Introduction

There is no doubt that following the modern period of Western philosophy, there has been a shift from religious and metaphysical explanations of reality towards a much more materialistic and mechanistic understanding of the world and how it works. This fact is made even more apparent with the emergence of David Hume and also with the emergence of logical positivism under the auspices of the Vienna circle in the 20th century.

This mechanistic drive also inspired the advent of neurophilosophy as an attractive way of understanding the nature of what is often called the ‘mind’. For me, the neurophilosophical model serves as an attractive explanatory model to the mind-body problem and one I have enlisted elsewhere (Chimakonam, et al., 2019) in my attempt to explain alleged mental phenomena such as consciousness, the mind, the soul etc., especially as it relates to the mind-body problem. These phenomena were originally thought of as possessing a spiritual character and operating in a different realm that is beyond the physical, whilst at the same time somehow achieving interaction. With a materialistic-cum-neurophilosophical model (which I termed ‘Proto-phenomenalism’) came certain seemingly obvious implications. The most profound of these implications is the permanent and eternal loss of consciousness that the death of an individual’s brain strongly suggests, which in turn, necessarily suggests oblivion and nothingness as the direct (non)experiential consequence of death. In other words, what death brings is a wholesome forgetfulness, a profound unawareness that disables and decimates the subjective character of any individual (un)fortunate to be dead. This fact is even more apparent if one puts into consideration the idea that there exists no mind or soul or spiritual essence that lives on beyond the first few seconds of brain death.

If we grant the inevitability of death, grant the nonexistence, forgetfulness, nothingness and oblivion that death presumes, and also grant the futility that death places on life – what then is the meaning or purpose of our existence? Why should we engage in the deep struggle that living
entertains and for what reason, if any, should we consider our lives important? These questions and the background from which they emerge, as I have explained, constitute the main factors enabling this research’s exploration of the various conceptions of the meaning of life. The answer this research will find will not only assuage my personal curiosity, but it will also – hopefully – illuminate our minds in ways we have not thought of before. Now, the primary problem which this research seeks to address is an understanding of the meaning of life, especially from a traditional African perspective.

The question of life’s meaning has been an object of deep fascination for philosophers and those thinkers who like me have, perhaps, (un)fortunately, found themselves suddenly aware of the existential quagmire that exists in trying to understand, as it were, the significance of their existence as well as find a viable response to the question of life’s meaning, whether in the affirmative or in the negative. The phrase ‘Meaning of life’, as used in the context of this research, generally involves those questions concerning what characterises the essential purpose and/or aim of an individual human’s existence and ultimately whether life is worth living.

Thinkers from the ancient period of Western philosophical tradition have mused on the nature of a good life (DeWitt, 1964; Plato, 1998; Aristotle, 2000), and others like Schopenhauer (1860) have given proper systematic attention to the question of life’s meaning, at least in the literate, Western tradition. Following Schopenhauer’s lead, philosophers such as Nietzsche (1882), Camus (1955), Nagel (1971), Metz (2013), etc., have all theorised and thought up various conceptions of the meaning or meaninglessness of life.

However, beyond this diverse potpourri of thoughts concerning the meaning of life, it is easy to see that the African philosophical space has not been fully engaged in discussing issues concerning the meaning of life – at least not as actively as it is being addressed in, say, the Western philosophical tradition.

For most African philosophers (whose views are taken to reflect their cultural worldviews – or, at least, are inspired by them), the general assumption is that that human life is of great value
Indeed, African scholars, regardless of ethnic commitments, are indeed quick to point out that in their cultures human life is naturally sacrosanct (Achebe, 2009; Edet, 2013). Procreation, for instance, is held in high esteem and considered the essence of any marriage, as procreation brings forth new life into the community (Kyalo, 2012). Indeed, individuals who find themselves unable to procreate are often regarded or seen as unfortunate. Suicide, broadly defined as self-inflicted death, is highly frowned upon in most traditional African cultures and is often considered a sin against the earth (Adinkrah, 2015). The idea of a self-inflicted disvaluing of something as sacred as human life seems lost to most Africans. Human life sacrifices, when practised, was done with the hope of preventing a cataclysmic extinction of the community of individuals, whose lives were at stake. There is, therefore, no doubt that in much of the African traditional context, life is sacred and considered to be of great value. Although various writings abound with regards to other related concepts such as death, personhood, value and sanctity of human life etc., pertinent works explicitly devoted to the meaning of life are very few at best.

This research thus seeks to answer the following primary questions: What are the African conceptions of the meaning of life? Which one, if any, is defensible? What does the most defensible account of meaning entail for how to live? Is it defensible enough?

This existential problem has not been captured sufficiently within the context of traditional African thought, not because of a lack of interest, but because of an abundance of generally untapped solutions, as I shall examine in this research. These solutions are built on a metaphysical foundation that includes the belief in a dynamic spiritual realm as well as the belief in a fluid interplay between the material realm and the spiritual realm. This metaphysical foundation, which generally cuts across most traditional African thought systems, cannot acknowledge most pessimistic and/or nihilistic concerns as, first and foremost, a person’s life can go on even after death (more of this is examined in the subsequent chapters of this work). This study aims to build, through clues from related concepts, what I identify as traditional African conceptions of the
meaning of life and, in so doing, fill the obvious lack of sufficient literature and theorising on this very important subject matter within African philosophy.

It is important to note here what exactly we mean by ‘traditional African perspective’. We must understand my application of the term ‘African’ in the context of this research. By ‘Africa(n)’ I do not necessarily mean contemporary Africa since one can argue that contemporary African values have been ‘adulterated’ by other non-African values mainly due to Africa’s colonial past and the presently globalised world. Although some African communities did make some cultural contact with other non-African communities in pre-colonial times, what differentiates those types of contact with the adulteration I speak of is that such contact allowed for the natural evolution of those African cultures, rather than the forced/imposed nature of colonial contact. This is important for a few reasons. Indeed, cultures have always interacted with other cultures. However, one can argue that one can distinguish between cultures and identify them – even beyond their geographical naming – perhaps via those salient features that are characteristic of that particular culture. When I talk about “traditional Africa”, I do not presume a pure cultural paradigm devoid of interaction with other cultures. Instead, I mean an identifiable way of life/thinking that expresses certain salient characteristics. Thus, traditional Africa is distinguished from colonial Africa which is characterised by a forceful overhaul of African culture and (first) its replacement with Western Culture and (subsequently) an unrecognisable hybrid that is neither Western nor traditionally African. It is also important to note that by ‘Africa(n)’ I include only indigenous black sub-Saharan peoples of Africa (excluding North Africans, at least insofar as they are of Arab descent, and non-African settlers in sub-Saharan African). Thus, by ‘Africa(n)’ I mean pre-colonial traditional African peoples (and their contemporary counterparts who hold fast to pre-colonial belief systems), traditions, values and beliefs – especially as provided in African philosophical literature.

With this in mind, an African perspective would, therefore, mean those beliefs, ideas or views that share certain similarities amongst most sub-Saharan groups. I do not necessarily allude to a strict unanimity with regards to African views. This study, as I envision it, shall not subsist as a
mere exercise in descriptive story-telling. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, I shall construct
African conceptions of meaning out of traditional sources, criticise said conceptions and provide my
alternative understanding of the matter at hand.

Thus, in this research, I will present the first real attempt at constructing and properly
mapping out African conceptions of meaning (from related clues). Secondly, I will interrogate the
basic foundations of traditional African conceptions of the meaning in/of life from an original
alternative perspective, in a bid to ascertain the philosophical attractiveness of the African
conceptions of the meaning in/of life and, in so doing, situate my own perspective on the matter at
hand by proposing a conception of meaning in life that I have termed the ‘passionate yearning
theory’. I shall also introduce to the literature, the idea of ratio-structuralism as a theory of meaning
of life. It is important to note here that whereas queries about meaning in life deal with those
individual moments of meaningfulness that may occasionally dot our lives, the meaning of life
deals with an individual’s life as a whole and whether it can be considered meaningful. Whereas the
latter understanding of the meaning of life is somewhat different from other usages of the term –
which involves life as a whole, not just an individual’s life – scholars like Nagel (Nagel, 1987)
share a similar understanding of what I mean when I speak about the meaning of life.

Finally, by factoring in the finality of death in the question of the meaning of life and the
attendant consequence of meaninglessness, I shall propose a new mode or mood of living with
meaninglessness – the philosophy of indifference.

Within the African context, the clues found in the African understanding of ideas like
community, normative function and immortality (in its various expressions such as ancestorhood
and reincarnation) will all play an important role with regards to a meaningful life. An important
catalyst in this potent mixture is the African conception of the person, which for the most part
traditionally confers a certain immaterial cum spiritual element to the individual, conveniently
distinct from her material body. With scientific evidence, or at least the acceptance of scientific
evidence (and its correspondence with reality) as the most attractive standard of justification
appearing to almost negate or falsify such claims to a fantastic spiritual component of the human person and/or spiritual realm (thus denying the interaction between the two), this catalyst is threatened – and, by a large extension, the logic behind most of the major African conceptions of the meaning of life. Thus, in criticizing African views on meaning, I shall reject the supernatural foundations of African conceptions of meaning and, in so doing, propose a theory of meaning that sees meaning as a passionate yearning for anything an individual finds worthy of yearning for – the passionate yearning theory of meaning in life.

This theory, as I shall explain further in this research, arises from my critique of African conceptions of meaning and my conceptualisation of what I currently perceive to be a more attractive theory of meaning. My new alternative theory of meaning in life is inspired by my critical evaluation of African conceptions of meaning and the need to find a theory that encompasses most meaningful acts (thus avoiding the narrowness of theories like the communal normative function theory) while avoiding the flaws found in characteristically African theories of meaning in life.

With regards to issues concerning the meaning of life, I shall find the finality and nothingness that death entails, enables the meaninglessness of life, by virtue of the immediate and permanent non-existence of the human person. I shall strive to project what I call the ‘philosophy of indifference’ as a possible answer to the question of how to live with the meaninglessness of life. Indifference, as I present it, encourages a non-reactionary attitude towards the meaninglessness of life, since any reaction to meaninglessness is weighed down by its own futility and the valuelessness of meaninglessness. Thus, the discussion presented in this research is both metaphysical (since certain metaphysical, judgments and speculations are made in our description of the African metaphysical worldview) and normative – since it prescribes how one ought live in light of the meaninglessness of life and how one ought to attain meaningfulness in life (via the passionate yearning theory).
This research is structured into six different chapters. This first chapter shall explain in detail the background to this research, the ideas that this research introduces into the literature as well as the methodology of this research.

The second chapter will attempt a precise exposition of the question of the ‘Meaning of Life’. Here, a penetrating analysis and conceptual clarification of what we mean when we refer to the question of the meaning of life will be made. Thus, this chapter will examine the concept of meaning, including the in/of distinction mentioned above, the conceptions of meaning as well as the parameters and scope within which any talk of meaning is cocooned. Accomplishing that task, I shall also proceed to present a historical analysis of some of the major thinkers who have influenced or explicitly philosophised on the question of meaning. Finally, I shall in the second chapter, present a critical exegesis of some of the major theories of meaning from the Western tradition. This chapter is important to this research as it provides the theoretical background with which we can create, build and understand any African theory of meaning – one of the primary objectives of this research.

The third chapter deals squarely with the various African conceptions of meaning. I shall begin by first bringing to the fore the underlying metaphysics behind most African thought systems, viz a faithfulness to a matter-spirit dualism that allows an interplay between the material world and the spiritual world. This metaphysics, as we shall see, is supremely paramount to most of what I shall present as African conceptions of meaning. This chapter shall also investigate African thoughts on the meaning in/of life and, in so doing, provide a deep exegesis of: the ‘African God-Purpose theory’, which generally locates meaningfulness in partaking in the will of a supreme deity; the ‘African Soul/Vital-Force Theory’, which locates meaningfulness in engaging in those acts that build up one’s vital force; and meaning as a ‘communal normative function’ which locates meaningfulness in the fostering of harmony through positive interpersonal relationships, including, traditionally speaking, with the living-dead, who are individuals who have transcended the physical world and are remembered by the living as ancestors.
The fourth chapter will provide a critique of African conceptions of meaning and also make an attempt to develop a more defensible theory of meaning in life. I shall do this by first calling into question the underlying metaphysics behind African thoughts on meaning and from there proceed to provide a critique of the African conceptions of meaning as I shall portray them. Thereafter I shall present the passionate yearning theory as a much more encompassing and defensible alternative to the African theories of meaning that I outline.

In the fifth chapter, I shall propose the theory of ratio-structuralism as a viable theory of the meaning of life. I shall claim that a life whose instances of meaning are not tied up in a coherent manner avoids the meaning of life. Beyond this, I shall show that the finality of death generally undercuts any claims to the meaning of life. To do this, I shall make sense of the concept of death and its relationship with the concept of the meaning of life. Whereas meaning in life is possible, the meaning of life is a different matter altogether. I shall also show how the finality of death also negates this ratio-structural approach or indeed any other theory of the meaning of life and renders it futile. I shall work with this proposition and attempt a pivot towards a theory of the meaninglessness of life, considered as a whole.

The sixth and final chapter will attempt to present what I take to be the proper mode/mood for living with meaninglessness. I shall in this chapter present the African philosophy of consolationism as propounded by Ada Agada as a possible mode or mood for living with meaninglessness. However, finding it inadequate, I shall project what I have termed the philosophy of indifference as the proper mode of living with meaninglessness. Furthermore, I shall also in this chapter address issue(s) that may arise from adopting a theory of meaninglessness. These issues include the function of suicide and the value or valuelessness of procreation.

All in all, this research shall be ambitious in its attempt to understand the problems that I have earlier spelt out as primary to this research. I shall adopt ideas that are seldom used in African philosophy to address questions that are rarely thought of within the African context, in the hope of expressing what I think qualifies as a logically coherent answer to the problem which I wish to
solve. It is hoped that this study will open new vistas in the study of what can be termed ‘African existentialism’ and also expose my audience – which include African philosophers, those interested in African studies, philosophers in other philosophical traditions and individuals seeking (fresh) answers to the question of the meaning of/in life – to ideas about meaning that has been developed from the African perspective.

1.2. Research Methodology

This research is a text-based research and as is common with text-based researches, relevant literature such as journals, articles, books, internet sources, etc., will be consulted. Thus, Anglophone sources from sub-Saharan African literature in the areas of African philosophy, ethics, African conception of personhood, meaning of/in life, existentialism and other related areas will be utilised in the search for clues related to African conceptions of meaning.

Putting into consideration the unique nature of this research and what it is attempting to do, three major philosophical research methodologies will be exploited congruently – the hermeneutic method, the analytic method and the conversational method of African philosophy. As a study aiming to garner and build African conceptions of the meaning of life through clues gathered from other related subjects in African discourse such as personhood, African conceptions of the self, etc., it is obvious that a hermeneutical approach would be most adequate in interpreting various related texts within the context set out in this study. Hermeneutics refers to those instances in which an interpretative effort is used to make clear and meaningful those things that are not easily understandable or apparent (Gadamer, 1976). As a methodology in philosophical research writing, the hermeneutic method involves the use of interpretative techniques such as intention, context analysis, context re-evaluation, context transposition, etc., to understand a text or point of view that was otherwise not explicitly stated. African scholars such as Tsenay Serequeberhan (1994), Sophie Oluwole, and Theophilus Okere are famous for employing this method (Fayemi, 2016). The interpretative method that hermeneutics entails will help this study understand and build the subject
matter of its research based on the interpretation of related texts. Given the history and nature of African thought systems as well as the nature of this research, hermeneutics will be an indispensable tool in this research.

Another method this research shall find necessary to employ is the analytic method. Researching in an analytic way involves the evaluation and clarification of terms and/or concepts as well as the employment of logic in understanding the rational plausibility of certain statements or propositions (Kothari 2004: 3). Within the African tradition, Thaddeus Metz is a prominent African philosopher who employs this method in African philosophical discourse (Metz, 2007; Metz, 2017). Thus, I shall in this research, employ the analytic method in unpacking and evaluating the logical coherence of what the research presents as the African conceptions of the meaning of life as well as clarify certain ambiguous terms and/or concepts. Also, in marking out certain distinctions between seemingly similar concepts with different connotations, the analytic method will be fully utilised.

Finally, the conversational method of African philosophy will be yet another method that I shall employ in the course of this research. Conversational thinking (or the conversational method) was initially propounded by Jonathan Chimakonam (Chimakonam, 2014; Chimakonam, 2015; Chimakonam, 2017a; Chimakonam, 2018) and is being further developed by the conversational school of philosophy. The Conversational School of Philosophy (domiciled at the University of Calabar, Nigeria) is a body which strives to construct and promote African philosophical ideas while employing those ideas in the global space. This method generally involves what Chimakonam calls *arumaristics*. Arumaristics is a rigorous process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction between two opposing theses, with the aim of not achieving a synthesis but a mutual improvement of the opposing theses (Chimakonam, 2017b, p. 17). In my examination of the African view, I shall construct a different thesis with which my conversation with the characteristically traditional African metaphysics and view on meaning in life will be built. I believe that it is through this critical interaction that we avoid an ethnosophistorical fealty to the
traditional African theories of the meaning of life and encourage a critical refinement of our understanding of the African view.

1.3. Original Contribution to Knowledge

This research shall contribute to philosophical knowledge in a few distinct ways, as I shall explain presently.

That the question of the meaning of life is not a new philosophical problem is not in doubt. Indeed, many thinkers have sought to give their own take on the issue, arriving at different and sometimes overlapping conclusions. However, addressing this question from an African philosophical perspective appears, so far, to be something that is virgin territory as only a handful of African philosophers, like Agada (2015) and Igbaria (2017), have sought to theorise explicitly on the meaning of life from an African perspective, in a way that one might term ‘philosophically systematic’ – although their works do not sufficiently map out the entire field. This research thus will contribute to knowledge by presenting the first real attempt at sufficiently mapping out the field and articulating plausible candidates for African conceptions of meaning.

Secondly, this research shall offer the first sustained critique of the various African conceptions of meaning by interrogating their basic foundations from a largely materialistic perspective, in a bid to ascertain the philosophical attractiveness of the African conceptions of the meaning of/in life. I shall also bring to bear the narrowness of the African theories of meaning, especially as it has to do with the communal normative theory of meaning and the African God-purpose theory. This narrowness is mainly found in the inability of these African theories of meaning to account for some subjectively derived acts of meaningfulness that do not fit their set narrative. It is in light of these critiques that I shall present and situate my own perspective on the matter at hand by proposing a conception of meaning in life that I shall in this research call the ‘passionate yearning theory’.
Beyond this, I shall also propose a new theory of the meaning of life, which I shall call ‘ratio-structuralism’. This theory generally avers that for a person’s life to be considered meaningful as a whole, there must be some coherence that ties up the individual’s life as well as an intrinsically acknowledged *telos* or rationale which that life aims at, and this *telos* must be permanently satisfactory and acknowledged by the individual.

Finally, factoring the finality of death and given the probable inclinations towards meaninglessness that that entails, I shall also, from my perspective, theorise on a proper mode and/or mood for *living with* meaninglessness and within the confines of a valueless universe. I shall call this mode the *philosophy of indifference*. Indifference in this context implies a benign acknowledgement of meaninglessness. It decries pessimism or optimism or indeed any other reactionary attitudes to meaninglessness (this is because such reactions are in-themselves futile – leading only to despair). The philosophy of indifference is, therefore, an individual’s unbridled acknowledgement of meaninglessness (not an evil in itself) and the futility of any attempt to address it. It is this acknowledgement that encourages individuals to be apathetic to the false despair often associated with meaninglessness.
Chapter 2.

2.1. The Question of the ‘Meaning of Life’

Any exegesis of the subject matter proper cannot begin without a suitable explanation of the question being asked. This is even more apparent in understanding what is meant when we ask about the ‘meaning of life’ – whether from an African perspective or not. To properly understand what the question of life’s meaning entails, we must also know what the question does not entail. When we ask, ‘What is the meaning of life?’, we are not asking for a definition of life or by extension, some sort of semantic referential relation.

Although knowing what life is seems necessary for an understanding of what life means, asking what the meaning of life is involves something more than that – it generally involves the subject matter of living itself. Also, another related question which the question of life’s meaning does not entail is the question of the nature of life. In answering the question of life’s meaning, we are not necessarily interested in providing an account of the origin, nature and evolution of life. Providing such an account does not necessarily answer the question of life’s meaning that I have in mind, as it only offers a bare account of peripheral matters about what being alive entails. These again may serve as potential premises and points of fact but cannot serve as an answer to the question of meaning.

Perhaps the closest related question which one may easily slip and slide into but does not necessarily answer the question of life’s meaning is the question of the value of life. Whereas the question of life’s value may hover around questions concerning the importance one places on life, this question is somewhat different from the question of life’s meaning. Stating why this is so is not as simple as one might think; since the ideas of importance and meaning are so entangled, demarcating both ideas requires a bit of care and precision. Usually, when we talk of importance, we generally mean those things that a subject has that makes it a necessary tool for a certain end. For instance, in relation to having children (an end), one might consider sex necessary and
important. It would be odd in this instance to consider a mop or a blackboard as important for the mere fact that neither a mop nor a blackboard serves the purpose of procreating. However, if the end sought after was a clean room or teaching in a classroom respectively, sex would hardly be of any importance. Instead, the mop and the blackboard would assume an important role in relation to the ends that I have just mentioned.

It then seems to me that in answering the question of what is important, we are implicitly asking for those things that best serve a certain purpose or end. Thus, questions about why life is important would then seem to require answers to the question: what are those things that enable life to achieve a certain end – in other words, what makes life a means to a certain end? In contrast to the question of importance, we see that the question of what makes life meaningful answers a different question. It points to life as an end in itself (not as a means to an end) and roughly asks: what are those things or values in one’s or about one’s life that are worth pursuing for their own sake?

Another important distinction to take note of is that the question of life’s meaning is not necessarily a question about whether one is living well. The idea of living well can be thought of in two ways. First is the idea of living well as being in general good health and the second idea is living well as doing those things that make one’s life enjoyable. One can discount the first account of living as a question of meaning since one can easily argue that good health, on its face value, is not a sufficient condition for meaning. One can consider Gandhi whose life is considered as meaningful but yet the very reason for this consideration generally deprived him of good health. The second account is a much more difficult one to discount. Indeed, one can consider the second account of what living well means as mainly a hedonistic account – one that seems driven to pleasure. It seems to me however that there is something about meaningfulness that goes beyond mere happiness. Intuitively, we agree that sex, for instance, grants us great pleasure, but it seems odd to agree that the pleasure that sex grants is in-itself what makes life meaningful. This same argument seems to apply to the second account of what it means to live well. Whereas living well
might account for a good life (hedonistically speaking), it is not necessarily the case that it accounts for a meaningful life. Meaningfulness seems to involve a certain transcendence that is not predicated on the presence or absence of real-world pleasures.

Although there are other such related questions which we can easily mistake as being the same as questions about the meaning of life, I shall not exhaust all of them here. Also important to note is specifically what is considered when I refer to the term ‘life’. I do not consider the term life in the sense of a general reference to the totality of biological life as we know it or – like most individuals who want to believe that the universe possesses some form of consciousness – the ‘life’ of the universe. I think such a project is, at best, a difficult task. What is generally referred to as life in this study is specifically an individual human’s life, and does not refer to other forms of life such as plant life or other animal lives etc.

2.2. The Concept of ‘Meaning’

In the preceding paragraphs, I have (to a certain extent) provided some sense as to what we do not mean when we are faced with the question of meaning (I use the term ‘question of meaning’ interchangeably with related phrases such as ‘the question of the meaning of life’ and ‘question of life’s meaning’ amongst others). The next task which this section aims to achieve is to properly delineate in hopefully clear terms what is generally meant when philosophers ask about life’s meaning. The reason for this intricate clarification is for the reader to possess a precise understanding of the question which we are asking.

Our task here is to present an overarching concept of meaning that in the ideal case embraces all conceptions of meaning in its definition. It is important to note, here, the distinction between conceptions of meaning and concepts of meaning. Thaddeus Metz (2013a) makes clear this distinction. For him, conceptions of life’s meaning can be seen as simply a synonym for theories of meaning. A concept of meaning on the other hand ‘is what all and only the competing conceptions of a meaningful life are about….’(Metz, 2013a, pp. 18-19). So, although a conception of meaning
includes ideas that specifically explain the question of life’s meaning or what it means (if it is at all possible) to have a meaningful life, a concept of meaning is a general abstraction of those idea(s) common to all theories or conceptions of meaning that specifically distinguishes talk of meaning from other related values. Analysing a concept of meaning in the manner adumbrated above is not necessarily an easy task. However,undaunted, I shall still make an attempt.

Given the nature of what a concept of meaning entails – earlier stated to mean what all conceptions of meaning are about or generally talk about – Tatjana Visak (Visak, 2017) argues that when we ask, ‘what is the meaning of life?’, we are simply asking, what are the normative reasons for our actions? Normative reasons for action would involve those non-derivative (and positive) reasons we appeal to when we try to justify why we (should) act. It is important to note that for Visak, when one speaks about normative reasons for action, one is not merely talking about explanatory reasons for actions – for instance, it would not count that the meaning of life for Sisyphus is that he has been condemned to roll a stone up a hill forever (a substantive reason for action).

Thus, if we suppose that an individual who has Alzheimer’s disease saves another individual’s life and remembers that she has saved this individual but forgets that she belongs in community x and that her reason for action lies in her subjective investment in enhancing communal harmony, such an instance of meaning would not count as meaningful in this account. But it would be hard to deny that this act is an instance of meaningfulness since there are other objective theories of meaning that would count such an act as meaningful.

For Frank Martela, in defining what the concept of meaning is, we are only asking what contributions a life has made. What is meant is not merely ‘about the contribution taking place, but also about how much my life is responsible for that contribution’ (Martela, 2017, p. 244). However, this concept of meaning is much too narrow and does not account for every conception of meaningfulness – specifically those instances of meaning that do not involve any contribution. So within this account, a Sisyphus who has been imbued by the gods with a drive to subjectively enjoy
and derive passion in pushing the rock or the lady who invests a life-time in understanding the
different cuisines in the world would by definition both be living meaningless lives as far as this
concept of meaning is concerned – but this is not the case, especially, if one favours subjectivism.

I am inclined to take an intuitive leap and claim that any concept of meaning would
generally tilt towards being a pluralistic concept rather than a monistic one. The reason for this
inclination towards pluralism is not very far-fetched. Given the need to express an all-embracing
concept, it is hard to imagine a single idea that expresses and captures all or at least most of the
major conceptions of meaning (Seachris, n.d.). Metz seems to agree with this point with his
rejection of purposiveness (broadly construed as setting and achieving certain goals), self-
transcendence (broadly construed as connecting with ends for their own sake beyond our base
emotive feelings of pain and pleasure) and self-esteem/admiration (broadly construed as those ends
that elicit a certain pride and subjective worthiness and satisfaction) etc., as the only possible stand-
alone concepts of meaning as they do not fully capture the very broad range of theories that are
about life’s meaning (Metz, 2013a, pp. 24-34).

In light of the above, Metz suggests – and I agree with him – that a pluralist analysis, i.e. a
fusion of various common denominators that are common to any talk of meaningfulness, would be
apter in defining what a concept of meaning would entail. He goes further to advance what he calls
a ‘family semblance approach’ which sees any enquiry into life’s meaning as ‘roughly, a cluster of
ideas that overlap with one another. To ask about meaning [for Metz] … is to pose questions such
as: which ends, besides one’s own pleasure as such are most worth pursuing for their own sake;
how to transcend one’s animal nature; and what in life merits great esteem or admiration’ (Metz,
2013a, p. 34).

I find Metz’s family semblance theory apt and tenable. In involving these clusters and
adopting a pluralistic stance, Metz’s position accommodates most conceptions of meaning. It
generally deals with those ends that may make one’s life meaningful and I would like to think even
certain means are included in his theory insofar as those means are also valued as ends in
themselves or are considered final values. With scholars such as Ada Agada (Agada, 2015) who speaks of a universal yearning for perfection and Susan Wolf (2010) who contends that meaningfulness involves loving those things that are worthy of love (Wolf, 2010, p. 8), I shall propose to add two more variables to Metz’s cluster. The first variable is the subjective passionate pursuit and yearning for those ends that an individual passionately finds supremely worth pursuing (insofar as the individual considers those things/values as ends in themselves). The second variable that I propose is coherence. In speaking about the meaning of life (for a fuller analysis see below), it is plausible to presuppose that one looks for some coherence that ties together the various instances of meaning and/or the actions that an individual has or is committed to performing throughout her life. In this coherence, one immediately finds that underlying non-derivative rationale that allows us to make sense of our lives as a whole. The subjectivity seemingly presupposed in the first variable escapes the possibility of having certain acts recognised as objects of meaning (like happiness) by incorporating the other three elements of meaning expounded by Metz. So, the enjoyment of sexual pleasures and a subjective drive towards having that pleasure would not be seen as an object of meaning by the mere recourse to its subjective appeal since engaging in sexual acts may not count as something that at the very least does not transcend one’s animal nature. The coherence presupposed by the second addition allows us to have a pluralist concept of meaning that also bears on conceptions of the meaning of life. This along with other parameters that I shall set forth in the fourth chapter of this research avoids the sort of problem outlined above.

The addition of subjectivity – as characterised by an intrinsic willingness and participation of the individual in the pursuit of a certain object of meaning – is further necessitated by my rejection of meaning as a merely instrumental value. Thomas Nagel captures this fact quite well when he states:

But a role in some larger enterprise cannot confer significance unless that enterprise is itself significant…. If we learned that we were being raised to provide food for other creatures fond of human flesh, who planned to turn us
into cutlets before we got too stringy - even if we learned that the human race had been developed by animal breeders precisely for this purpose – that would still not give our lives meaning, for two reasons. First, we would still be in the dark as to the significance of the lives of those other beings; second, although we might acknowledge that this culinary role would make our lives meaningful to them, it is not clear how it would make them meaningful to us. (Nagel, 1979, p. 16)

It is hard to deny Nagel’s claim about objects of meaning that assume a purely instrumental role. By blindly adopting a purpose that is of instrumental value, the significance of such an object of meaning lies not in the individual who is attempting to achieve meaning but in the thing for which that instrumental value is important. Instrumental values will only make sense when there is an intrinsic subjective acknowledgement and absorption of that external form of meaning as one’s own. Thus, a derivative and mechanical pursuit of God’s purpose as an object of meaning will only make sense when the individual subjectively decides to pursue God’s purpose and accept it as what makes her life meaningful.

Taking a step out of our lives to examine the meaning of our pursuits engages the individual with herself and brings out her feelings of the meaning of the series of activities and inactivity that characterises her life. The question of meaning can have profound implications on how we generally go on with lives. Recognising that life is meaningful has the potential for encouraging an excitement about life and a will to continually flourish whether physically, morally or otherwise. Acknowledging that life is not meaningful is another matter altogether. Why should we then be moral? Why should we build political states/institutions? Why should we pursue knowledge and flourishing if these values are ultimately worthless and our pursuit of them is not worthwhile?
2.3. Other Pertinent Distinction(s): Meaning of Life vs Meaning in Life

In the previous sections, I have sought to explain what questions of meaning do not entail and what any general concept of meaning would involve. Here, I seek to make further clarification(s) that I feel may help in the progress of this study as we move along. This clarification involves a clear distinction of the terms: meaning of life and meaning in life. It is important to note at this juncture that my previous analysis about the concept of meaning applies to both meaning in life and meaning of life. Aspects of the family semblance approach such as purposiveness, self-transcendence, self-esteem/admiration as well as yearning and passionate pursuit and coherence can bear on what we generally mean when we speak about meaning in or of life. The importance of this distinction is made apparent by the fact that though these words give an impression of similarity, they do not really mean the same thing and may not be considered interchangeable terms. This distinction will inevitably dovetail into addressing questions of what Metz terms ‘bearers of meaning’.

What do we mean when we utter the phrase, meaning of life? Intuitively, one would think that such talk involves a general overview of life’s existence, either in terms of cosmic life, biological life or human life/existence specifically (Taylor, 1970). In this research, however, the term ‘meaning of’ (I use the phrase ‘meaning of’ interchangeably with the phrase ‘meaning of life’) is used in a narrower sense. By ‘meaning of’, I mean a general outlook on what makes the life of a human person meaningful. Meaning, here construed, does not involve just a mere examination of those specific things that make one’s life meaningful, especially within the confines of an individual’s lifetime; ‘meaning of’ here involves a cumulative of the totality of one’s lifetime and perhaps beyond.

‘Meaning in life’ (I use the phrase ‘meaning in’ interchangeably with the phrase ‘meaning in life) on the other hand is something more precise and definite. By ‘meaning in’, I mean an examination of those ends or means that make a particular individual’s life meaningful at a specific
Consider the following example as a simple explanation of what the above distinction entails. Suppose one asks: is this soup delicious? What the questioner intuitively expects from the respondent as an answer to the question is a general judgment on the tastiness of the food itself and not only on specific ingredients. This is not to discountenance the fact that specific ingredients may have a pronounced effect on the general tastiness or distastefulness of the food. On the other hand, if the questioner asks: is there anything in this soup that is enjoyable? What the questioner expects as an answer is something obviously different from what was expected in the first question. What the questioner expects, in this case, is something more specific. Her concern is specifically about what ingredients, if any, are particularly tasteful. Perhaps the answer may be stretched to include any ingredient that may, in itself, make the soup good or bad enough to be considered tasteful or distasteful respectively.

This same distinction may be extended or considered analogous to the distinction we are trying to make with regards to ‘meaning of’ vs ‘meaning in’. For an individual who is looking to investigate the former, all aspects of an individual’s existence are considered, perhaps significant specific parts too, insofar as those specific parts affect the general outlook of a life’s meaningfulness. For an individual investigating the latter, the concern is with those specific parts, values, means and/or ends that may at some point make an individual’s life meaningful.

This distinction, as previously stated at the beginning of this section, seems to invoke questions about what aspects of a person’s life are bearers of meaning, viz. is meaning a constituent of one’s whole existence (Velleman, 2015, pp. 142-144) or a constituent of specific parts and moments or even a combination of both (Metz, 2013a, pp. 38-39). Another way of asking this question in a way that shows its relationship with the previous distinction is to ask, which – between ‘meaning of’ and ‘meaning in’ – best describes the most superlative or most attractive sense of meaningfulness? To accept the former in a strict sense intuitively denies moments of
meaningfulness especially when such moments are surrounded and outweighed by moments of despair and/or meaninglessness. This point is even more poignant if one agrees that sometimes at least one moment of meaningfulness can be sufficient in making one’s life meaningful. To further buttress this point, consider the following examples:

(1) A criminal who, finding his lifetime of criminal activities an exercise in meaninglessness, finds himself in a situation where risking his life and saving a few million people is an option and opts to take that option.

(2) A criminal who, finding his lifetime of criminal activities an exercise in meaninglessness, considers making his mother smile as meaningful and occasionally makes his mother smile.

In the first example, it may be safe to assume that one moment of meaningfulness, viz. opting to risk his life to save others, was enough to make his life genuinely meaningful, despite a lifetime of criminal activities. The second example expresses something slightly different. Although his occasional moments of meaningfulness viz. making his mother smile, may not be intuitively thought of to be as meaningful in exactly the same degree as the moment of meaningfulness in the first example, it would be wrong, I think, to deny the meaningfulness of the second criminal’s moment(s) of meaningfulness.

What the above proves is that whereas one can make judgments about the meaningfulness of one’s whole life – in the sense of (but not limited to) some sort of flashback or death-bed perspective – it would seem unsound to deny the meaningfulness of certain parts of the individual’s life and/or the meaningfulness of certain specific moments or acts of meaningfulness. If this is true, then it would seem only reasonable to consider both the ‘meaning of’ and ‘meaning in’ life in equal depth as aspects of meaningfulness rather than upholding one aspect as only that which constitutes meaning.
2.4. Historical Background of the Conceptions of the Meaning in/of Life

I have in the previous sections sought to clarify what is meant when we reflect on the meaning of life – at least in the context of this study. I have also attempted to make further distinctions in the subject matter that I hope will clear our understanding of the subject matter on which this research focuses, i.e. the meaning of life from an African perspective. Having done this, it seems necessary that I provide a brief examination of some historical perspectives with regards to the question of the meaning of life that range from the Western, Oriental and Middle Eastern traditions. Why this is necessary is simple. In order to properly map out the conceptions of meaning in/of life from an African perspective, it is pertinent that we have some big-picture overview of what others have said about the matter. This is all in the bid to understand other perspectives and guide my systematisation of African perspectives on meaningfulness.

The problem of the meaning of life is not a new philosophical conundrum; various ancient and modern thinkers have often pondered the purpose of their existence amongst other things. It may seem odd that historical views of past African scholars on the subject of the meaning of life are ignored here. This is not by design but due to the fact that there is little or no real traditional account of African (especially sub-Saharan African) conceptions of meaning in the literature. Perhaps the reason for this is hinged on the fact that pre-colonial African thought was largely based on the oral tradition until recently, and not all major topics have received written study. This does not discountenance any future account of meaning from an African perspective, nor does it discountenance the fact that it would seem proper that I examine these views, in order to have a firm grasp of the historical background and precursors of the subject and, from there, proceed to build an understanding of African conceptions of meaning (this will be done in the third chapter). I begin by examining some relevant historical literature that may be considered within the purview of the subject matter at hand. I will, however, pay closer attention to more modern scholars and literature as they provide a much more systematic account.
The thoughts of Qoheleth – and perhaps other unknown authors – (Ecclesiastes Chapters 1–12) presents to us an in-depth look at the question of life’s meaning – one that would in the very least influence the trajectory of this research. The author begins by lamenting the vanity of human existence and proceeds to describe different pursuits – wisdom, wealth, entertainment, laughter/happiness etc., – that would seem to express meaning in life. He, however, alludes to the fact that these specific moments of meaningfulness seemingly fall flat when one puts into consideration the inevitability of death and the nothingness that it presupposes (Ecclesiastes 1:14-18; 2:1-16. Indeed, Qoheleth is quick to admit that the individual who manages to acquire some meaning in life (what I have referred to in the previous section as episodes of meaningfulness) and the individual whose life possesses no meaning are not so different as both lives eventually empty into nothingness. Ecclesiastes ends with a turn towards what is usually termed a ‘God purpose theory’ with the conclusion (in Ecclesiastes 12:13-14) that the sole meaning of an individual’s life is to keep the commandments of God (in this case the Hebrew God, as there are many). Qoheleth’s turn towards God and/or a God purpose as the source of meaning echoes the basic intuition of most Christians and Jews with regards to what they may consider to be the meaning of life.

In Oriental traditions, what mostly characterised an answer to the question of meaning generally involved an appeal to harmony of some sort or a need to better one’s self. In the Chinese tradition of Confucianism, the harmony that allowed one to consider his/her life as meaningful was mostly social and usually depended on the ability of the individual to constantly develop and improve one’s relational self (Goldin, 2005, p. 5). A meaningful life would then subsist within the context of developing one’s self, i.e., fostering good human interpersonal relationship and playing a role in the development of one’s own society. Thus, doing those things that enable a harmonious social relationship is what would make a life meaningful. In the Hindu tradition, the meaning of one’s life involves the striving for the attainment of one-ness with the Supreme Being – Brahman – and in so doing, break the cycle of reincarnation (Edet, 2006, pp. 10-13). For the Buddhist, meaning also involves the breaking of one’s life cycle, but the aim is not a reunion with a Supreme Being but
rather the achievement of Nirvana or enlightenment. Enlightenment is usually attained in this world, while the individual is still alive. By learning to shed one’s desires and incorporate an ascetic lifestyle, the individual (if ardent enough) might achieve a state where the passions and desires of the world cease to make meaning to her. It is at this stage that the individual achieves enlightenment and by extension, meaning.

In Hellenistic traditions, questions of meaning were not divorced from the concept of a good life, and indeed it is possible to derive ideas about meaning from their reflections on the good life. For Plato, Socrates’ understudy, meaningfulness is resident in the proper harmonious interplay between the three parts or components of the soul (Plato, 1998). Plato in describing the tripartite notion of the soul argues that the soul is made up of three parts viz. the rational or logical, the appetitive (which describes our pleasures, passions and desires) and the spirited (basically our temperament). A meaningful life would be one where reason rules over and reins in the appetitive and the spirited – such a life becomes more adept at grasping the ideal form viz. the form of good (Plato, 1998).

Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, also pondered the purpose of human existence. Basing his views on the assumption that each representation of reality has a function related to its existence, Aristotle is quick to submit that human existence must implicitly have a function – this function is rationality. In the unbridled pursuit of its respective function, these aspects of reality achieve happiness. In the same vein, through the pursuit of a virtue through reason, humans achieve happiness (happiness should not be construed here to mean the pleasurable excitement that lay or ordinary reference to the term expresses). The achievement of this happiness – or what is referred to as *eudaimonia*– is exactly the purpose of human existence (1097b22 – 1098a17).

During the medieval period, the question of life’s meaning was generally sidestepped, since the response to the question of life’s meaning was already found in the Christian doctrine – pursuing God’s purpose (specifically the Christian God) and obeying His divine will (O’Brien, n.d.). For Thomas Aquinas, the ultimate purpose of human existence is generally tied to God. He states:
The ultimate goal of human life will always transcend any natural good or set of goods (ST 1/2.1–5). Nothing but God, as known and loved in the promised beatific vision, can fully satisfy the human desire for knowledge of the truth and union with the good (Ferr, 2009, p. 67).

Schopenhauer, another scholar within the Western tradition, also explicitly explores questions concerning the meaning of life. In his essay titled ‘On Human Nature’, he asks, ‘What is the meaning of life at all? To what purpose is it played, this farce in which everything that is essential is irrevocably fixed and determined?’(Schopenhauer, 1860a). In his answer to this question, Schopenhauer in another essay titled ‘The Vanity of Existence’ expresses his pessimism as to life having any meaning. For him, life is but a fleeting moment, sandwiched in-between an eternity of nothingness. He further states that although it may appear logical to enjoy the present, such an endeavour is (and I agree with him) the greatest folly – any present action that is sure to exist no more in a short moment is indeed not worth the effort (Schopenhauer, 1851, pp. 9-10).

Although Schopenhauer does not explicitly consider suicide as a genuine alternative to living a meaningless life, his strong arguments for suicide, and his distaste for the stigma placed on it, only appears to be a silent nod towards that direction – one I shall explore further, along with his nihilistic approach, in the latter part of this research. Although pessimism appears to be a leading theme in Schopenhauer’s discourse on meaning, it did not stop Schopenhauer from philosophising about what it means to lead a happy life –which he describes in ‘The Wisdom of Life’ as simply being one’s self (Schopenhauer, 1860a, pp. 3-7). This view places great emphasis on subjective dispositions rather than objective ones. For Schopenhauer, subjective dispositions play a vital role in determining whether an individual determines her life experiences to be melancholic, happy/pleasurable, meaningless etc. Thus, whereas an individual of high intellect might find certain simple experiences or even her thoughts alone as meaningful and despise superfluous attempts at luxury as meaningless and even a burden, the dullard may find simple activities and experiences an
exercise in boredom and instead pursue a more sensual appetite. This does not, however, discountenance any class of persons. On the contrary, Schopenhauer opines:

The only thing that stands in our power to achieve, is to make the most advantageous use possible of the personal qualities we possess, and accordingly to follow such pursuits only as will call them into play, to strive after the kind of perfection of which they admit and to avoid every other; consequently, to choose the position, occupation and manner of life which are most suitable for their development. (Schopenhauer, 1860a, p. 6)

In staying true to one’s disposition and striving towards perfection in light of the disposition one possesses, Schopenhauer believes that a happy life is possible. Unfortunately, that happy life may not necessarily translate to a meaningful one.

Following Schopenhauer’s pessimistic tradition, Friedrich Nietzsche (1882) in his *The Gay Science* also presents a remarkable position on the meaning(lessness) of life. He begins by decrying the belief in a purposeful life by the herd (humanity), apparently acknowledging such beliefs as folly, soon to be laughed at by nature and reason (Nietzsche, 1882, pp. 27-29). This folly, for Nietzsche, is often reinforced by the ‘ethical teacher’ who, in Nietzsche’s view, creates an alternate reality – one that is not congruent with the true state of things. In his words, the ‘teacher[s]’:

makes his appearance as the teacher of the purpose of existence in order that what happens necessarily and always, by itself and without a purpose, shall henceforth seem to be done for a purpose and strike man as reason and an ultimate commandment; to this end he invents a second, different existence and takes by means of his new mechanics the old, ordinary existence off its old, ordinary hinges. (Nietzsche, 1882, p. 28)

It is clear to Nietzsche that the search for meaning is inextricably linked with the consistent resurgence of the ‘heroes’ (synonymous with the ‘ethical teachers’ of meaning) who consistently skew human nature, thus enabling an additional need for meaning as well as the need ‘for the
repeated appearance of such teachers and such teachings of a ‘purpose’’ (Nietzsche, 1882, p. 29). While acknowledging the value neutrality of human existence, Nietzsche suggests that rather than despair, one should acknowledge the absurdity of existence as not only a tragedy, but also a comedy – something to be laughed at (Nietzsche 2008: 27-29). Nietzsche’s view is stretched further by Moritz Schlick who claims that for Nietzsche, meaning invariably lies in the freedom from ends and purposes of any kind (Schlick, 1927).

Soren Kierkegaard, often considered the father of existentialism, understood meaning from a seemingly religious point of view. To understand Kierkegaard’s views on meaning is invariably tied to an individual’s subjective progression as well as what is usually referred to as a ‘leap of faith’ (Kierkegaard, 2009). For Kierkegaard, individuals usually encounter three stages of life viz. the aesthetic stage, the ethical stage and the religious stage. Having encountered the pleasures of the aesthetic stage and the moral and intellectual/rational maturity of the ethical stage, the individual encounters meaningfulness in the attainment of the religious state. It is during this stage that one encounters the idea of a leap of faith. Kierkegaard grants that life is often meaningless, especially when considered with the lenses of experiential evidence and reason. However, Kierkegaard offers us a solution. He suggests that we set aside reason and evidence and pursue a genuine faith or belief in God – the Christian God. At the religious stage, it is only natural that one pursues a belief in the Christian God and – despite the fact that there is no obvious reason why Christianity is preferred over other religions – Kierkegaard suggests a leap from reason and evidence to faith-based awareness. It is through this leap and the ensuing relationship with God that such a faithful leap ensures that the individual avoids despair and finds meaning (Metz, 2019, p. 9). Kierkegaard’s view is not markedly different from Tolstoy’s (Tolstoy, 1905). For him, life would be meaningful if an individual possessed a spiritual essence which could unite with God in heaven. Life would be absurd and meaningless if the opposite is the case.

Following the pessimism of Schopenhauer and the faith-based conclusions of both Kierkegaard and Tolstoy, it is only natural that we turn our attentions to the views of one of the
greatest existentialist in modern history – Albert Camus – whose views touch greatly on the pessimism of the likes of Schopenhauer and the faith-based doctrines of the likes of Kierkegaard and Tolstoy. In his book, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus (1955) presents to us perhaps the most popular rendition of the question of meaning as well as the absurd. For him, life is meaningless as there is not much to look forward to other than suffering, death and nothingness. As such, the most pertinent philosophical questions for Camus concern whether life is worth living at all and how best to carry on living, especially as life and the world around us largely possesses an absurd, meaningless, senseless and unintelligible character.

Camus paints a gloomy picture here. As individuals, we constantly search for a transcendent sort of meaning or even a God who would impart some form of meaning in the chaotic world around us. With death inevitably plunging the individual into nothingness and oblivion, ‘the absence of any profound reason for living… and the uselessness of suffering’, the absurdity precipitated by the discord between man and meaning becomes apparent (Camus, 1955, p. 6). The pointless character that the meaninglessness of life invokes in Camus’ philosophy is vibrantly made clear in its allusion to the Greek myth of Sisyphus, an individual who is forever condemned to push a rock up a hill, only to watch it roll back down to the bottom. Thus, the need to escape and/or respond to the pointless labour of life becomes apparent and Camus gives us a few tips.

He first suggests that we reject suicide as a response to meaninglessness and the absurd. Suicide for Camus smacks of an escapist attitude and this attitude is exactly the mindset that the ‘tormentor’ craves. Suicide would, for Camus, be a great victory for the torment that the trap of the meaninglessness of our lives implies. Second, he suggests that we also reject an elusive stance – the type that faith and hope brings. This rejection is not unconnected to the fact that any appeal to faith is a rejection of the obvious – the meaningless and absurd character – and it is also a rejection of reason(Camus, 1955, pp. 29-34). The dearth of reason in a bid to evade the absurd is what Camus calls *philosophical suicide*. Camus thus recommends what he terms ‘revolt’(Camus, 1955, p. 35). Revolt, as envisioned by Camus, calls for an embracing of the absurd rather than an evasion of it.
Rather than take the leap of faith, as Kierkegaard and Tolstoy did, Camus advises that we turn around and face with scorn the meaninglessness that encircles our existence. He states that ‘The lucidity that was to constitute his [Sisyphus’] torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn’ (Camus, 1955, p. 77). In striving to live life for the moment and to the fullest, we act in scorn of meaninglessness – in revolt. This constitutes, for Camus, the best mode of living with meaninglessness and the absurd.

In the late 19th and early 20th century analytic tradition, the works of William James, Bertrand Russell and A. J. Ayer stand out. William James (1896) was quick to point out that meaning only subsists in a supernatural order which invariably corrects the imperfection and answers the question that befuddles us in the natural world. By rejecting the existence of a supernatural world, an individual who does not possess an optimistic disposition may find it easier to contemplate suicide. However, James believes that the rejection of the supernatural world is unfounded as scientific knowledge only seems able to explain only a minute part of reality. He further suggests that we avoid the pessimism that agrees that life is not worth living and instead invest in overcoming this pessimism by engaging positively with life (James, 1896, p. 60). The positive engagement that would (according to James) require that we:

…carry on with a sense of purpose, that we may attain a victory in it. In the same way a mountaineer facing a perilous gulf may be able to clear it only if he can get himself to believe that he can, so our lives may be worth living only if we can get ourselves to believe that they are. (Bramble, 2014, p. 218)

What James suggests is a form of rebellion against the feeling of meaninglessness. His view agreed that a subjective willing of meaningfulness is precisely what makes life meaningful. Indeed, James concludes his book *Is Life Worth Living?* by stating that we ‘Be not afraid of life. Believe that life *is* worth living, and your belief will help to create the fact’ (James, 1896, p. 63). Thus, in believing that life can be meaningful, facing it squarely and trusting in the existence of a supernatural order, mankind finds meaning.
Bertrand Russell, on his part, begins by first entertaining the idea of a random accidental universe. He seems to further suggest that in a random world, finding meaningfulness in the mindless chaos of the universe is, at best, a difficult task. Such a task is made even more difficult when one puts into consideration the fact that the life span of the solar system – and by extension the earth – is generally dependent on the survival of the sun, which is bound to die at some point. Such a cataclysmic event will not only allow humanity to go extinct, but it would also extinguish all our histories and legacies – this ultimately questions the need to constantly strive for meaningfulness (Russell, 1923). Still, beyond this deep pessimism, Russell advises that we resist the worship of power and embrace our ideals. This is clear when he says:

The worship of Force, to which Carlyle and Nietzsche and the creed of Militarism have accustomed us, is the result of failure to maintain our own ideals against a hostile universe: it is itself a prostrate submission to evil, a sacrifice of our best to Moloch. If strength indeed is to be respected, let us respect rather the strength of those who refuse that false ‘recognition of facts’ which fails to recognise that facts are often bad... Let us preserve our respect for truth, for beauty, for the ideal of perfection which life does not permit us to attain, though none of these things meet with the approval of the unconscious universe. (Russell, 1923, p. 3)

Russell believes that in striving for our ideals and resisting the indignation that a purposeless universe and an inevitable end presents, an individual can attain a certain freedom.

A. J. Ayer’s (2008) position presents an interesting twist in the literature. Although Ayer concludes that the question of the meaning of life is in itself meaningless, it appears that the absurdity of the question is directed at an ultimate objective purpose or meaning. Ayer argues that the meaningfulness is not a feature of some ultimate divine purpose set forth by a God or Gods especially if the human person fails to agree with them. This is agreeable as meaning in my view
involves a subjective acceptance of a worthwhile pursuit. Meaning for Ayer thus involves what the individual supposes is meaningful – it involves creating meaning for one’s self.

What can be taken away from the above analysis is that for most thinkers, there is some agreement with the idea that meaning in life is possible i.e. it is possible to achieve episodes of meaningfulness. With regards to the meaning of life, we are mostly met with either a pessimistic attitude or an appeal to something transcendent such as God, harmony and scorn (in the sense of transcending the absurdity of one’s existential fate and rebelling against it).

2.5. Theories of the Meaning in/of Life

In the previous section, I provided a historical exposition of some ideas about meaning in/of life. In this section, I go beyond ideas and analyse some of the prominent theories or conceptions of meaningfulness. These theories usually provide the framework on which various ideas of meaningfulness are understood. Since this study seeks to build African conceptions of meaning – basically from scratch, it is therefore pertinent that one understands the various contexts in which other theories of meaning make sense. Doing this will invariably provide fertile grounds for planting the seeds of what this research will consider as new and prima facie attractive African theories or conceptions of meaning (as shall be presented in the third chapter). It is important to note here that this section does not seek to express all non-African conceptions of meaning available in the literature. We shall only examine and categorise the more important and popular ones. In this regard, we shall consider some of the various forms of the Supernaturalism, Naturalism and Nihilism. I shall not try to debunk or point out what I find unattractive about these theories of meaning, as such an enterprise may not necessarily affect the overall purpose of this research.
2.5.1. Supernaturalism

In its most general definition, supernaturalism involves the idea that meaning is, in one or in various ways, tied to some relationship with an immaterial or spiritual realm, a God and/or some residents of that spiritual realm (Nozick, 1981; Craig, 1994; Poettcker, 2015). This view presents itself in various ways and we shall seek to untangle its many forms and manifestations.

The first manifestation involves what is usually referred to as a “God-purpose theory” (Metz, 2013a, p. 79). This theory can, in turn, be understood in two ways viz. what I call a whole-world view and a pure-life view. The whole-world view, as I conceive it, first assumes the existence of a spiritual creative entity (usually refers to a God or a group of Gods) that is responsible for the existence of the universe as we know it today. Considered a being in possession of at least some form of personality and rational ability, the second assumption made is that God (I now use the term to refer to one or many Gods) created the universe by its rational will and for a purpose. What this view immediately implies is a view that everything that exists serves or is meant to serve a Godly purpose (Craig, 1994). All that constitutes the physical world is driven and pursues a divine purpose and a holy end that is usually external and relatively unknown. It would seem only logical then to conclude that the meaning of human existence or human life involves a fealty to this purpose. What is not clear, however, is whether there is a need to actively tap into this purpose or whether this purpose is necessarily automatic, i.e. it is not clear whether the universe, as created to fulfil a God’s purpose, is automatically geared towards this purpose and whether the constituents of the universe are aware that they are actively participating in such a purpose or not. Nonetheless, meaning is seen as some faithfulness to God’s ultimate purpose.

The pure-life view, on the other hand, is something more specific. Again, the assumption that there exists a spiritual creative entity, responsible for the existence of the universe is prominent. However, the emphasis is not in the universe as a whole, as the purveyor of God’s purpose; meaning is here seen as inherent in an individual’s personal relationship with God and a subjective
willingness to obey and carry out his will, which might be different for different people or groups of
them (Poettcker, 2015).

The second manifestation of supernaturalism involves what is referred to in the literature as
a ‘soul-based theory’. For most individuals, there is an undoubted belief that beyond the human
physical body; there appears to be an immaterial cum spiritual component of the human person. For
the most part, this soul is usually considered as an eternal substance and also a direct expression of
an individual’s true self. This belief is not unfounded. The seemingly unexplained phenomena of
consciousness and qualia, for instance, seem to point to the existence of other component(s) of the
human body that are considered immaterial and spiritual. The soul-based theory taps into this
assumption and claims that what is meaningful generally involves having a soul as well as pursuing
any and all those ends that generally edify the soul. For the religious versions of this theory,
achieving meaningfulness may also mean the pursuit of those acts and the moral state of mind that
enables a proper transition of one’s soul to an eternal bliss. Sometimes, the drive towards this
eternal bliss ensures an escape from the absurdity that the physical world represents. Metz makes
this clear when he states that ‘one common argument for the soul-centred theory is that life would
be meaningless if the injustices of this world were not rectified in another world’ (Metz, 2013a, p.
124). In this sense, meaning would then subsist in the existence of a soul and one that is immortal.
Thus, what gives life meaning is predicated on our investment in something permanent and
immortal – in this case the soul – rather than something that is fleeting and brief (Morris, 1992;
Fischer, 1994).

Supernaturalism speaks to both understandings of meaningfulness viz. meaning in life and
the meaning of life. This is so because by engaging in those activities that serve God’s purpose, we
achieve those instances of meaning necessary for us to speak about meaning in life. Also, we can
also appeal to that purpose for the coherence that would tie those instances of meaning together and
then potentially allow us to speak about supernaturalism in terms of the meaning of life, whether in
terms of the achievement of coherence or the achievement of a set goal.
2.5.2. Naturalism

Naturalism as a theory of meaning, broadly construed, sees meaning as generally derivable whether or not there exists a spiritual realm or soul. This view sees meaning as possible even if one considers life from a purely materialistic perspective. Metz divides naturalism into two main sub-categories viz. subjectivism and objectivism (Metz, 2013a; Metz, 2013b).

Subjectivism as a naturalist theory of meaning can be understood in roughly two interrelated ways – as an expression and as an impression. First, as an expression, subjectivism views meaning as not only derived from acts stemming from the individual but also from his personal acceptance of those acts as particularly meaningful. Thus, whereas an individual may subjectively donate to the poor, or fall in love, those acts only elevate themselves to meaningfulness insofar as the individual accepts or views those acts or events as purveyors of meaningfulness. As an ‘impression’ however, subjective naturalism involves the view that meaningfulness is derived from the personal satisfaction one feels in achieving a purpose and may vary from person to person (Frankfurt, 1988; Hooker, 2008; Metz, 2013b; Calhoun, 2015; Visak, 2017).

Objectivism, on the other hand, is the view that meaningfulness exists outside and independent of the subjective individual. As Metz states, properties such as ‘morality and creativity are widely held instances of actions that confer meaning on life while trimming toenails and eating snow… are not’ (Metz, 2013b). Objectivism, according to Metz, can be categorised into pure-objectivism, a view that subjective mental states play no part in the achievement of meaningfulness. Meaningfulness is derived only from engaging in objective properties such as creativity, justice, power and transcending human nature etc. (Nietzsche, 2006; Metz, 2013b), a cosmic purpose (Agada, 2015), goodness and/or reward (Audi, 2005), etc. Hybrid versions of objectivism, on the other hand, generally accept an interplay between subjective attractiveness and objective attractiveness. An example of this view is Susan Wolf’s love-based theory of meaningfulness, where for meaning to arise, the agent must love something worth loving. Unlike egotistic reasons
for action, meaningful actions that are fuelled by love do not always benefit the subject who is loving. In fact, a majority of these actions are carried out for the sake of the object of love (Wolf, 2010, pp. 4-5).

2.5.3. Nihilism

Nihilism, first of all, is a theory of meaninglessness. It is important for the reader not to conflate nihilism with views that seem to find the question of meaning as incapable of possessing any truth function (Habermas, 1983). Whereas the latter concerns itself with the formal logical structure of the question itself, the former smacks of something different – a rational acknowledgement of a void (a lack of meaningfulness) and an emotion (usually a certain despair, and pessimism). Nihilism generally involves two concessions, viz. a rejection of the claim that a supernatural realm actually exists and second, an acceptance of life’s futility.

As I have earlier alluded to in my examination of supernaturalism, for most humans there is nothing more intimately true, for which we aspire to, than the spiritual or supernatural. In our deep acknowledgement of our consciousness, which manifests itself in our belief in a spiritual soul, our search for a divine being that is responsible for the order and chaos that the universe represents, or our dissatisfaction with the imperfections of the physical world and a hope for a better one, which manifests in our beliefs in a spiritual realm where all is perfect, we are led to find meaning beyond the physical. This view still holds value in some Western, Oriental and African views of meaning (as I shall show in the subsequent chapter).

However, the renaissance of science and the vast improvements in scientific knowledge have led to an encroachment of scientific explanatory borders into the realms of what was previously believed to be in the purview of the metaphysical and spiritual. Astrophysical and neuroscientific claims/discoveries provide some compelling arguments against any claim to supernaturalism that allows for the belief in the actual existence of spiritual entities or a spiritual realm – providing explanatory models (generally with reference to material realities) for those
beliefs and presuppositions that were initially thought of as only explainable by reference to the spiritual. Thus, it seems more attractive today to explain, for instance, the soul and/or mind or a divinely created and purposeful universe in terms of the human brain and the purposeless expansion of the universe from a single point, respectively. For most nihilists (Russell, 1923), the purposelessness of the universe and the seeming non-existence of a God or Gods capable of inserting an underlying meaning for the universe or more specifically, human existence, only suggests that meaningfulness is an impossibility.

The second manifestation of nihilism is expressed in much more personal terms. The attractiveness of a neurophilosophical outlook as an explanatory model for phenomena such as the mind, the self or a soul inevitably revokes any recourse to any soul-purpose theory of meaning that is based on the belief in the actual existence of souls and, by extension, permits a drive towards meaninglessness. In denying the existence of an immaterial (and potentially eternal) soul or other such related supposed phenomena, it becomes only obvious that an individual’s death generally expresses a plunge into oblivion and nothingness (we shall examine this in detail in Chapter Four). Non-existence and the nothingness and oblivion that that presupposes, as well as the inevitability of death, only registers on the intellect of the dying individual the futility of his pursuits and in the intellect of the individual who is yet to die the futility that is to come. These nihilistic tendencies and the anguish that such thoughts elicit is sufficiently expressed in the lamentations of Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes), Arthur Schopenhauer (1851), Albert Camus (1955), Thomas Nagel (1979; Nagel, 1986), Raymond Martin (1993), etc. Although subjective naturalists (and even some nihilists) acknowledge the possibility of attaining meaning in life, such an achievement only becomes ultimately futile as one draws nearer to, or contemplates on, death. It is only natural that an individual involved in such contemplations ponders the meaningfulness of any derived meaning, as such meaningfulness only empties into nothingness.
All in all, we see some similarities between some of these approaches and the African approach. As we shall see in the next chapter, two African approaches to meaning share similar tendencies to the supernatural account.
Chapter 3.

3.1. African Metaphysical Thought: What We Mean and Why It Is Important

As I begin the discourse on what, if anything, can and does constitute an African conception of the meaning of life, I recognise the need to engage properly with the modes of thinking and beliefs prevalent in Africa. Like I have stated in my introduction, by the delineation ‘Africa(n)’, I refer to traditional Africa(n) and by ‘traditional’ I mean those beliefs that belong to the long-held thought-systems of precolonial Africans. This is to enable the reader to immerse him/herself in the African thought system(s) and avoid the prejudices that may arise from analysing African beliefs with non-African lenses. With regards to the specific discussions in this research, I find it necessary to elucidate appropriately the underlying metaphysical and logical thinking in African thought, as this is deeply intertwined with any talk of meaning arising from an African perspective.

I further reiterate the fact that when I speak of African conceptions or views of ‘X’, I do not necessarily imply that ALL Africans believe or propound certain specific ways of understanding and interpreting reality. It also doesn’t imply that only Africans (can) believe these ideas. Indeed, there are Africans who do not share the same belief-paradigm usually associated with African modes of thought, depending on the matter spoken about. When I speak of African thought systems or African conceptions of ‘X’, I mean those traditional ideas and modes of thinking that most Africans have been generally inclined to accept – it simply implies those major paradigms and philosophical trends that pervade most indigenous African societies.

The general description of what metaphysics is, for most laypersons and even some students of philosophy, built on the famous misinterpretation of Andronicus’ labelling of Aristotle’s first philosophy. Rather than understand the terms meta physika literally meaning ‘after the works on physics’, Andronicus’ labelling was misrepresented as dealing with issues beyond the realm of the physical. This famous (mis)interpretation, has, perhaps inadvertently, helped in representing
metaphysics as mainly a discourse on non-material realities – things beyond the physical. Indeed, for most individuals, metaphysics is closer to systematic voodoo than it is to a scientific enterprise. Perhaps, a similar sort of thinking enabled the radical rejections of metaphysics by scholars such as David Hume and the logical positivists. Metaphysics is however not mere esoteric thinking; it subsists as a discipline, one that seeks to address issues that are considered fundamental in our understanding of reality in all its glory. In addressing questions such as the nature of being, existence, causality etc., the metaphysician’s aim is to create a holistic understanding of what reality fundamentally is and a holistic understanding of how the universe works.

Now, what one considers to be reality is both objective and relative at the same time. It is objective in the sense that what is real—by this I mean all existent realities in whatever forms they may subsist—remains alive, out there and independent of sentience. It is relative in the sense that we cannot perceive all forms of reality at the same time but can perceive only those realities common to our personal spaces. This sort of relativistic-realism enables the type of thinking that can validate or allow contextual and/or particularistic forms of metaphysics to survive. As scholars, we can make sense of only those realities we perceive and thus we seek to understand these realities how we perceive them. If we can make sense of only those realities before us, then it may not be far-fetched to assume that every metaphysician can only try to understand those realities common to their geographical or personal space. If we further agree that reality is not spread out in the same way and in equal measure in every single geographical space, then it may be safe to assume that each geographical space or context may possess realities peculiar to it and that any understanding of reality can be expressed only in relation to those peculiar realities and rarely anything more—I choose to agree with this line of thinking. If this is so then one may not be wrong to think of ‘African metaphysics’, ‘Oriental metaphysics’ etc. because the realities and understanding of these realities may overlap and also differ amongst individuals depending on their perspectives and contexts. This is not a claim that necessarily suggests that African metaphysics would not make sense if reality were the same in Africa as it is in, say, Asia. Perhaps one can argue that beyond the
peculiarities (or lack thereof) inherent in any geographical domain, specific cultural idiosyncrasies can always allow a specific way of thinking about reality.

For the African, reality is perceived in a simple and, yet, much different way than it is in many other contexts and cultures. Knowing or understanding the way Africans understand reality is, therefore, an obvious prerequisite for understanding how Africans relate with reality and understand their place in it. This, in turn, is necessary for any understanding of what the African recognises as his place in the scheme of things (i.e. his place in relation to reality) and ultimately, what she is inclined to think makes her life meaningful.

3.2. The Foundation of African Metaphysical Thinking

Like the unfortunate misrepresentation of what metaphysics is, due to the misinterpretation of Andronicus’ labelling methods, African metaphysics has been plagued with its fair share of misrepresentations. Like Levy-Bruhl (1932), who had never set foot in Africa, it is perhaps more convenient to make unjustified assumptions about a group based on hearsay and non-contextualised tidbits of fact. For African metaphysics, the case is nearly the same. For non-initiates (i.e. individuals who are not scholars of African metaphysics), it is easy to imagine that African metaphysics entails nothing more than treatises on juju, witchcraft and ancient religious myths – indeed, some African scholars do appear to think that this is the case. However, that sort of thinking is not even a largely accurate assumption and is one that ought not to be taken seriously. In describing what constitutes reality for most Africans as well as their understandings of it, what is immediately discovered is a sort of metaphysics grounded in what I consider to be a benign faithfulness to a curious type of empiricism – one that incorporates both the non-physical and the physical in a monistic understanding of reality.

Western thought is rife with various sorts of absolute distinctions and bifurcation. From the bifurcation of substance and accident, spirit and matter, mind and body, etc., the dualistic conditioning that so engages Western metaphysics seems to elicit a certain disjunctive character that
only separates reality into cocoons that should either be accepted as true or rejected as false. This intuitively seems to create a fragmented view of the world that encourages the very real possibility of some parts of reality being misunderstood or erringly ill-considered as non-aspects of reality – the world of quantum mechanics is a good example of this fact. Not only that, the discriminatory mindset that the bifurcation of certain aspects of reality – as Asouzu (2007) warns us of – seems to point at least to the difference in perspectives especially as it relates to an understanding of the fundamental nature of reality. For the African metaphysician, that sort of bifurcating mindset, prevalent in Western thought, appears to be quite unnecessary, and it is largely absent in African thought. Reality is roughly understood as an integrated whole of different aspects, complementing each other in such a way that all aspects of reality remains indispensable (Asouzu, 2004; Ijiomah, 2014).

Ifeanyi Menkiti buttresses the African disenchantment with bifurcating attitudes (especially when dealing with the nature of the universe) when he says:

…in so far as the village was concerned, when it comes to body–mind distinctions, the looseness or ambiguity regarding what constitutes the domain of the physical, and what the domain of the mental, does not necessarily stem from a kind of an ingrown limitation of the village mind, acrudeness or ignorance, unschooled, regarding the necessity of properly differentiating things, one from the other, but is rather an attitude that is well considered given the ambiguous nature of the physical universe, especially that part of it which is the domain of sentient biological organisms, within which include persons described as constituted by their bodies, their minds, and whatever else the post-Cartesian elucidators believe persons are made of or can ultimately be reduced to. My view on the matter is that the looseness or ambiguity in question is not necessarily a sign of indifference to applicable distinctions demanded by an epistemology, but is itself an epistemic stance,
namely: do not make distinctions when the situation does not call for the
distinctions that you make. (Menkiti, 2004b, pp. 124-125)

Within the context of this complementary – roughly the view that realities exist as interdependent
variables or missing links – monism, we are introduced to the sort of curious empiricism I had
earlier mentioned. It is because of the lack of a bifurcating attitude that reality is seen as a monistic
whole of interrelated properties. These properties are viewed as equally valid (with regards to their
existence) and essentially devoid of the grand distinction of matter and spirit – a distinction that is
ever present in much of Western philosophy and/or metaphysics. Nelson Ukwamedua further
buttresses this point when he avers:

Reality for the African is parallel to the dualism in Platonic tradition
recognizing the material and the spiritual realms of being. Unlike the Platonic
consideration, the African considers both worlds as real and not mere
shadows and therefore all the things in both worlds are beings in African
thinking. (Ukwamedua, 2014, p. 32)

There is thus a strong belief in much of what constitutes the corpus of the African metaphysical
thought that the distinctions between matter (I use this term – along with material, visible, physical
and material – in reference to those aspects of reality that are readily available to our raw senses)
and spirit (I use this term – along with invisible, non-physical and immaterial – in reference to those
aspects of reality that may not necessarily be accessible to the raw senses but are nonetheless
purportedly known through their varied effects on reality or by revelation from entities that are
supposedly higher up in the hierarchy of beings) are not as clearly defined as one would generally
presuppose. Reality is here seen as a composite of various types of existent realities whose major or
essential property is the fact that they are interdependent realities. They are known to exist by virtue
of the fact that the ripples of their effects as they interact with other forms of reality can be felt and
seen to manifest in our everyday lives – it is precisely because of the idea that these effects are
experienced that most Africans accept, recognise and acknowledge them. Spirit or mind is not
considered as distinct *types* of reality but are rather seen as distinct *aspects* of reality. This distinction here noted is important. As *types* of reality, entities that are deemed spiritual are often understood as being far removed from what we may term the ‘material world’, such that any understanding of an alleged interaction between both realms (i.e. the spiritual versus the physical) is deemed either impossible, miraculous and/or a figment of the imagination. As *aspects*, however, those entities delineated as spiritual are understood to be very real and also naturally acting components of the Universe.

Thus, within traditional African thought systems, bifurcations such as the spirit-matter dichotomy are not only unnecessary and untenable, they are non-existent. It would therefore be no surprise to most traditional Africans if the spiritual is seen to act on the physical or, more interestingly, if the spiritual is offered as an explanation for certain physical events. Such an intervention or explanation would not be regarded as miraculous (at best) as it is already considered as natural a phenomenon as typing on a computer. The spiritual is in most cases also seen as the animating component of material realities – a type of reality, akin to energy, that can also be manipulated given the right circumstances and personalities (Omeregbe, 1990).

The distinction between invisible forces and invisible agents can be drawn here. Whereas the latter describes those spiritual/invisible forms of reality that possess some form of subjective personality, the former describes those aspects of reality that may not possess a subjective personality but are nonetheless an existent reality. Lesser gods, spirits, ancestors etc., are examples of invisible agents that possess subjective personalities and agency. The vital force inherent in every individual for instance or the power released by the sacrifice of an animal or a human person, or the forces that allow the manipulation of certain phenomena, are the sort of things one might consider invisible realities that are not in themselves agents.

To further buttress this lack of bifurcation, I am inclined to think that for the African, spirit and matter are more than two sides of the same coin. It would be, in my view, safe to assume that African metaphysical understanding goes beyond this Spinoza-type parallelism to embrace a much
simpler yet profound mode of understanding – reality as one complemented whole. This sort of thinking takes a step back to understand these two aspects of realities as not two sides of the same coin (as most Western thinkers are inclined to bifurcate), but as one coin, plain and simple. In this regard, one cannot help but acknowledge the relational fluid interplay that exists between matter and spirit in African ontology (Idoniboye, 1973, pp. 84-85; Ruch & Anyanwu, 1981). This point is further reiterated by Viriri and Mungwini (2009, p. 181) who opine that:

The puzzle of how the immaterial spiritual entities come to interact and continue to influence the activities of the living does not arise for the Africans as it does for those who subscribe to the mechanistic view of the world. The idea of causality is not difficult to understand once one has understood the fact that the Africans believe in immortality of the spiritual being. Spiritual beings are very much counted among the living as important participants in shaping everything that may happen and by their very nature they now occupy a better position in determining events and influencing them, as they are no longer subject to the limitations of space and time.

While it may be ridiculous to some that most traditional Africans acknowledge such an interaction, Jonathan Chimakonam (2012) informs us, in a quite robust manner, the underlying logic driving this belief. For him, much of what is considered African science or metaphysics operates on the foundation of a three-valued logic. Although three-valued logic is nothing new and has also been expressed in Western philosophy, for instance, the point of variance lies in the expression of the third truth function or value – in Western philosophy, the third value is labelled ‘undetermined’ and in Africa philosophy, the third value is labelled ‘complemented’ (Chimakonam, 2012, p. 12). A complemented value is one that generally expresses itself as a situation where ‘two standard values which are treated as contraries, come to a functional perfection of mutual complementarity in the third value called the complemented’ (Chimakonam, 2012, p. 13). Traditional African ideas about causality, for instance, express this sort of logic since causal explanations are best understood in
both empirical and spiritual terms at the same time (Horton, 1970; 1982; Menkiti, 2004b; Lajul, 2017).

This idea is useful in understanding how reality expresses itself to the African. In explaining the existence of spiritual and physical realities, the appeal to a dualistic framework (as is common in Western thought) is abandoned for a more robust understanding that sees reality as physical, non-physical and/or both. The complemented value (i.e. third value) in Chimakonam’s logic explains that reality can manifest itself as both physical and non-physical and in terms of what he calls a ‘functional perfection of mutual complementarity’. Thus, it is not strange for the African that realities with physical properties, non-physical properties or both can exist, and that interaction/manipulation among/of these realities is possible irrespective of the existential categories the manipulating agent finds itself.

Metaphysically speaking, an understanding of what a complemented value implies is best expressed by Asouzu’s subtly impressive maxim which affirms that all that exists serves as a missing link of reality (Asouzu, 2004). Thus, whereas most non-African metaphysical thinkers are quick to locate tension between seemingly incompatible forms of reality – especially those whose acknowledgement involves a certain dose of contradictions – as is most prominently the case with regards to the mind-body problem, African metaphysicians are more likely to recognise all forms of reality as positive contraries that share a fluid harmonious complementary interrelatedness beyond any perceived essential differences. It is this sort of thinking that drives the way most traditional Africans are seen to understand reality.

This mode of thinking sprawls out into the everyday understanding of and interaction with reality stretching from the mundane to the profound. From simple activities such as sharing a meal with an ancestor to the complicated chants of a chief priest meant to avert a disaster, there is a deep acknowledgement of the natural relationship that exists between the material and the immaterial. However, this acknowledgement is not necessarily a blind one. It might be easy for one to think that
because of the firm belief in the natural fluid interaction between matter and spirit, any imagined spiritual phenomena or entity can pass as possessing real existence.

However, for most Africans, belief in the supernatural is grounded in some – usually empirical – evidence that seems to express or manifest itself in everyday experiences (Menkiti, 2004b). Ukwamedua sees this type of metaphysical thinking as an explanation that works and, therefore, pragmatic in character. He states:

The African concept of spirit can be considered as a pragmatic metaphysics for its strong reliability on ‘an idea, an explanation, a conception, a belief or folk wisdom’ on the basis that it works even when they fail in fulfilling the fundamental criteria of objective reality. (Ukwamedua, 2014, p. 32)

Ukwamedua’s analysis, on closer inspection, seems to suggest that traditional African metaphysics simply draws its powers from its experiential/explanatory ability and pragmatic stance as it seeks to explain (perhaps via folk psychology) the various mysterious goings-on that surround the African. Thus, as a ‘metaphysics of the gap’, traditional African metaphysics only seeks to insert the spiritual as explanatory causes. Whether Ukwamedua’s assertion is accurate or not, there is no doubt that most Africans understand reality this way and often point to some form of experience or physical evidence as proof of spiritual influence in worldly matters. Most phenomena, especially unexplained phenomena, are usually attributed to the whimsical influence of spiritual forces. As Chris Akpan opines:

In this type of world, events are determined by the will of spiritual beings, the operation of automatic forces, and the self-willed actions of men and other animals, which follow in orderly and comprehensible sequence. The traditional African is usually influenced by this conception of the world in his explanation or prediction of events. He may refer to the Supreme Being, the spirits, deities, ancestors or evil forces as the cause of certain events. He may
also point to the individual as the cause of his own problem. (Akpan, 2011, p. 725)

This sort of thinking seems to underlie the obsession and the importance most Africans place on what I refer to as the ‘why question’. Unlike in Western metaphysics, where explanations seem to make sense (at least principally) in reference to causal relationships, African metaphysics seems to go beyond that sort of explanation to ask ‘why’ it is so that that sort of causal relationship is possible. Thus, in answering the question, ‘why is Mr. “A” dead?’, or as Advice Viriri and Pascah Mungwini probe, ‘…why must a particular event happen to a particular person, at a particular place in a given time? Why to that specific individual and not any other?’ (2009, p. 181). It is not enough to recount the pathology of the disease that may have afflicted Mr A, or the pure case of bad luck or terrible chance that any other type of fatal calamity may have represented. Sometimes such proximate explanations even appear unnecessary. The question considered most important is the question of why he died, on whose account he may have died and the repercussions of his death for societal harmony. At the heart of this type of ‘why’ questioning is the idea of a teleological or purpose-driven universe and a somewhat rigid rejection of happenstance (Teffo & Roux, 2003).

Thus, there is a widespread acceptance of social causality, inspired by the social nature of African metaphysics (Teffo & Roux, 2003, pp. 197-198) that tends to see every event as serving some purpose and/or representing a manifestation of consequences related to one’s positive or negative interactions with the universe. The complementary intermingling of realities enables an understanding of reality as having relations that necessarily influence and affect other forms of reality. Here, the universe is seen as a world wide web of interconnected realities whose actions are acknowledged as having wide-reaching effect in the expressed totality of reality. In reference to the terms ‘world wide web’, I do not refer to the ordinary usage of the term in relation to the internet. I instead allude to the underlying interconnectedness that the underlying term may imply in African thinking. Positive or negative vibrations in any string or web of reality always sends a ripple through reality and usually with an exponential increase in effect (Asouzu, 2004; Asouzu, 2013).
Thus, manslaughter by an individual, for instance, may exert cataclysmic calamity on not only her or her family but, more worryingly, on the whole community (Achebe, 2009).

These ideas of what constitutes the proper character of reality from an African perspective may seem just fantastic to some or, at best, in need of review – especially in light of the current global scientific push – but my interest in outlining African metaphysical thinking may not require a deep inquiry into the validity of most of the claims outlined above – at least not yet. In engaging in a proper philosophical or scientific inquiry, there is no doubt that the baggage of our previous prejudices weigh heavily in the way we view things and, ultimately, the way we judge the way we view things. In briefly outlining the basic logic of African metaphysical thinking, my aim is to recalibrate the reader’s mind to understand the African mode of thought by helping her understand the foundational ideas that inform the particular mode of thought that is here described as African. In doing so, one is given the proper pedestal to understand why most Africans think the way they do.

Most of what I shall outline as African conceptions of meaning – as I shall present in subsequent sections in this chapter – deeply incorporate this sort of metaphysical thinking and it is pertinent to note that understanding the basics of African metaphysics is necessary for a proper understanding of African conceptions of meaning.

3.3. African Conceptions of Meaning

In outlining the foundational basis of much of what is considered African thought, I have, or at the very least, tried to set us up with the proper lenses with which to understand the various African conceptions of meaning that can be hermeneutically gleaned from other related concepts in the literature. As stated, whilst introducing this research, African philosophers have seemingly neglected or perhaps ignored the question of meaning in/of life. Indeed, only a handful of African scholars have tackled the question of meaning directly, and from an African perspective. Why this is so may be for one of a couple of reasons, viz. an ignorance of the problems that asking and
answering the convoluted question of meaning poses, a downright under-appreciation of the question or a widespread acknowledgement of those beliefs that renders the question of meaning unnecessary and its answers self-evident. To claim ignorance of the problem is to claim that Africans rarely rationalised about what may be described as a potent and obvious existential question – one that cannot readily be ignored. It may be possible that there is an under-appreciation of the subject matter, but I am inclined to assume that any under-appreciation or any lack of philosophising about the question of meaning from an African perspective is more likely due to an acknowledgment of the lack of necessity in answering a question whose answer is neatly interwoven into the everyday lives of the African. Whatever the reasons, there is no doubt that there is a gap in the literature as far as African philosophy is concerned and it is necessary for one to fill that gap by properly articulating what most Africans are generally inclined to think constitutes the meaning of/in life.

In scouring through related literature regarding the question of the meaning of/in life from an African perspective, three distinct theories suggest themselves as possible African conceptions of meaning. These include: the African God purpose theory, the vital force theory and the communal normative function theory, and I shall seek to analyse them presently, in some detail and evaluate them further in the next chapter.

3.3.1. The African God Purpose Theory

I begin by stating that the God purpose theory is neither new nor a solely African point of view. However, what allows for the prefix ‘African’ in the title are the unique ideas generally shared by most Africans about God and what Its (I use the term ‘It’ to denote a genderless God) purposes may be and may seek to serve, which generally makes the theory of meaningfulness based on these ideas different from those shared by other peoples of the world. As a matter of clarity, the God purpose theory, as generally conceived, is the view that the idea of God, a set of purposes meted out by It (whatever they may be) and/or a virtuous relationship with It is necessary for human life to enjoy the accolade of meaningfulness. This point is important because the God purpose
theory, generally speaking, does not presuppose the existence of a god or a set of purposes set forth by God. It only acknowledges god as a necessary prerequisite for meaningfulness. Metz buttresses this important point by stating:

…purpose theory implies nothing about whether God in fact has a purpose or whether God even exists. Of course, many theists do hold purpose theory, but it would be possible for, say, atheistic existentialists to hold it as well. Supernaturalism is a view about what would confer meaning on life and does not imply that these conditions obtain. (Metz, 2013a, p. 80)

Thus, as Metz also concludes, raising arguments about the possible non-existence of God cannot serve as veritable critiques of the God purpose theory, as such arguments flash the spotlight on ideas that are inconsequential to the theory itself. This line of thinking is much applauded as duly logical and acceptable. However, I choose to not accept this line of thinking with regards to the context of an African God purpose theory and I shall outline my reasons presently.

In attempting to describe the views of most Africans with regards to the belief that God and/or a relationship with him is capable of conferring meaningfulness on human life and how it is so that that is possible, it is pertinent that one understands that the idea of God’s existence is so deeply entrenched in most traditional African views that one can argue that it is an important belief in much of what is traditional African metaphysical thinking. Pantaleon Iroegbu (1995) buttresses this assumption when he states:

So far, nobody to our knowledge, has disputed the claim that in African traditional societies, there were no atheists. The existence of God is not taught to children, the saying goes. This means that the existence of God is not learnt, for it is innate and obvious to all. God is ubiquitously involved in the life and practices of the people. (Iroegbu, 1995, p. 359)

Indeed, knowledge of the Supreme Being is clear to the traditional African. It does not require a deep and intense formal theological enterprise or sacred texts documentation to experience full
flourishing. Knowledge of God is figuratively inborn and expresses itself in every aspect of traditional life (Mbiti, 1990; Ekeopara, 2005). Thus, for the African, the idea of God’s existence is not just a contingent factor whilst considering a God purpose theory, it is an important factor. The general assumption here being that we do not account for meaning if there was a god but rather on the assumption that there is God.

So, it is possible to address the African God purpose theory with God as a factor and without the contingency that Metz (2013a) alludes to in his book. The fixation here is not about what Godly conditions ought to exist for meaningfulness to be achieved but rather on those Godly conditions that do exist which allows for meaningfulness to subsist – insofar as we assume that God exists.

Thus, beyond the bi-conditional propositions and unlike the sort of wishful thinking that the conventional God purpose theories allow, the African God purpose theory makes claims on what is thought of as available to the intellect as existent realities – in this case, the existence of God and Its relationship with the world.

3.3.1.1. The Nature of God

In order to show how God factors in with regards to meaningfulness from an African perspective, I think it is necessary to describe the notion of God in African thought systems. This task is not an easy task, as it is a difficult process to surgically remove those notions of God that have been infused into the African notion of God by the influences of the two major religions from the Middle-east, viz. Islam and Christianity, brought into Africa as precursors to colonialism.

One major idea in African metaphysics that allows for a belief in the existence of God is the notion of being in African thought. In Western scholarship, it is easy to allocate terms like being and nothingness in respect to realities that exist and the idea of non-existence. In acknowledging these two concepts, Western metaphysics, and indeed science, has been plagued with the problem of answering the question of why there is being and not nothingness, how it is possible that being
can arise from non-being, as well as what the origin of God is. In African metaphysics, however, the idea of nothingness can be considered as lost to the African thinker. In talking about opposites, it is believed that unlike Western metaphysics, which suggests an acknowledgement of the possibility of being and nothingness, African metaphysics rather suggests an acknowledgement of *being* and *being-alone*. The reason for this view lies buried in the African understanding of God as eternal and also the progenitor of the universe (Mbiti, 1990, pp. 30-40; Mbiti, 2012). Acknowledging God as eternal and creator points to a being that must necessarily exist even without the existence of the universe. God’s eternity thus negates the idea of nothingness as God must necessarily exist. The term ‘being-alone’ therefore becomes apt. In rejecting the idea of nothingness and incorporating the idea of being-alone as its replacement, the African thinker generally circumvents the questions posed earlier about being and non-being. Thus, one cannot ask why there is something and not nothing or how being can manifest from non-being. This is because, for the African, it is assumed that being must necessarily always exist either as being-alone or being-with-others (with the former a supremely unattractive prospect).

What the above means is that God, for the African, must be necessarily eternal insofar as by God it is meant that Supreme Being beyond which there is none other. With the above in mind, it only becomes easy for the African to acknowledge God (the Supreme Being) as that necessary being from which other forms of reality flow. This allows for a mostly pantheistic view of reality, where all forms of reality exude a divine character as extensions and progenies of God’s essence and omnipresence (Parrinder, 1974).

In most African traditional religions, there exists a hierarchy of beings with inanimate objects such as stones, mountains, rivers etc., at the bottom of the rung; living things such as plants and animals a step higher; human persons a step higher; ancestors and spirits representing the next step; minor gods and goddesses a step higher; and God at the apex of this hierarchy (Menkiti, 2004a, p. 329). This hierarchy demonstrates not only the top-down flow of importance at each level of being, it also shows the flow of authority, vitality and power. Beyond this, one can also see the
top-down composition of life-force inherent in every reality with God as the source of life-force and every other aspect of reality sharing in this life-force as per its place in the hierarchy of beings. In this sense, whereas inanimate objects do possess life-force, they do not possess as much life-force as plants, animals, humans and so on. This hierarchy is important, as it shows a person’s place in the world and how it is expected that s/he interacts with other beings in the world.

The distance in relation between God and humans (as expressed in the hierarchy of being and the role of lesser gods, spirits and ancestors in affecting/sustaining the harmony in the universe), in my mind, intuitively evokes a deistic understanding of God (Mbiti, 1990). One can further argue that it is rarely the case that Africans directly invoke God’s power in resolving problems that may afflict them. One might intercede to an ancestor or seek the help of any or all minor gods in the vast pantheon of spirits and minor gods, all of who have specified functions, but it is not always the case that the Supreme Being is ever invoked except in worship, praise or thanksgiving. As Mbiti puts it, God’s activities are mostly referenced in relation to these smaller divinities who are thought of as creations of God and the personification of God’s activities (Mbiti, 1990, pp. 74-75). As intermediaries between humans and the Supreme Being, the immediate concerns and imbalances in the universe are dealt with by these lesser deities in relation to their functions and in accordance with their abilities. Thus, the supreme deity is usually worshipped for its greatness and role as creator but is largely unknown or accessible to the human person. Indeed, God can be conceived here as some sort of transcendent being whose nature is too great and unfathomable.

3.3.1.2. God’s Purpose

In acknowledging a deistic stance with regards to an African understanding of God, it may be difficult to ascertain exactly the nature of the purpose a largely inaccessible God can confer on a human person. However, the hierarchy alluded to in the previous paragraph, and a general
understanding of the workings of the universe, seem to show a pattern – one that can serve as a clue as to what might constitute an African God purpose theory.

In conventional non-African theological circles, the purpose that God confers on an individual is generally subsumed under a greater goal that involves the destiny of the universe. What this goal might be is a matter of speculation amongst various religious scholars. The African God-purpose theory shows similar leanings but there are differences with regards to God’s purpose for the universe – something I believe is not necessarily a matter for speculation. Within the corpus of African thought, God confers meaning in two distinct ways, viz through specific destinies and through natural law and order. These two methods of conferring meaning are deeply intertwined and are all geared towards a grand purpose as we shall see in the subsequent paragraphs.

Segun Gbadegesin (Gbadegesin, 2004) presents a theory of destiny from the Yoruba perspective that seems to suggest that prior to one’s birth, an individual is given a pre-ordained destiny that is specific to that individual. Although it is not clear whether the individual chooses that destiny on her own accord or has one imposed on her, what is clear is that the Supreme Being (called Oludumare) is responsible for creating and offering up said destinies (Gbadegesin, 2004, pp. 313-316).

Destiny, as used in this context, must be distinguished from fate(fulness). Fate would involve a serious type of determinism that would imply an inability to control or affect certain or all outcomes that affect one’s life. The absence of freewill in a fateful conception of destiny is immediately at odds with real-world experiences and the best interpretation of an African conception of destiny. Intuitively, we are sometimes quick to point out that certain individuals – usually successful ones – have fulfilled their destiny and in the same manner, we are quick to point out that certain others have not fulfilled their destinies – perhaps, unsuccessful and/or non-moral persons. What is more curious is that we intuitively agree that it is possible for one to choose to try to accomplish one’s destiny, choose not to try to accomplish their destiny or even choose to cut short the pursuit of that destiny and/or choose to restart that pursuit. What the above suggests is
that whereas we can think of destiny as a predetermined path, it does not necessarily follow that freewill is denied and as such destiny cannot be thought of in terms of fatefulness, especially in the context which it is used in this thesis (Balogun, 2007, p. 123).

Destiny, as I imagine it, is more akin to a pre-set end, that is intimate and specific to an individual and generally involves a life-long pursuit of that end or at the very least a pursuit that takes most of an individual’s life. Destiny in this context would not involve a series of specific events that are meant to occur in the life of an individual but would rather involve some predetermined purpose, which an individual may, as a matter of freewill, decide to accomplish.

Although it is possible for one to imagine an individual personally carving out an end which s/he strives to fulfil, such an end would not count as destiny in the context which I present. This is because a self-willed end is prone to alteration and modification whereas a destiny suggests a purpose that is basically unchangeable. In deciding how destiny is acquired, it would not be far-fetched to assume that an individual’s destiny would come from something that is not only external to the individual, but also, something that is ontologically superior to the individual. Intuitively, it would be hard to accept that the specificity and permanence of destinies is so for no reason at all. It might be safer to assume that destinies are given for a greater purpose that is outside the overall purview of the individual on whom such a destiny is specified. If we accept the argument that an even greater purpose predicates the need for destinies, then one must also accept that destinies are meted out by something external and greater than the human person for which this greater purpose is clear. Destinies are then beyond the scope of even the individual’s transcendence and mostly known to the divine. If destinies do exist, I am willing to accept this line of thought.

The African theory of destiny is mainly derived from myths, folk stories and legends, but it is possible to extract from these myths certain beliefs that can constitute a theory of meaning. Gbadegesin agrees that, in most traditional literature, there is a lack of consensus with regards to whether a destiny is chosen by the individual prior to his/her existence in the material world or whether it is imposed on the individual (Gbadegesin, 2004, p. 315). It would be sensible to imagine
that destinies are imposed (it is hard to imagine an it, as Menkiti puts it, possessing the proper normative character sufficient enough to be able to choose something as prevailing as one’s own destiny), but that individuals possess enough freewill to accept, fulfil, reject or disregard one’s destiny (this does not negate the fact that it was assigned). Gbadegesin also draws attention to the fact that destinies can be good as well as bad, and the supposition that one can freely ignore a bad destiny and choose to do good instead, lends credence (in Gbadegesin’s mind) to the fact that (at least from one perspective) destinies are alterable (Gbadegesin, 2004, p. 316). I do not, however, think this is the case. Ignoring a bad destiny to do good is similar to ignoring a good destiny to do bad things. In both instances, it is not the case that one’s destiny itself has been altered – it is instead the case that one’s destiny has been ignored, not altered. It does not change the fact or content of a given destiny – it only relegates it to the background.

Since it is absurd and also contradictory in some sense to assume that prior to an individual’s conception in the physical world, that individual existed as a physical entity, who, in the presence of God, received and housed a non-physical destiny (and indeed no one has suggested that), we can then allow the assumption that only a personalised spiritual essence belonging to the individual, about to be conceived, can receive and house a destiny.

On the question of how meaning is derived in the context of the destiny theory, it would not be wrong to assume that destinies are given by the Supreme Being and imposed upon the individual (for reasons that were outlined previously) as a necessary facet of the greater purpose (that is not known to him/her) and the grander scheme of things. One’s destiny is mostly only specific to that individual and perhaps similar to those of others in terms of a similar variation. Whereas it is true that destinies are part of a greater meaning, it is possible for one to ignore that greater meaning, in terms of its relevance to whatever meaning one may derive in the pursuit of his/her destiny, in itself.

The nature of destiny can either be good or bad and it is strange for one to accept that that which is supposed to confer meaning as granted by a seemingly perfect Supreme Being can possess an immoral character. To get around this one might argue against the very idea of morality itself,
essentially denying the existence of good or bad, but this is at odds with the common-sense understanding of morality in traditional African thought. The very idea of the pursuit of personhood through a communal normative function rejects this line of thinking, at least in an African context (Gbadegesin, 2004, p. 318). Perhaps, one can argue that the idea of ‘bad’ or an ‘evil’ destiny can readily fit into the greater purpose without hurting the idea of a probably ‘good’ Supreme Being, if one agrees that a purposely bad destiny allows for a greater good that would outweigh whatever disharmony the previous evil may have caused.

It is in this sense that one would consider, for instance, the evil of the betrayal of Jesus by Judas Iscariot in Christian lore as a very necessary evil – an evil redefines itself as a good when we realise that in Christian lore it led to the salvation of the world. Or in traditional African settings, the evil of human sacrifice (which negatively touches on the most supreme of all African values – the sanctity of human life) in relation to the benefits that such an act would invariably bring to the community. I am inclined to adopt this latter argument as a possible response to the existence of ‘bad’ destinies in African thought. I am also willing to accept that it is possible that these bad destinies can and do confer meaning on an individual, as there is nothing to suggest that conveyors of meaning must as a matter of necessity possess a morally good character as opposed to a perverse or even a non-moral character. This is not to discountenance the fact that sometimes individuals do perform bad acts that do not tally with their destinies, which may require that the individual performs good acts.

The fulfilment of one’s destiny would be considered a source of great admiration and esteem both by the individual who has done the fulfilling and the members of his/her society who have understood that s/he has fulfilled his/her destiny. Even if we resurrect the argument that bad destinies are not ends worth any sort of esteem or admiration, the idea that if one understands bad destinies as forerunners to a greater good (as I have previously explained), especially with regards to an increased communal harmony in relation to what would have been the case if such a bad destiny was not accomplished, would trump such an argument. Even bad destinies, I dare say,
should be worth admiration. Thus, it can be said that meaning in/of life resides precisely in our abilities to live a life that fulfils a pre-ordained destiny and a meaningless life would require a tacit rejection of one’s destiny.

God is also thought of as conferring meaning through divine laws. These laws are known through Its representatives as per the hierarchy of beings earlier alluded to in the preceding paragraphs (Idowu, 2005, pp. 186-187). These laws are meant to enable the individual to attain a fulfilled and balanced existence as obedience to these laws determines an individual’s flourishing on earth (Mbiti, 2015, p. 49). Engaging positively with others, engaging in certain rites and rituals and avoiding certain taboos and sacrilegious acts (such as suicide) are examples of these divine obligations. An individual who disobeys these laws creates an imbalance in the natural scheme of things which in turn quickly dovetails into a meaningless existence that may not only negatively affect the individual but also the world around him (Mbiti, 2015, pp. 41,52,179). Discord is thus constituted in the breaking of the laws and in the lack of fulfilment of one’s destiny (both of which are representative of God’s will). In other words, meaning and/or meaninglessness would then be tied to a willful decision to execute these obligations or not to invest in them respectively.

Meaningfulness through the observance of divine law and/or the fulfilment of destiny, it must be observed, serves a grander purpose or a greater goal that is beyond the human person. In some non-African religious circles, this ultimately boils down to a perfect reunion with the supreme deity either through the merging of the human essence or spirit with that of God, an achievement of enlightenment and/or a blissful communion with God in paradise (Edet, 2006). For the African, this ultimate purpose is a practical and an instrumental one. At the base of African metaphysical thinking is the rejection of the possibility of nothingness or nothingness and an acceptance of the idea of being-alone. Whereas it is possible to speak of being-alone, it is suggested that a being actualises an authentic existence only in relationship with another being or beings (Iroegbu, 1995; Ijiomah, 2014). It would not be far-fetched, therefore, to stretch this particular line of thinking to accommodate the relationship between God and the universe. In creating the universe, God
authenticates Its own existence in Its relationship with the world. The mutual interdependent relationship that exists here is one of legitimacy and sustenance. The need for God to properly authenticate Its existence necessitates the sustenance of the world and this necessity is the reason the universe continues to exist.

In observing the hierarchy of being as earlier stated, one sees the underlying structure of this sustenance. A closer look, however, brings to bear the metaphysical concept which drives this sustenance and ultimately the primary purpose of all that exists – harmony (Mbiti, 2015, p. 40). Harmony, as I conceive it, functions as both a verb and a noun. In other words, it is both a striving and a state of affairs. It involves the universe’s attempt (by the universe, I mean anything that constitutes a created reality) to constantly achieve the delicate balance necessary for its sustenance. This balance is important – one even observes that in most African cultures, serious taboos or blasphemous acts are usually terrible actions that affect the overall workings and harmony in the universe. Harmony thus flows from God’s need to sustain Its legitimacy and consolidate an authentic existence for Itself and the created universe. It is in that respect a necessary phenomenon.

This necessity does not however negate human freewill. In assuming a stale and automatic existence, meaning might be lost as an individual’s autonomy is sacrificed for an automatic goal or purpose that might be alien to the individual. Such an existence deprives the individual of that feeling of satisfaction or passion or yearning that might accompany any autonomous acts. In choosing whether or not to fulfil or attempt to fulfil one’s destiny or obey divine law as set forth via the lesser gods, spirits and ancestors, humans exercise their sentience and freewill. One is free to choose whatever one wills but these choices possess their own commensurate consequences depending on whether these decisions or choices promote harmony or create an imbalance. When an individual’s decision creates disharmony or an imbalance, a rebalancing act is instigated via anything ranging from a stern telling-off to a community-wide catastrophe, depending on the amount of disharmony achieved. Thus, stealing, for instance, might involve a fine of a goat (if one is repentant) or an unfruitful harvest (if one is unrepentant), and murder might involve a total
severance of communal ties or death of the individual and/or her family. The necessity of harmony is thus preserved without the loss of freewill.

Harmony as described in this light, expresses fully the mutual interdependency that is thought of, in African philosophy, to characterise our existence and mode of living. At the highest level of being, it shows the mutual interdependency between God and the universe with God sustaining the universe and the universe authenticating and legitimising God’s existence. At the lower levels, our very destinies are intertwined in such a way that achieving them creates the sort of harmony that sustains the universe and legitimises God. The African God purpose theory of meaning would, therefore, locate meaning in an individual’s ability to obey divine law and pursue her destiny in such a way that the harmony, necessary for the sustenance of Universe and the legitimisation of God, is achieved.

So, meaning in life consists of doing what God wills – whether it is by fulfilling one’s destiny or obeying God’s law – where God wills harmony, and meaninglessness would involve acting discordantly. Thus, insofar as our actions are perceived to sustain the harmony in the universe, those actions would be considered meaningful, since they catch a transcendent purpose that is beyond an individual’s animal nature viz. the harmony that legitimises God’s existence.

It is also important to note that this theory also captures our intuitions about the meaningfulness of not just positive actions but positive actions that do not augur well for the individual. Thus, for the individual who sacrifices his comfort for the persistence of harmony – like the life of Martin Luther King Jnr who died trying to end racism or the life of the soldier who knowingly meets his death so that his comrades might survive – such an act of sacrifice would be considered meaningful even if the sacrifice one’s life or at least one’s wellbeing cuts-short the individual’s ability for further attempts at harmony.

Closely related to the above is the view that acts of meaningfulness need not always involve positivity. Some discordant acts, insofar as they fulfil a divine destiny, can be considered meaningful within the purview of this theory. In such an instance, a greater good that ensures even
greater harmony is enabled by such initially discordant acts of meaning. Hence, within this view, the life of Judas Iscariot (or at least the act of his betrayal) would be captured as meaningful since his betrayal was required for the salvation of humankind. This is in contrast with other lives (like the life of Adolf Hitler) which would be considered meaningless with regards to this theory since his various acts of discord did not enable any harmony of any kind.

3.3.2. The African Soul-Centred Theory: Vital Force

In speaking of an African soul/vital force theory, I use the term ‘soul’ to refer to the immaterial aspects of the human person. Before going any further, it is pertinent to understand that the African understanding of a soul is somewhat different from other understandings of the term, e.g. the Western view of the soul. For instance, the Western view of the soul describes a purely anthropomorphised spiritual essence that generally lives on after the death of the individual. The African view, on the other hand, is somewhat different. It generally refers to the immaterial aspects of the human person. Whereas scholars such as Mbiti (1990), Oruka (1990, pp. 70-73), Crispinous Iteyo (2009) seem to agree that although the soul does possess some form of personalised identity as well as the capacity to will and does transcend death, it is also the case that what is referred to as the soul for Africans operates not in a heavenly realm but on earth as we know it. Indeed, for most Africans, all aspects of reality possess some non-physical component and one can think of the level of sentience as dependent on that being’s position in the hierarchy of beings (Iroegbu, 1995; Agada, 2015)

3.3.2.1. African Soul/Vital Force Theory of Meaning

It is important to note at this juncture that the soul referred to here would be the human soul and not the soul of other types of animals and/or (maybe) plants. From a general understanding of what a soul is, the first thing that comes to mind is an acknowledgement of the nature of the soul, as distinct from the body. In Western thought, this distinction is quite widespread. Plato (1998),
thought of the soul as something distinct from the body and even went further to describe what he considered to be the different elements of the soul viz. the rational, the appetitive and the spirited. Following this tradition most Western philosophers from Descartes(1641) to Leibniz(1898) and even to the property dualism of David Chalmers (1996) have, in one way or the other, expressed a fealty to this sort of dualism, expressed in different ways but generally saying the same thing.

The reason for this belief can be generally tied to two things. First is the belief that we are an extension of an immaterial God, and in sharing Its essence, we invariably possess an equally immaterial essence that ties us to our immaterial origin, God. Housed in the physical body, this spiritual essence or soul becomes ‘free’ after death and is usually thought of as outliving the body either for a long while or for eternity. The second reason lies in our acknowledgement of the intimate character of our mental experiences and consciousness as something distinct from physical experiences. It is therefore assumed that these non-material experiences would only logically emanate from an immaterial substance and this substance is usually thought of as the soul.

For most traditional Africans, understanding the soul first begins by understanding the harmonious complementary relationship that exists between matter and spirit, or in this case, body and soul. As alluded to earlier at the beginning of this chapter, most Africans are more likely to accept a certain type of monism that rejects the dualism prevalent in Western metaphysics and instead allows for understanding of the soul and body as complemented wholes. The soul and body are therefore thought of, not as two vastly different entities, but rather aspects of reality that constitute a mutually complementary whole.

With regards to the nature of the soul, Wilfred Lajul (2017, p. 28) in explaining Maduabuchi Dukor’s views about the soul/vital force states that:

… Africans believe that behind every human being or object there is a vital power or soul (1989: 369). Africans personify nature because they believe that there is a spiritual force residing in every object of nature. This is why
African religious practices, feasts and ceremonies cannot in any way be equated to magical and idolatrous practices or fetishism.

The spiritual force that animates living things, and human beings in particular, depicts what a soul is for most Africans. Force here must be distinguished from the Aristotelian idea of substance. Whereas substances indicate the essential property of a thing (i.e. what continues to endure as the thing-in-itself) that may differ from reality to reality, force (vital force) is thought of as an all-pervading force, emanating from God and simply present in all of reality. This idea of force was introduced into the literature by the Belgian priest and philosopher, Placide Tempels. Tempels, in his attempt to properly articulate Bantu (a group of peoples thought to be linguistically connected and mostly found in central and southern Africa) ontology, introduces us to the concept of vital force. The vital force emanates from God who possesses this force in its most potent form. Again, as the creator of the universe, this vital force would flow through every object of creation and Tempels alludes to this fact when he says, ‘In the minds of Bantu, all beings in the universe possess vital force of their own: human, animal, vegetable, or inanimate’ (Tempels, 1959, p. 22).

Although it is possible to think of the soul as sharing in the divine essence since it is something created by the Supreme Being (Gyekye, 1978), it is unclear whether the soul, so conceived, shares in the supposedly divine characteristic of immortality. Whereas for most Africans the soul *does* outlive the body, there appears to be nothing (or very little), beyond Christian or Islamic influence, that seems to suggest that the soul possesses an immortal character.

Menkiti (2004a), in describing the normative progression of the person suggests a progression from an ‘it’ - a lower degree of non-personhood – to an ‘it’ – a higher degree of non-personhood. The individual, for Menkiti, after death can become an ancestor and if sufficiently remembered by those still alive – via rituals, sacrifices and reverence – persists as such. The lack of remembrance by those who are alive allows the individual to lose her personal and spiritual character, and generally allows a transformation of the individual from a person to a ‘nameless dead’ (Mbiti, 1990, pp. 24-25; Menkiti, 2004a, pp. 326-328). In becoming a nameless dead, Menkiti
agrees that it does not make much sense to append immortality to the fragmented individual. He states that:

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. Hence it is better, I believe, to refer to them by the name of the nameless dead rather than designate their stage of existence by such a term as “collective immortality,” thereby suggesting that they could somehow be described as “collective immortals,” which is not only odd, but also inaccurate. (Menkiti, 2004a, p. 328)

What is intriguing here is the idea that collective or communal acknowledgement plays an important role in sustaining one’s existence even after one dies. Perhaps this acknowledgement, mostly through rituals and ancestor reverence, allows for the sustenance of the soul and the legitimacy of the person involved in much the same way that the universe is thought of (as earlier explained) as granting legitimacy to God’s existence. The soul in this instance, is, therefore, generally understood as a sentient personalised animating force. Indeed, Deogratia Bikopo and Louis-Jacques van Bogaert (2010) contend that:

> All beings are endowed with varying levels of energy. The highest levels characterise the Supreme Being (God), the ‘Strong One’; the *muntu* (person, intelligent being), participates in God’s force, and so do the non-human animals but to a lesser degree…Life has its origin in *Ashé*, power, the creative source of all that is. This power gives vitality to life and dynamism to being. *Ashé* is the creative word, the logos; it is: ‘A rational and spiritual
principle that confers identity and destiny to humans.’…What subsists after death is the ‘self’ that was hidden behind the body during life. The process of dying is not static; it goes through progressive stages of energy loss. To be dead means to have a diminished life because of a reduced level of energy. When the level of energy falls to zero, one is completely dead. (Bikopo & van Bogaert, 2010, pp. 3-4)

What the above seems to suggest is that there is something peculiar to the vital force inherent in human beings, for, whereas other sorts of being possess vital force, theirs do not portray the rational and creative element. Thus, one can safely assume that what differentiates humans from other beings that are below it in the hierarchy of beings is the creative power of the vital force as it operates in humans. This same feeling is echoed by Noah Dzobo (1992, p. 230).

If Tempels is to be taken seriously, then vital force forms an integral part of the human person and generally drives our existence. It would be understood as some sort of ethereal energy that can be cut-short, replenished and augmented, depending on the actions of the individual and/or influences by negative or positive external forces.

Now, this force usually outlives the body and may not necessarily be immortal with their continued existence, more or less depending on those who are alive and how much they are generally remembered, especially through rites of reverence and rituals of remembrance. The personalised character of the soul, as well as its ability to escape death, allows us to speak of the deceased individual as a real character – an ancestor – residing on earth as a living-dead and capable of influencing the activities of the physical world or even returning in another body via reincarnation.

However, there initially appears to be no logical reason to believe that the vital force carries on after death. Coupled with the views of Deogratia Bikopo and Louis-Jacques Bogaert (2010) above, Tempels also suggests that for the Bantu, death involves a dire decrease of an individual’s
vital force, usually by an external agent – a decrease of which predicates the need to acquire vital force through certain positive actions and/or rituals. In his words:

Every illness, wound or disappointment, all suffering, depression, or fatigue, every injustice and every failure: all these are held to be, and are spoken of by the Bantu as, a diminution of vital force. Illness and death do not have their source in our own vital power, but result from some external agent who weakens us through his greater force. It is only by fortifying our vital energy through the use of magical recipes, that we acquire resistance to malevolent external forces. (Tempels, 1959, p. 23)

In permitting the argument that the loss of one’s vital force would lead to a loss of life, the possibility of possessing vital force in a supposed after-life seems logically remote. However, if one is to allow for the existence of ancestors after death, as Tempels claims the Bantu do, it would be necessary to assume that the low levels of vital force that characterises one’s death can be rejuvenated in a special way by any or all of the following:

1. The Supreme Being (or any other being that is powerful enough to do so).
2. The persistence of the dead individual whose force is still powerful enough to survive death and is augmented by the reverence of those left behind.
3. The transition to the next/higher level of existence that characterises ancestorhood necessarily provides a depleted level of vital force a new and higher beginning. Death is, therefore, a transitory event that ushers the individual into a new phase of existence. Thus, dying is not in this sense a cessation of existence but rather a continuation of living but in another mode.

3.3.2.2. Meaning and Vital Force

In this section, I build on the vital force theory and present the idea that meaning can be attained by building up one’s vital force. Like much of what we have talked about in this chapter, there is a transcendental link between the Supreme Being and the vital force that suffuses the human
person. Vital force, like everything that exists in the universe, whether material or spiritual, locates its origin in God and generally flows from It. Vital forces are considered to be a potent form of energy that embodies the human person and whose increase or decrease basically regulates the quality of life an individual might have. The amount of vital force that a piece of reality has might also be thought of as depending on its place in the hierarchy of being earlier alluded to in our discussions of African metaphysics. Thus, inanimate objects may possess vital force but not at the level of plants; plants may possess vital force at a certain level but not at the same level as animals, and so on. God is thought of as the source of this vital energy and it is from It that other forms of life receive or augment their vital forces. Although vital force possesses an animating, creative, rational and identifying character (especially with regards to human persons and other realities above human beings in the hierarchy of being) the same may not be said about things like rocks, plants etc. (since their vital force does not possess this personalised/rational character).

On what can constitute a vital force theory of meaning, we must keep in mind the amount of importance traditional Africans place on vital force. According to Tempels:

The Bantu say, in respect of a number of strange practices in which we see neither rime nor reason, that their purpose is to acquire life, strength or vital force, to live strongly, that they are to make life stronger, or to assure that force shall remain perpetually in one's posterity. Used negatively, the same idea is expressed when the Bantu say: we act thus to be protected from misfortune, or from a diminution of life or of being, or in order to protect ourselves from those influences which annihilate or diminish us.(Tempels, 1959, p. 22)

What immediately stands out is the great importance placed on retaining and enhancing one’s vital force and the subjectivity imbued in that importance. The sustenance of one’s vital force requires the individual to personally seek out ways to improve the levels of vital force present within them. Increasing one’s vital force generally involves two processes. The first process involves an appeal
to something with a greater reservoir of vital force. This is evident when Tempels claims, ‘Force, the potent life, vital energy are the object of prayers and invocations to God, to the spirits and to the dead, as well as of all that is usually called magic, sorcery or magical remedies’ (Tempels, 1959).

The second process would include immersing oneself in morally uplifting acts. In positively exercising one’s moral communal obligations towards the community of life, it is inevitable that that individual by extension improves the quality of her/vital force (Nalwamba & Buitendag, 2017, pp. 4-5). It would also involve engaging in those acts that positively express human creativity, growth and productivity (Dzobo, 1992, p. 227).

The importance that is placed on possessing and acquiring more vital force, as explained by Tempels, greatly suggests that the vital force theory can and does serve as a condition necessary for achieving a significant or meaningful life. Tempels posits that ‘Supreme happiness, the only kind of blessing, is, to the Bantu, to possess the greatest vital force: the worst misfortune and, in very truth, the only misfortune, is, he thinks, the diminution of this power’ (Tempels, 1959, p. 22).

Meaningfulness would then imply performing those acts that habitually improve one’s own life force, as this would mean an improvement in the quality of life. Conversely, a meaningless life would involve not performing those acts that improve one’s vital force (at the very least) and/or performing those actions that do act against the habitual improvement of one’s vital force (the gravest of this, in the African context, would most likely be suicide).

It may seem that this theory of meaning operates only within the purview of life in the material world or in our existence as human beings in the physical world, but this is not so. The vital force theory of meaning transcends the physical world and is also in effect in the world of human ancestors. Tempels implies this fact when he states:

The spirits of the first ancestors, highly exalted in the superhuman world, possess extraordinary force inasmuch as they are the founders of the human race and propagators of the divine inheritance of vital human strength. The
other dead are esteemed only to the extent to which they increase and perpetuate their vital force in their progeny. (Tempels, 1959, p. 22)

The high esteem placed on the ancestor and the reverence that follows him/her is only expressed insofar as those ancestors continue to perform those acts that consistently improve upon their vital force. This would be the reason why ancestors are thought of as normatively active and vigorously involved in the activities of those who are alive in the physical world. It would therefore not be far-fetched to assume that meaningfulness (with regards to the vital force theory) is also an otherworldly pursuit that continues even as one becomes a living dead.

One can take this theory of meaning seriously because in seeking to continually improve one’s vital force, certain things are implied. First, the individual is focused on the transcendental goal of improving his or her vital force. The vital force theory acknowledges the vital force as something spiritual and, in the case of human beings, as something imbued with reason. What this then means is that at the level of vital force one transcends mere animal nature, and that it is in the enhancing of this vital force that the individual invests in something that is meaningful and valuable for its own sake.

Beyond this, this account of meaning allows us to think of the lifelong activity of acquiring and enhancing one’s vital force as responsible for those nuggets of meaning in life that may characterise our lives. Since the methods of acquiring vital force involve engaging in activities that express an individual’s creative power and productivity (Dzobo, 1992) and/or an individual’s moral obligations (especially) to his or her community, individual moments of meaningfulness are thus captured by this theory. So, if we imagine that Michelangelo was, through the profound expression of the power of the creative genius domiciled in his vital force, able to create art that positively affected others, then the act of creating such art would count as meaningful. Also, if we assumed that Nelson Mandela decided that one way to enhance his vital force by fighting for the rights of black people in South Africa, which enhanced their vital force – a morally productive act – such an act would be thought of as meaningful within the purview of this theory.
Finally, one can think of this theory of meaning as a possible candidate of a theory of the meaning of life, not merely in life. This is mainly because by tailoring one’s life towards the goal of continually enhancing one’s vital force (even after death as an ancestor), one encounters a coherence and rationale that is needed for any life, as a whole, to be considered meaningful.

3.3.3. The Communal Normative Function Theory of Meaning

Nothing seems more predominant in much of what is considered African philosophy than the sort of thinking that acknowledges a communal metaphysics or understanding of reality and a communal socio-ethic. The importance of communal relationships in traditional African philosophy cannot be overstated and many African philosophers and scholars such as Mbiti (1990), Khoza (1994), Ramose (1999), Menkiti (2004a), Asouzu (2004), Murove (2007), Ozumba & Chimakonam (2014), Metz (2017), etc., have all either sought to build their philosophies on a communitarian foundation (I use communal and communitarian interchangeably) or explicitly expressed those philosophies that capture the essence of communal relationships.

Again, to fully understand how communal normative relationships can be purveyors of meaning, it is important that one has a full understanding of African views on normative communal relations. Key to this understanding for many thinkers is the metaphysical understanding of the universe as a complementary whole. For most traditional African thought systems, the universe is often thought of as an interconnected whole, with each constituent seen as missing links of a mutually complementary whole (Asouzu, 2004). Each missing link is viewed as very important to the overall harmony of the universe and although there is some hierarchy in the understanding of being, with some realities considered as important and others seen as more important (Asouzu, 2007), there is little doubt that each missing link shares a fundamental importance. As missing links in a universal interconnected web of reality, positive or negative changes in one aspect of reality generally produce an effect that vibrates, positively or negatively, throughout the universe.
This type of communal metaphysics is also seen as a feature of African conceptions of human relationships. Communal relationships – mostly predicated on the ideas that every human person forms an integral part of an interconnected whole; that the individual is only fully realised in relation to that communal whole; and that every individual action, whether positive or negative, resonates soundly in the lives of others in that communal whole – are a prevalent feature of most traditional African communities and philosophies. This is not to say that there are no instances of this sort of thinking in other non-African communities. Indeed, most human relationships in other parts of the world are sufficiently communal. What I claim is that communal relations are characteristic of traditional African social relations. It penetrates their metaphysics, ethics, politics – their way of life. From the smallest unit of traditional African society (which is the family), the extent of the drive towards a communal way of life is apparent. Families are not thought of in the sense of ‘nuclear’ family (where only the parents and children live); families are thought of in the sense of extended families, comprising of both immediate relatives such as parents, children and maybe grandparents, but also of far-relatives such as aunties, cousins, etc., and sometimes even friends. The bonds of kinship and brotherhood in these families are very strong and, ideally, each family member sets out to act in a way that enables the attainment of a common good. It is exactly this mode of thinking that inspired Julius Nyerere to propose Ujamaa, based on the foundation of familial relationships or kinship, as an ethical system (and an actual state policy) that would, in the broader sense, enable a feeling of deep communal kinship amongst Africans as they constantly strive for the common good. Within this ethical framework, Ujamaa – which means brotherhood or familyhood (Nyerere, 1968, p. 12) – engenders a sort of African socialism that avoids capitalist exploitations usually found in most individualistic societies and encourages a classless communal welfarism unto the common good (Nyerere, 1968, pp. 1-15).

From the foregoing, we have an overall feel of the pride of place that the idea of communalism has in traditional African thought systems. With respect to what this section seeks to achieve, I focus more on ideas of communalism especially as it relates to the African ideas of
personhood and normative function. I focus on these ideas for the following reasons. A conception of personhood generally seeks to answer the question ‘What does it mean to be a human person?’.

For the African, personhood does not just involve rationality in the Aristotelian sense, it involves something more – a positive acknowledgement of a communal belongingness as expressed in an individual’s relationship with his/her community. This belongingness is inextricably linked and predicated upon one’s normative function towards the community that identifies him/her. In attaining personhood, it seems to me that the individual not only acquires an identity, s/he acquires something more – a full and continuous flourishing of his/her humanity – insofar as that individual continues to perform his/her communal normative functions. It is within this line of thinking that I attempt to excavate another theory of meaning – the communal normative function theory of meaning.

Mbiti’s famous dictum ‘I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am’ (Mbiti, 1990, p. 106) perfectly captures the character of African communal philosophy. By identifying the community as the focal point of all normativity, the individual endeavours to tailor his/her actions to suit the progress of the community, which is in turn tied to the flourishing of the individual. This sort of thinking is captured by the southern African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu*, in its most basic sense, means humanness or being human (Khoza, 1994, p. 2). Being human as expressed in the *ubuntu* paradigm involves a reference to and a relationship with other persons. Khoza expresses this view when he states:

One useful gateway to appreciating the depth or philosophical dimensions of the concept of ‘ubuntu’ is to visit age old wisdom…. The following come to mind… A person is a person through other persons…one finger cannot pick up a grain…. Such expressions abound in all African languages and cast light on [ubuntu’s] basic orientation. The essence of these axioms is that one’s humanity (humanness), one’s personhood is dependent upon one’s relationship with others.(Khoza, 1994, p. 3)
One can glean from the above that the humanism, expressed by ubuntu, involves the acknowledgement of one’s humanity through a relationship with other people. One would imagine that such a relationship is positive rather than negative for the obvious reason that a negative relationship enables a relational disconnect while a positive relationship enhances relational bonds. Positive actions in this context would involve ethically right actions, and what is ethically right in an ubuntu context is captured aptly by Metz when he states, ‘An action is right just insofar as it produces harmony and reduces discord; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to develop communion’ (Metz, 2017, p. 111). Thus, enhancing one’s humanity would involve performing those acts that promote communal harmony while at the same time avoiding those acts that promote communal discord.

The idea of enhancing one’s humanity is important. This is because in traditional African thought, ‘human nature is capable of increasing or decreasing, almost to a point of total extinction’ (Khoza, 1994, p. 8). The aim, therefore, would be to garner as much humanness that one can muster, and this applies to individuals who have become ancestors as they continue to influence the present even though they are now part of the past (Murove, 2007). What the above also implies is that there is an ontological progression with regards to personhood from a lower level to a higher one. This view has been popularised by Ifeanyi Menkiti (2004a) and his communal normative theory of personhood is important to this work.

Menkiti’s conception of personhood is one where the individual is rooted deeply in the community and derives his/her existential essence from the community. This is inexorably in consonance with Mbiti’s ‘I am because we are’ (Mbiti, 1990, p. 141). The ‘I’ here delineates a strong recognition and willingness of the individual to participate in the community to which he belongs and from where she derives her essence and sense of the self.

Although Menkiti acknowledges obvious biological expressions of individuals, he nevertheless seems to think that there is a valid difference between an individual and an individual
The latter possesses more weight than the former, from a moral standpoint. According to him:

…considered as an individuated source of consumption, a bundle as it were of primary appetites, the individual could still count as an agent in the world. But to go beyond the raw appetitive level to the special level marked by the dignity of the person, something more would seem needed. In this regard, ‘individual’ and ‘Individual person’ may carry somewhat different weight and it is the context of the discussion that spells out whether they converge or diverge. (Menkiti, 2004a, p. 325)

Menkiti believes that if there is any dignity that is to be attached to the human person, one must transcend the appetitive underpinning of the individual to the moral agency of the individual person, where the badge of dignity resides.

Ontological progression is an important idea in Menkiti’s conception of personhood. The import of this is that the moral qualities of the individual develop with time, and time is an important factor that contributes a great deal to the development of the person. This is a ‘moral empiricism’ of some sort, where the individual not only relies on moral experiences to better approximate the finest person s/he potentially can be but is judged as a person based on the number and/or timeline of his/her moral experiences. Thus, the positive rise of the number of moral experiences as well as the age of the individual contributes positively to the perceived moral agency of the individual involved. The community plays the important role of reinforcing positive behavioural patterns and is the moral compass and arbiter for the individual passing through ‘ontological gradations.’ Accordingly, Menkiti suggests that it is best to regard the movement of the individual human child into full personhood and beyond as essentially a journey from an it to an it (Menkiti, 2004a, p. 326).

The it in the first instance refers to the state of the individual at birth, one who possesses no identity, no culture, and no moral insight. The inculcation of moral values and communal identity in
the intellect of such a child is the duty of the community, and this heralds the individual’s journey to personhood. The *it* in its latter use does not refer to the individual at the state of physical death or ancestorhood (as Menkiti believes ancestorhood is continued personhood) but a person only becomes an *it* again when the individual becomes a ‘nameless dead’. The difference between the living dead (ancestors) and the nameless dead is the moral function they perform or the lack thereof. In other words, the nameless dead are so-called because they perform no moral function and are no longer remembered by the community. Though the nameless dead may be chronologically older, they do not perform any moral function and are therefore only fragments of a forgotten past. They become forgotten aspects of communal history and no longer possess any real existence.

Although scholars such as Gyekye are quick to disagree with Menkiti on some of the details of his conception of personhood, especially regarding the idea that the person acquires personhood after birth and is an ‘it’ prior to the acquisition of that personhood (Gyekye, 1992), what is not disputed is the fact that performing those acts that promote harmony and the common good generally improves the quality of one’s humanity.

What we can glean from the above is a theory of meaning that taps into this understanding of communal normative function. 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 ostracization from the community of real persons. This would, in traditional African settings, be the ultimate representation of a meaningless life. Disharmony and/or discord would invariably obstruct the attainment of the common good.
Communal normative function would then be a personal duty that one is obliged to perform, not only for the common good, but for the full realisation of his/her humanity. The lives of Nelson Mandela and that of Mother Theresa would, in this instance, count as meaningful lives because of the service to their communities and their efforts at enabling harmony in their immediate communities. Indeed, for the average individual living in communal harmony with others in the society, meaning would be ascribed to that person’s life – the communal normative theory is not just centred on supererogatory acts that express communal harmony (such as the work of Mother Theresa). However, it is plausible to claim a higher degree of meaning for those lives that go beyond the call of moral duty and/or harmony.

3.3.4. **Consolationism and Meaning**

Ada Agada’s award-winning book, *Existence and Consolation*, is one of the few works within the purview of African philosophy that deals with the proper attitude for a seemingly meaninglessness world headlong. One primary feature of Agada’s metaphysics is his assertion that one should consider the universe as purposeful and alive in varying degrees. The continued evolution of the universe for him is not the product of mindless matter but a product of a purpose. This purpose is thought of as the product of a divine agenda, and although Agada does not fully express the true nature of what he calls ‘divine’, he goes on to project the proposition that the purpose that drives the universe is transcendental freedom. This freedom is not the classical freedom of choice, which is always necessary, but the absolute freedom that brings about only a perfect state of affairs. This perfect state of affairs for Agada involves the achievement of a fully intelligible universe. In his words, a ‘rational universe is a perfect universe in which perfect determinism reigns so that effects are clearly adequate to causes’ (Agada, 2015, p. 79). The motivation for Agada’s consolationist metaphysics lies mainly in Asouzu’s idea of complementarity and Senghor’s idea of emotionality. For Agada, the idea of missing links and complementarity points only to the fact that the universe yearns to achieve a completeness and therefore an end. This is mainly true because in admitting the pursuit of a complementary whole or any other sort of
relational metaphysics, it would not be strange to admit that this complementarity is sought after for the sake of a higher end. Thus, yearning and the perfection this yearning seeks to achieve is a logical aftermath of the complementary metaphysics that pervades African thought. Yearning is part and parcel of existence and we see its expression in even natural processes evolution and natural selection seems to express this yearning.

Humans are not left out in this yearning process and our inclinations towards solidarity, self-edification and, ultimately, progress only express our yearning for perfection. The attainment of this perfection is the meaning of life and the yearning for this perfection accounts for the moments of meaning in life.

Although yearning for perfection is part and parcel of a meaningful life, Agada is quick to admit that (attaining) perfection is beyond the reach of the flailing individual and even the universe. Agada, in admitting this, suggests that the individual continues to yearn for perfection (since this allows for moments of meaningfulness) and seek for consolation (since the meaning of life cannot be achieved). This admission obviously calls into question the meaningfulness of such yearning. To find meaning in the pursuit of something beyond one’s reach appears to be an awkward position to hold, but Agada persists and further argues that yearning itself becomes consolation and the proper mood for balancing the joy of existence – those instances of meaning we gain through yearning – and the sadness or melancholy of our inability to grasp the ultimate purpose or meaning. Meaning is found in precisely the optimism and joy of existence that the search for freedom entails and the awareness of the melancholy that the futility, pessimism and sadness that our knowledge of the fact that such freedom is beyond our reach entails (Agada, 2015, pp. 62).

Agada’s theory of meaning is worth taking seriously. Agada tries to show that there exists an external and transcendental purpose that humans (and all of existence) strive for, which is perfection. By identifying perfection as this transcendental source of meaning, Agada locates meaning in something that is not merely tied to our animal nature.
From his ideas about yearning, one notices that most of our intuitions about meaning in life are aptly captured. By striving for perfection, emphasis is placed on those admirable acts that generally lead to harmony and solidarity (since they allow for the flourishing and development of the human person via community progress), and self-edification (since it implies the positive improvement of the human person). The process of striving for perfection, therefore, allows the individual to achieve some moments of meaning in life.
Chapter 4.

4.1. Rejecting the Obsolete: Towards a New Metaphysics

In the previous chapter, I sought to present and explain what I consider to be African conceptions of the meaning in/of life, as gleaned from the various related ideas that speak to how Africans conceptualise meaningfulness or at least related values. From these ideas, I identified three conceptions of meaning that can be construed as particularly African viz. the African God purpose theory, the African soul/vital force theory (again, I use the term soul not in the Western/Christian metaphysical sense but in the African sense of the immaterial component of the human person) and the communal normative function theory. What serves as the foundation to each of these theories of meaning is an underlying metaphysics – as explained in chapter three – an African metaphysics that understands reality in terms of an intimate interplay between the material and immaterial. While this is true, it is also important that beyond the appearance of its logical validity, one also tests the veracity of the claims inherent in this metaphysics in order to ascertain the logical soundness of the ideas put forward. The conversation that follows this interrogation shall help determine the need to rework some parts of this underlying metaphysics. I shall conclude that a naturalistic understanding of the vital force theory and the communal normative function theory stands as the most plausible accounts of African conceptions of meaning. However, because of the fact that these theories do not fully account for subjectivity and do not account for non-relational sorts of meaningfulness respectively, I shall provide an alternative theory of meaning, which I shall label the ‘passionate yearning theory’.

One important factor that influences the belief in the supernatural is the fact that for most Africans, there is an acknowledgement of the perceived effects of the supernatural occurrences in everyday occurrences and in the life of the African. Menkiti contributes quite poignantly to these ideas in his essay titled ‘Physical and Metaphysical Understanding: Nature, Agency, and Causation in African Traditional Thought’ (Menkiti, 2004b). For instance, for the human person, the very
essence of his/her existence is an arguably spiritual component that is referred to as the vital force and this is despite the fact that the body is quite visible and physical. We also see this in the general belief in the agency of non-physical realities and the supposed expression of that agency in the physical world.

In explaining other components of the human person, allusions are made to other assumed spiritual entities such as the ori (Yoruba word that denotes the bearer of a person’s destiny), the okan (a Yoruba word that denotes a mutually complementary entity that both serve as the physical human heart and the spiritual mind), the okra (an Akan word denoting the inner self – an immaterial entity directly drawn from God), etc. (Gbadegesin, 2004, p. 314; Gyekye, 1978). Above the human person, in the hierarchy of beings are ancestors, it would not be odd to categorise ancestors, Ngozis, spirits, lesser gods and the Supreme Being as other examples of largely spiritual entities. These spiritual entities are believed to exist because they entertain a mutual and intimate relationship with the physical world, and manifestations of their influences in the physical world are easily identifiable. The Supreme Being, for instance, is thought of as largely responsible for all that exists; lesser gods, especially when solicited, are believed to be capable of redirecting a physical status quo positively (through bountiful harvests, an increased fertility etc.) or negatively (through famine, unexplained deaths etc.); Ngozis or vengeful ancestral spirits are believed to seek reparations for a hurt that may involve grave consequences such as the untimely death of members of the erring family etc. (Mutekwa, 2010; Musanga, 2017). The ripple effects of engaging with the spiritual or a spiritual engagement with the physical are quite profound and real for most Africans.

While it is true that most traditional Africans acknowledge both the existence of spiritual entities and the metaphysics that allows an interplay between matter and spirit, what is of utmost concern to me is the soundness of this seemingly valid acknowledgement. Indeed, one can suppose that as African philosophers, it is quite pertinent that we interrogate our beliefs with reason as the soundness of an idea does not necessarily rest only on the popularity or prevalence of that belief in a given group but with its correlation with truth and/or reality. While it is true that there are certain
occasions that may not be immediately explained by common sense empirical observations (i.e. cannot be explained by an initial encounter by the senses) or might not be explained at all by conventional rational enterprises, what is not true is that these occasions must, as a matter of necessity, be explained by a continuous appeal to the spiritual. Although one can say that an appeal to the spiritual or invisible does the best explanatory job, so that it’s reasonable to appeal to them, one must tread with caution as what is needed is not a convenient explanation but an explanation that best correlates with the state of affairs. In claiming ignorance, one is inspired to know. Accepting an explanation on the basis of its convenience allows for the sort of thinking that may or may not be appropriate and in the instance of inappropriateness, mislead the thinker and further his descent to even more inappropriate explanation.

As human knowledge and technologies continue to improve, those encounters or realities that were thought of in mystical and spiritual terms have been mostly stripped of their prior mystique and are now thought of in simpler material terms. To further buttress this point, as humans continue to progress and break the shackles of mysticism, we notice that in understanding previously unknown realities, there seems to be an explanatory movement from those explanations that are more spiritually inclined to explanations that are more materially inclined and rarely vice-versa. Even in quantum mechanics, which demonstrates the capacity of particles to behave like waves and the reality of seemingly acausal relations, mysticism need not be invoked, as the main issue involved is a disagreement between quantum indeterminacy and classical Newtonian physics. The difficulty in understanding this disagreement or in unifying both theories does not as yet require a recourse to ideas about supernaturality – the hope being that incidences that are not understood would eventually be explained within a coherent scientific framework.

Beyond this, one notices that the encounters, occasions and realities that most Africans consider spiritual either refer to abstractions, coincidences and/or phenomena that can be explained by paradigms that do not really need an appeal to the spiritual. For instance, with regards to the human person, most Africans are inclined to agree that there exists an animating character that
exists within every human being that is essentially spiritual and capable of surviving death – possibly subsisting as ancestors, especially if one lived a meaningful life (Tempels, 1959; Nalwamba & Buitendag, 2017). In defining what the term ‘animating’ means, we are mostly talking about what wills the body and thus demonstrates that it is alive. To will, in this sense, generally involves the ability to think, the ability to feel emotionally, and the ability to translate those thoughts and emotions to physical actions or deeds. Interestingly, advances in neuroscience, continue to show that the ‘animation’ of the human person, in terms of the characteristic of willing, are simply functions of the human brain, the nervous system and their various support structures i.e. vital organs etc., which are all non-spiritual realities. Beyond this, attributes like thinking, judging, feeling, being moral and even loving, which were initially thought of as typical of a spiritual and imperceptible self, are now being discussed in reference to the brain (we shall discuss this in detail further into this chapter). Accepting neuroscience as true immerses most claims to spirituality relating to a human person in a pool of serious doubt. As a logical follow up to the acceptance of neuroscientific claims as true, one can go as far as to claim that because the animation of the human person subsists in materiality, the loss of those material realities would involve a loss of that animating character. As such, the death of a person would generally not involve ancestorhood, insofar as that animating character is lost in the decay of the brain, the nervous system and its support structure.

One might also point to God as a source of spirituality even though neuroscience concludes that humans do not participate in this spirituality. However, whereas I am inclined to believe that it is true, as I stated earlier, the necessity of God’s existence (by God, I refer to an eternally subsisting first cause) lies in the impossibility of nothingness or non-being, as most Africans are wont to believe, what I am hesitant to accept, is the idea that this eternally subsisting first cause must, as a matter of necessity, possess a spiritual character.

Perhaps the most damning critique against accepting the existence of spiritual realities lies in the supposed definition of it or rather a lack. To be sure, what is spiritual, as I understand it, is
any reality that \textit{in-itself} is un-extended, independent of, and beyond, the material world. All material realities, as I understand them, share a similar characteristic i.e. the ability to reach out either directly or indirectly to the subjective experiences of the individual in contact with them. Direct impressions come from those realities that are immediately available to our senses such as sight, smell, touch, taste and hearing. Indirect impressions, on the other hand, come from those realities that are not immediately available to the senses but are made available via certain instruments, the real effects they do have on other realities or both. Electrons, quarks, solar flares etc., would be good examples of indirectly impressionable realities. Now whereas these sorts of indirect impressions are possible, it must be differentiated from what I term ‘misdirected inferences’. This difference generally lies in the evidence – or lack thereof – of certain beliefs about indirect impression. It is one thing to say that electrons exist and that they indirectly impress themselves and it is another thing for one to claim that the cause of a yet-to-be explained event (say an initially unexplained disease) is a disgruntled spirit (2004b, pp. 127-128). Care must be taken, and all evidence considered before any such claims to indirect impressions are made.

Thus, the common characteristic of material realities would then be that they are composed of sub-atomic particles, or at least are extended in space, and their ability to impress themselves on the subject that is in contact with it. Thus, it is reasonable to posit that if spiritual realities are capable of impressing (whether directly or indirectly), then their expression of that ability immediately grants them the moniker of ‘material’ – at least at the time when such abilities are expressed. However, it is also reasonable to suspect that no spiritual condition behaves in such a manner, especially since our everyday pointers to spiritual impressionability are, more often than not, explained in terms of natural causes. Whereas the African view suggests that spiritual realities do explain some types of events (especially in relation to their causal histories) and by virtue of that claim can in principle ‘impress’ indirectly, I am still sceptical. A few possible alternative replies are possible:
1. There are no spiritual realities and the events alleged to be influenced by them are the handiwork of other types of material realities. Menkiti’s example, where water vapour was for mistaken spirits, would be apt (Menkiti, 2004b, pp. 127-128).

2. What we term ‘spiritual realities’ are indeed material realities and our claim to the existence of a reality understood to be spiritually un-extended is at the very best improbable. The supposition here is that spirits exist, not in the magical way we think they do, but as material realities that can at least indirectly impress themselves the way other supposedly material realities do.

Mbiti (1990, pp. 74-78) inadvertently admits this in his description of spirits. Whereas most Africans claim knowledge of a pantheon of spiritual beings and realities and also make claims that these realities make themselves visible to human persons, Mbiti still avers that:

> In reality, however, they have sunk beyond the horizon of the Zamani period, so that human beings do not see them either physically or mentally...they are ‘seen’ in the corporate belief in their existence. Yet, people experience their activities and personalities, even if an element of exaggeration is an essential part of that description. Because they are invisible, they are thought to be ubiquitous, so that a person is never sure where they are or are not. (Mbiti, 1990, p. 78)

Mbiti’s views here are quite instructive. Although he goes on to describe spirits in certain ways, his foundational premise presupposes that the direct experience of spirits or spiritual realities cannot be possible insofar as they are invisible to us both physically and mentally but because claims about their activities abound, we can think of spiritual realities. The question that would immediately follow this claim would be: what is the nature of these activities and can they be explained properly in contexts other than spiritual agency? If they can be explained within other non-spiritual paradigms, then one can begin to suspect the soundness of most claims to spiritual agency. Also, if it is then the case that spiritual realities are fundamentally different from material realities and if it
is the case that what is spiritual is characteristically un-extended, it becomes doubtful that we are capable of describing spiritual realities in the vivid manner that we sometimes do or even ascribe the quality of impressionability to something that is un-extended. If it is true that one can only make real reference to what one has some experience of (whether directly or indirectly), it becomes difficult to believe that one can deduce, in clear terms, the characteristics and nature of something that one has no experience or impression of. Now, this might imply that spiritual entities exist but cannot be spoken of or that they do not exist at all. Either way, the point being made is that claims about their material world influences cannot be readily justified within the framework of the general understanding of what spiritual entities are taken to be.

Based on the above, it would then be more plausible to assume that whatever characteristic we refer to, when talking about the spiritual, can only be born from ideas and imaginations that have nothing to do with spiritual realities in-themselves. Whereas one can claim that a lack of impression may not necessarily imply a non-existence, the point remains that such claims about spiritual events and/or entities are at the very least uninformed and not based on anything concrete. This calls into question the justifiability of belief in the spiritual or at the very least our claims about it.

4.2. The New Metaphysics

These doubts inspire me to consider a revision of what is currently being understood as African metaphysics. In accepting the view that, at best, we cannot make justifiable claims about the nature of spiritual beings/entities, including, of course, their existence, for reasons outlined above, it would then follow that an alternative understanding of African metaphysics should proceed on a course that sheds those ideas whose claims to authenticity are based on nothing besides imaginative prowess.

The new metaphysics that I claim should hold for African philosophy is based on the mutual complementarity earlier alluded to in the previous chapter, but with a minor twist. Rather than an
understanding of a mutual harmonious complementary relationship between material realities and spiritual realities, I advocate a mutual harmonious complementary relationship between material realities. Material realities, like I stated earlier, are in my thinking just those realities that can impress themselves through primary experience and secondary functional effect. By primary experience I mean observational experience (whether instrumentally or through the senses) and/or rational necessity. And by secondary functional effects, I mean indirect impressions of realities based on knowledge of their functions and knowledge of indirect interactions with other realities – an example of this being the Higgs boson whose status as a reality is understood in terms of the fact that it is responsible for other realities possessing mass. Thus, what I advocate for is essentially neither a dualistic ontology nor a harmonious monism in the sense that Ijiomah (2014) originally uses the term i.e. as a complementary relationship in, amongst and between matter and spirit – what I advocate for, as an alternative metaphysics, is a monistic ontology that understands being as essentially material and any complementary relationship to be essentially a relationship in, amongst and between material realities alone. My concern here is not to build in full a new metaphysics for African philosophy, as that is beyond the scope of this work. Rather, I present this view as a foundation on which African metaphysics should be built moving forward and it is indeed the foundation on which I interrogate the theories of meaning I have identified in the previous chapters. It is also important to note that although this sort of thinking (i.e. what I have proposed as an alternative African metaphysics or indeed any aspect of this dissertation that does not conform with traditionally held views) rejects (and is markedly different from) the original traditional African view, I would find accusations of un-Africanness (and I anticipate this accusation), extraneous and largely related to a rigid fealty to ethnophilosophy. I think so for several reasons. First, whereas the view is markedly different from the original traditional position, its inspiration arises from a critical interrogation of the traditional view and is such a refinement of it. Thus, although it is different from, and goes beyond, the African view (i.e. the decidedly pre-colonial traditional African views), it arises from my evaluation of this African view and presents itself as something more
contemporary than traditional. Thus, this project does not merely present or describe traditional African views about meaning, it also evaluates, deconstructs, reconstructs and re-evaluates said view. In this way, the project transcends mere description of traditional African views – ethnophilosophy.

Second, any accusation of un-Africanness in no way speaks to the soundness of the matter under discussion. The very idea that, as far as African philosophy is concerned, whatever is stated as true (or justified) is true only insofar as such a statement corresponds or is similar to those pre-colonial traditionally held views that are common to sub-Saharan black people in Africa only derides the true spirit of philosophy and critical thinking, or cocoons the African philosopher in traditional dogma, but also promotes dogmatism as a delineator of soundness and unsoundness. I understand the drive towards this tendency, and it is for that reason that I address this concern here and now.

4.3. Critiques of the African Conceptions of Meaning

In the previous chapter, I outlined various theories of meaning that may stand as African theories of meaningfulness. In this section, I interrogate them more closely and critically. What is important here is, and what serves as the aim of this section, that we answer the question of the viability of each and any of these theories of meaning as viable theories of meaning. In untangling what is justifiable from what is not justifiable, I shall expose and disregard those theories that are in my thinking not viable and then improve on those theories that I feel do show some promise.

4.3.1. African God Purpose Theory

I begin this discussion by first critically examining the basic instincts about the nature of God and, from there, proceed to state why one may consider the African God purpose theory of meaning plausible or not. I conclude that the African God-purpose theory is ultimately not viable since the assumption that the Supreme Being exists and supplies meaning in the way that we think it
does can be contended against. Beyond this, I argue that if it were indeed possible that the Supreme Being supplies individuals with a purpose, that purpose is not subjectively derived and is, therefore, unattractive. In our understanding of the nature of God, one of the main assumptions is that the Supreme Being is a spiritual entity or at the very least, mostly spiritual. The necessity of God’s existence and the power involved in creating all other realities, whether spiritual or physical, is basically seen as pointers to a spiritual character. For most Africans, it is perfectly logical to assume that the God purpose theory, which locates meaning in our drive towards harmony – what sustains the universe and legitimises the Supreme Being Itself – will continue to serve as a working theory of meaning because God is eternal and will continue to require of us a sustenance of this harmony. On the basis of our previously established material ontology, I am willing to challenge the prevailing intuition that the Supreme Being is necessarily spiritual in all ways or in some ways.

Whereas I agree that the Supreme Being exists as a necessary condition for all else, there is nothing to suggest that spirituality is a necessary characteristic of the Supreme Being. I had claimed earlier that our definition of what is material is based on that thing’s intrinsic ability to impress itself on (at least) the human psyche either in primary or secondary terms, and what is allegedly spiritual the exact opposite. Whereas it is hard to primarily observe the Supreme Being (i.e. either through the senses or instrumentally), It still impresses itself on our psyche in other ways – via a mental/rational necessity and Its influence on other material realities (at least, in the sense that their existence is a direct effect of the existence of a necessarily existing Supreme Being).

I suppose that the belief in the necessity of the Supreme Being is grounded by two things. First is the general idea that the world is structured in the sense of some sort of foundationalism. Foundationalism in this context is the idea that there must be an ever-existing first cause from which other realities spring from. Second is the idea that the alternative explanations – an infinite regress of causes or an infinite circularity of causes – seem highly unlikely and essentially unattractive. This is not to say that it is only the convenience of foundationalism of the idea of an infinite regress that legitimises the support for the former. The logical thinking behind this support
can be hinged on the deniability of the possibility of absolute nothingness, the idea that the universe does exist, the idea that the universe must have begun, the causal understanding of reality and the seemingly processual development of nature (usually) from simple to more complex (Mulgan, 2015). What these ideas do is provide reasons to support a foundational understanding of reality with the Supreme Being as that foundation.

Whereas most people may point to the creative power of God and Its eternality as functions of its spirituality, I am inclined to disagree. In African thought, as I have explained earlier, the idea of being-alone is statutorily less attractive than the idea of being-with-other and it is because of the latter that the created things exist – as mutual complements of the Supreme Being. Whether created beings are borne out of a conscious will or an ontological necessity or both, what is paramount is the intuition that there seems to be no connection between the power of creation and spirituality. The very fact of the materiality of created beings seems to question the assumption of spirituality, as it is hard to imagine that materiality can proceed from spirituality, and instead lays credence to the assumption that material realities are basically products of a necessary being that is Itself material.

Another intuition one might be willing to point to in a bid to recognise the spirituality of God is the eternity of God’s existence. By incorporating necessity into the idea of a Supreme Being, it is only logical for one to assume that God is eternal and with other material realities seemingly finite, it would then imply that the Supreme Being or God belongs to an ontological category that is different from what one may consider material. This different category would be the spiritual category – with infinity or eternality its defining character. In understanding what is eternal, the general intuition is that what is eternal has no beginning and no end – perhaps as influenced by Christian metaphysics.

Whereas this is one sense of eternality, I identify two other senses or types of eternal existence that may be gleaned from our understanding of African metaphysics. First is a regressive eternality. It generally involves an understanding of eternity that moves backwards in time rather
than forward (Mbiti, 1990). In claiming that the Supreme Being necessarily exists, especially in order for other beings to exist, we claim that the Supreme Being has no beginning and has always necessarily existed. Thus, looking at God, one sees a being that has always previously existed *ad infinitum*. Notice that whereas this eternality subsists insofar as we look back in time, it says nothing about future time. Further, there is nothing to suggest that because the Supreme Being had always necessarily existed in the past, it will continue to do so *ad infinitum* in the future. Thus, whereas God must have existed necessarily, there is nothing to suggest that It must continue to exist. The second sense in which one might think of eternity would be in the sense of a progressive eternality. In this sense, we might think of beings with a definite and precise beginning possessing an eternal future existence. As finite beings, we may be unable to know about the possibility of such an existence, but we can think of it from the point of view of a logical possibility. With material beings possessing this characteristic (i.e. the characteristic of having a precise and definite beginning), one can claim that the material world in its totality can exercise progressive eternality, perhaps through certain primordial substances that cannot cease to exist, through a constant metamorphosis, through a constant reproduction or by virtue of a progressively eternal Supreme Being which would always need other created beings to legitimise Its existence. If any of the above is possible, then one can claim that a spiritual existence is not a necessary condition for eternal existence. There is, of course, a possible third alternative that the universe could have always existed and could still exist (thus leaving out a Supreme Being altogether), but then such an alternative may not perhaps hold much water if we were to take the current dominant model of the evolution of the universe viz. the big bang theory. If we at all allow ourselves to think of/accept that the universe had an origin, then we must also concede that this third approach is untenable.

Although the analysis in the last two paragraphs says nothing about the attractiveness of the African God purpose theory itself, I find it necessary and important to have this revision of our ideas of the notion of the nature of God, since our ideas of a god-purpose theory is founded on our understanding of the nature of God. Thus, I will now be evaluating a *material* version of the
‘African’ God purpose view, as I take this to be the strongest version of the view. Furthermore, the idea of eternity and its three senses plays an important role in defining why the African God-purpose theory may not be attractive, at least in one sense.

Another way one can question the African God purpose theory stems from the assumption that whereas the Supreme Being is conceived as regressively eternal, it is possible that this Supreme Being may not necessarily be progressively eternal. In entertaining this possibility, what is questioned is the viability of the God purpose theory if it is possible that the Supreme Being ceases to exist. In locating meaning (from a human point of view) in the drive towards a harmony that sustains the material world, which in turn legitimises God’s existence, one wonders if this theory will continue to subsist as relevant in the face of the possible demise of a possibly non-progressively eternal God.

In all this, the major foundation of the African God purpose theory generally lies in our basic assumption that the Supreme Being necessarily possesses a personalised character or, at the very least, a conscious will. From the idea of a conscious will or intention, we further assume that the creation of the universe is generally for a purpose emanating from this conscious will or intention. Questioning this assumption and proving it false would ultimately call into question the idea of a God purpose as that which we consider the supreme being would, in fact, be a bland type of reality possessing no conscious will and, as such, incapable of setting out a purpose. Indeed, there is every reason to question this assumption and no reason why we should believe that the Supreme Being, granted that one exists, is an intentional being. Often times, we assume that once an act is valuable or represents some good, then the cause of such an action must have enabled such an effect intentionally. While this may be true for living things (and indeed they do show intentionality), certain other aspects of reality can act in an unintentional way. That the sun enables plants to grow or that the rains supply the earth with freshwater or that gravity keeps us grounded does not in any way suggest that the sun, the water cycle or gravity acts in an intentional way, merely because the actions which they produce offers some value. In the same way, one can argue
that although the Supreme Being is a necessary being and that it is from It that the material world proceeds, there is no necessary connection between this idea and the idea that the Supreme Being is necessarily personal, conscious or intentional. This objection works insofar as we assume that the Supreme Being exists and that It supplies us with meaning.

Beyond these arguments about possibilities, one other objection to the African God Purpose theory rings true. Suppose we fully grant that the Supreme Being does indeed possess intentionality and/or a conscious will and suppose we grant that any of the characteristics of God, discussed in the previous chapter – as well as the fact that the human existence finds meaning in sustaining the harmony that enables the continued existence of the material world which in turn legitimises God’s existence – obtains. What cannot be denied, then, is the fact that this meaningfulness is of an instrumental kind and usually lacking a deep subjective willfulness on the part of those beings who only serve an instrumental purpose (in this context, human beings). I find instrumental values unattractive as purveyors of meaning and maybe even incapable of eliciting meaningfulness. It is precisely because of the fact that the African God purpose theory acknowledges the material world (including humans) as a means to an end – an end that does not even necessarily serve the human condition (beyond mere survival) but an external one – that I find this theory inadequate as a theory of meaning. Garrett Thomson also voices this type of objection when he tells us, ‘One weakness of the divine theorist's argument is that the first premise presents an exclusive definition of 'meaning.' It excludes the idea that something can be meaningful by being non-instrumentally valuable’ (Thomson, 2003, p. 48).

It is the same reason that a hen would not consider her life meaningful only on the mere basis that it gleefully eats fat in order for it to provide top-notch meat for the pleasure and nourishment of KFC customers. Or that person ‘X’ would not consider her life meaningful for the mere fact that Person ‘Y’ expects and considers her to be a means to an end. In creating the material world for this purpose, it would then seem that human existence is automatically geared towards this purpose. The automatic/default drive towards this purpose, (a sort of theological determinism or
pre-destination) in the face of freewill (freewill allows the human person to choose what is meaningful) only helps to water down its meaningfulness in much the same way that instinctive behaviours or acts do not count as meaningful acts. A. J. Ayer voices a similar objection in his ‘The Claims of Philosophy’. For him, a higher-order sort of teleological meaningfulness seems out of place since there is no reason to have such an assumption and even if it was so that such a claim to meaningfulness subsists, it would make no sense to the individual since that end, that ultimate meaningfulness, was not chosen freely by the individual (Ayer, 2008, p. 199).

Responses to the above, such as John Cottingham’s (2005, pp. 42-43), suggest that perhaps God’s will does not involve blind servitude and demands that the individual actually strives to attain a full realisation of his or her potential. He further states that autonomy is indeed compatible with God’s will if the autonomous being is understood as the ‘being who makes decisions independently of the arbitrary will of another, acting in the full light of reason, free from internal or external interference with her rational processes’ (Cottingham, 2005, p. 43). He goes on to state:

Consider an analogy with how we exercise our independent powers of reason in investigating the physical creation. The theistic claim that the source of the physical cosmos is God does not absolve the scientist from responsibility to use her reason to assess what the cosmos is like. (‘It says so in Scripture’ is never a good reason for adopting a particular scientific hypothesis.) And similarly for the ‘moral creation’. If God has laid down an objective moral order, we still have to use our critical rational powers to determine what it is, and how we should act. (Cottingham, 2005, p. 45)

What is unfortunate though is that this sort of thinking does not necessarily tackle the claim that such meaningfulness still remains instrumental. This is especially so if the claim is that only doing God’s will is what gives life meaning. That one is free and rationally capable of *discovering* God’s purpose does not discountenance the fact that that purpose does not emanate from the
individual – in much the same way that having the freedom and the rationale to discover that God created the world is not synonymous with the freedom and rationale to create the world.

Cottingham also points out that beyond mere instrumental value, God (who loves the individual) would only invariably desire that the individual lives a life that is of value to the individual (Cottingham, 2005, p. 52). Hence, fulfilling God’s desires or purpose would be good and be of value to the individual. However, the value of such a purpose does not negate the instrumentality that essentialises it. Perhaps one way that the instrumentality question can be circumvented would be by giving the individual the capacity to subjectively choose what counts as meaning for him or her and allowing these choices to be weighed up with reference to God’s purpose or desire. If we assume that this is how the world is set up, it would seem that such a move solves the problem of instrumentality. However, to suggest that this is how the world works is, at best, a long shot. Beyond this, one can argue that even if it was true that God exists in the way we think It does and that It voices out Its purpose for humans to subjectively indulge (or not indulge), one would then be forced to admit that either the theory is too narrow and does not capture other types of meaning or that God’s purpose is the only way to achieve meaningfulness, which takes us right back to the instrumentality problem.

Furthermore, the question of what motivates the idea of a shared meaningfulness – i.e. the idea that as instruments we gain meaning by working to enable a divine purpose that mostly makes sense to God – as sensible to the human person remains. Perhaps one way of looking at it is to suggest that an intrinsic investment in God’s purpose might make some sense as a theory of meaningfulness since this avoids accusations of instrumentality. This is indeed plausible, but this understanding of the African God’s purpose theory would only work if the Supreme Being exists in the conventional way that we think that It does and that that Supreme Being actually wills a purpose that we must pursue.
Therefore, I conclude here by positing that the instrumentality involved in the African God’s purpose theory, as well as my doubts about the conventional African understanding of God, makes it an unattractive theory of meaning.

4.3.2. The African Soul/Vital Force Theory

In the previous chapter, I presented the African soul theory as one potential theory of meaningfulness that arises from the African perspective. In it I described this view as one that finds the increment of one’s vital force as what constitutes a meaningful life. I identified meaningfulness as domiciled in the ability for one to increase the level of vital force usually via positive relations with others in one’s purview, positively expressing one’s creative power and/or through performing those rites and rituals that are expected of a member of a particular African society. Vital force in this instance is thought of as some sort of immaterial, ethereal and animating property, emanating from the Supreme Being and inherent in every type of reality. Indeed, Nalwamba and Buitendag (2017) have said, ‘Analogically understood, therefore, vital force is the cosmic spirit that is ontologically present in (and enfolds) all of creation and which indeed unfolds itself in all modes of be-ing. Vital force in African cosmology is, therefore, the cosmic animating potent force that interpenetrates all that is, without being identical to it’ (2017, p. 4). By striving to increase one’s vital force through these rites as well as through positive interventions outside one’s self, the individual does improve upon his or her level of vital force and by extension, his or her wellbeing. Whereas I can argue that there is no gauge that indicates at what level of vital force one achieves meaningfulness, I can nevertheless glean from my understanding of it that striving to increase one’s vital force above levels that are considered normal can be described as attempts at meaningfulness. Conversely, the theory suggests that an attempt to decrease in vital force below what is considered normal would then constitute a meaningless life.

With regards to the aspect of the African soul theory that directly speaks to vital forces as purveyors of meaning, my criticisms tackle the two possible versions of the theory. The first is the
metaphysical view that meaning subsists in our ability to increase our vital force. It might be quite reasonable to believe that within the individual resides an animating force. An individual who is alive retains the ability to physically express him or herself. By speaking, thinking, moving etc., the individual demonstrates that he or she is still alive. If that same individual immediately collapses and dies, something immediately changes. Whereas one can see that her body parts remain relatively intact, that ability to express herself suddenly melts away and disappears. What seems lost is not her body parts but the ability to be animate. Thus, it seems only logical for us to claim that what has disappeared is that animating character – that force. There are also good reasons to believe that this force is non-physical. While other physical parts of the individual are present, we cannot deny that – within the realms of our common-sense – something else has left the individual that is not part of his body. Since we cannot seem to readily point at this animating character that leaves our physical bodies when we die, we can begin to have good reasons to think that this animating character is at least non-physical. This is folk psychology.

Whereas there are good reasons to have certain common-sense beliefs about the existence of this non-physical vital force, a deeper examination of our reasons for thinking that they exist allows us to plausibly question and deny this intuition. To think, speak, will, create, move, secrete etc., are all acts that suggest animation but like I had stated earlier, these acts are not attributes, not of force, but of the human brain, the nervous system and/or the human body in general. When we die, it is not the animating character that leaves our bodies, it is simply the fact that our brain ceases to function. Indeed, individuals who are severely brain-damaged and comatose, do not express this animation that we speak of, even though they are medically alive. If this claim is true, then our intuitions about the existence of vital force and its relationship with the human body are implausible. If these intuitions are implausible, then we cannot speak of the vital force as something that is real. This, in turn, allows us to deny any allusions to a vital force theory of meaning since vital forces (spiritually speaking) do not exist like we think they do. By denying the possibility of a vital force we are claiming that a reference to a spiritual vital force is a reference to something that
does not exist – a reference to nothing. This would then mean that making claims to meaning by referencing the act of increasing one’s vital force would not make any sense since the reference to vital forces, and the effects that vital forces may have, is a reference to nothing.

Although the scepticism expressed above denies the vital force theory because of some of its basic metaphysical assumptions, another attempt to salvage the theory is possible. This involves reinterpreting, and understanding, the supernatural account of the vital force theory in naturalist terms. In this regard, the idea of a vital force will be viewed – not in terms of the spiritual – but in purely natural terms like well-being, creative power, etc. (Dzobo 1992; Kasenene 1994; Metz 2012). Vitality or liveliness is then perceived as some form of emergent property that arises from an improved wellbeing, whether in bodily terms and/or psychological terms. So, meaningfulness in this instance would involve doing those things that generally connote an optimum improvement in one’s wellbeing. Wellbeing here would be more akin to Metz’s idea of liveliness and creative power (Metz, 2012). This would generally involve taking care of one’s body and engaging in those positive activities or relationships (especially in relation to other people) that generally improves one’s self to the fullest. Thus, by seeking to achieve this perfect and profound state by trying to improve one’s self, the individual’s life becomes ultimately meaningful and fulfilled.

While this is one way of understanding the view, this idea can also be fine-tuned and given a different look. In the first instance, when we speak about a naturalist account of vitality or liveliness (I now use these two terms interchangeably), ideas like creativity, child-rearing, productivity, confidence, strength of will etc., immediately come to mind.

I subsume these cluster of ideas under one heading – creative power. Thus, expressing liveliness or vitality – in the context of what makes life meaningful and not generally speaking – would involve the different modes of expressing one’s creative power.

In actively engaging this creative power, what is pointed to is the expression of one’s rational will and for its own sake. This immediately demonstrates that liveliness, understood in this sense, is something that transcends animal nature and corals esteem. Thus, Michelangelo creating
the statue of David would count as something meaningful since it fully demonstrates his or her creative power. Likewise, the individual who strives to achieve harmony in his or her society also expresses creative power. This latter example alerts us to the fact that creative power is not only understood in terms of productivity but also in terms of one’s strength of will.

From the foregoing, we see that the naturalist version of the vital force theory stands as a plausible account of the vital force theory of meaning. The idea of creative power initially seems to suggest that this theory also possesses some form of subjectivity. While I agree that subjectivity is important in any account of meaning, I aver that the naturalist vital force theory only expresses a weak subjective character. This is so because whereas it appeals to an internal good (creative power or even the strength of will), such an appeal is distinct from the intrinsic drive to yearn and strive for an object of meaning passionately. That Michelangelo, through his creative genius and sheer will, painstakingly painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, appears to be a different proposition from the claim that Michelangelo subjectively decided to invest his creative genius in painting the Sistine Chapel as a source of meaning. For me, the latter claim constitutes a more appropriate account of meaning – especially from Michelangelo’s point of view. This point is even more poignant if it turned out to be the case that Michelangelo was forced by Pope Sixtus to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel on the pain of being impaled or if he attached no significance to the artwork and only thought of it like any other job for which he was commissioned to carry out.

4.3.3. The Communal Normative Function Theory of Meaning

We stated earlier in the previous chapter that one theory of meaning that may subsist as an African account is the communal normative function theory. It is ‘African’ not because only Africans are capable of communal normativity and neither is it African on the basis that the theory, so stated, is built only for Africans and cannot or should not be tapped into by humans elsewhere in the world. It is African because most traditional African peoples are associated with communal normativity and/or are more inclined to possess a communal mindset than, say, Western Europeans.
and North American peoples. In describing the theory, I claimed that a meaningful life was one that invested in those acts that aim for the common good (in relation to the community which the individual belongs) so that in doing so, the individual allows for harmony and a mutual complementarity rather than those actions that generally enable discord whether as a human person or as/with an ancestor. In essence, a meaningful life would, therefore, be one that attains or significantly strives to attain harmony and/or full human flourishing through communal normative functionality. A meaningless life would be the opposite of this, i.e. one that, at the very least, expresses an indifferent attitude to a personal striving for a realisation of one’s humanness and/or human flourishing, or in the worst-case scenario, expresses a personal striving for those acts that cause discord and/or disables the common good. Reminding ourselves of these facts will aid us in deciding whether the communal normative theory of meaning can subsist as credible theory of meaning.

I start off by pointing out what is most obvious in this conception of meaning and that is the fact that the only values considered as purveyors of meaning are moral/normative values and those values that are tied to a communal harmony. In effect, non-moral actions would be considered unsuitable as values that may offer meaning as far as those non-moral values offer nothing to the communal good or a harmonic experience. Hence, certain self-delineated values would be disavowed as sources of meaning even if some of these values are usually thought of as meaningful. Consider the following: suppose that beyond eating for the sake of quenching hunger, there is an individual who finds herself basically obsessed with food. On the basis of this obsession, she spends her whole life investigating different types of food all around the world, exploring how they are made and learning how to cook them. She not only goes around the world to learn (even in rough and harmful conditions), she also finds eating these different foods most pleasurable in-itself. It is obvious that for this lady, the love for food and discovering food overcomes her entire being and she knows it. For her, what makes her life most meaningful is immersing herself in the culinary world and just for the sake of it. In this example we notice certain things. First, the value of her love
for food is a non-moral value – i.e. it bears no relation to ideas about rightness or wrongness and as such cannot be adjudged as right or wrong – which says nothing of, and adds nothing to, any perceived communal good, and as such, bears no real normative function. She is also not a chef, whose culinary expertise would then be of use to the community at large. Second, the value of her love for food appears to be something intrinsic and personal to the lady involved and barely flows out to anyone around her. Now, within the context of the communal normative theory, whatever is meaningful must allow the promotion of the common good and the enabling environment for harmony.

The value expressed in the above example barely meets any of the criteria necessary for meaning as far as the communal normative function theory is concerned. Attaining personhood, according to Menkiti (2004, p. 326), is tied to an ontological process and progression that is inexorably linked to the community. The value of the love for food is not prima facie something one would consider part of this process, at least in the African sense. Also, because the value of the love of food is something personal and inherent in the individual (in this case the lady involved), the common good or communal harmony is not considered as part of the rationale behind the acknowledgement of that value, neither does it produce an after-effect that would influence harmony or the common good.

Although one can argue that this value elicits happiness that in turn puts the lady in the right frame of mind to be more inclined towards a communal good, a counter-argument would be the fact that there are many things that can offer the same effect. For the thief who steals from others to make a girlfriend happy or the airline traffic controller who decides to indulge in the use of cocaine to stay active and ensure no human life is lost under his watch etc., it seems counterintuitive to accept these route to happiness as reasonable especially in relation putting the individual in the right frame of mind to seek for harmony. The argument would thus be that using happiness as one way to ensure an inclination towards the common good is quite unattractive as there are many routes to happiness that are either moral, non-moral, immoral etc. From the foregoing it would then seem that
the whole life and full-time dedication to food, expressed by the lady in the example above, does not count as a purveyor of meaning and as such her life would be meaningless within the purview of the communal normative function. But this, for me, sounds a bit odd and hard to accept, and most people would be intuitively willing to accept that her passionate pursuit of different cuisines constitutes her moment(s) of meaningfulness. Indeed, the lady involved would only continue on her path, on the basis of the fact that by dedicating her life to rationally comprehending every facet, context and history of any food she encounters transcends mere animal pleasures; elicits the proper emotions like the emotional and rational satisfaction she feels as she tries to understand the histories and experiences surrounding the creation of the meals she encounters; and involves an intrinsic pursuit of a goal (since it is subjectively derived). Factors that make her life meaningful. One can then argue that the communal normative function theory of meaning is at least narrow and considers only those purveyors of meaning that are instrumental to communal harmony, disregarding those that may be meaningful without recourse to communal harmony or personhood as understood in traditional African beliefs. Instrumental value, like I have previously stated, is not sufficient for as Cottingham retorts, a life is ‘Far better, far more meaningful (as Hooker indeed concedes), if there can be a fit between the [individual’s] aspirations and the good he achieves’ (Cottingham, 2008, p. 262). The point here being that one’s aspirations, even those that are not captured in terms of their communal value, are equally important.

Perhaps one way of making the communal approach more accommodating is by taking Dismas Masolo’s (Masolo, 2013, pp. 185-234) account of communitarianism more seriously. Masolo thinks that unlike certain popular intuitions, communitarianism does not mean a total and absolute submission to the community. In fact, for him, the human being is born as his/her own person (distinct from others, especially biologically) and only grows to acquire those communal habits that are specific to his/her culture (Masolo, 2013, pp. 185-204). Communitarianism, as he understands it, is basically thought of in a relational sense, where values are learnt by the relatively autonomous individual by engaging with his/her community. A relational sort of communitarianism
would then seem to widen the scope of the communal normative theory since the fealty to the community seems to be epistemic (i.e. learning norms, morals, traditions, etc., by engaging with the community).

However, I wonder if this idea would speak up in defence of a path of meaningfulness that is at odds with what the community teaches. So, suppose one felt that meaningfulness would involve something that is not akin to her/his cultural background – say marriage to a loving partner of the same-sex. Would that path to meaningfulness be well received or morally frowned upon? Would that relative autonomy truly push through the furrows of that frown? I do not think that it will.

Another argument that may question the normative function theory of meaning also lies in the drive towards the communal good and shares great similarities with an argument I had made in the previous section. With the idea of harmony and the full realisation of one’s personhood both hinged on communal normativity, it appears to me that there is some alienation between the individual himself and the community, with the latter seemingly taking precedence. Although Gyekye (1992, pp. 101-108) had, in his critique of Menkiti and Mbiti, derided the radical communitarianism they professed and instead opted for a moderate communitarianism where the individual is somewhat recognised, the fact still remains, that for most traditional Africans, the community or the common good always overshadows individual rights or preferences (Famakinwa, 2010).

For the young person who must be sacrificed to ensure the health of the community or to appease a malevolent Ngozi (Mutekwa, 2010; Musanga, 2017) or to pay a blood debt (Achebe, 2009), the individual preference to remain alive and in one’s home is not necessarily considered paramount to the discussion since the fate of the community is at stake. These sorts of submission to the community do not take into account whether the type of communitarianism practised is radical or moderate. This is mainly due to the fact that although the individual’s rights are important, the sustenance of the community is more important since what is of paramount interest is
communal relations – the loss of one individual does not offer the same catastrophic loss of communion that the loss of a whole community would.

Thus, in the alienation of the individual (preferences) from the communal, it would not seem too far-fetched to argue that even though the individual is thought of as immersed in the community, there is a demarcation between the two that allows one to think that normative communal values (or at least some of them) are external to the individual. One is born originally cultureless but nevertheless introduced into the culture of the community that he or she is born. Culture and the normative values embedded in it are not initially intrinsic to the person. It is only later introduced to the individual through extensive education and participation in various rites and practices. As a separate entity different from the community, one is morally obligated to serve a communal purpose that is primarily for the sake of the community. The human person and the normative function s/he performs is only a means to an end i.e. communal harmony.

As I have claimed in the previous section, that sort of instrumental value would subsist as an unattractive purveyor of meaningfulness. Closely associated with the foregoing line of thinking is the argument that because communal normativity amongst Africans is often seen as obligatory and a matter of duty, it would be difficult to consider it an attractive purveyor of meaning on the basis of the fact that moral obligations are almost automatic (i.e. not a matter of choice, insofar as an individual wants to be moral). We have moral obligations to do many things like vote, obey the law, treat others like we would ourselves etc., but it is hardly the case that performing these acts in themselves constitute meaning in life even though they also serve the common good in some ways. Thus, if a drive towards harmony or normativity is seen as only a moral obligation, then it would lose its flavour as a candidate for meaning.

A plausible reply to this sort of thinking might be that there are certain moral acts that transcend mere obligation just as there are certain acts that transcend our animal nature. That individuals die in service to their community or that Bill Gates offers a vast portion of his wealth to fight polio in service to Africa are not the sort of moral obligation that is commonplace or the norm.
Indeed, the average citizen does not find it necessary to engage so much in service of the community (much more die for it) and the average billionaire does not find it necessary to donate a huge chunk of his/her wealth in service to his/her own community, much more another community that s/he does not belong to. Thus, there are certain acts that transcend mere obligation or duty and seem meaningful by virtue of their moral currency.

While this is a plausible response, let us not forget that our obligations ought to be in relation to what’s best for the community. This is a broad consideration – and perhaps one that covers self-transcendent sorts of moral acts. This is why it is not seen as abnormal that in precolonial African societies one could die for the sake of his/her community as a human sacrifice and do so with a sense of duty, despite the gravity of that sacrifice. This is why today, in most African societies, comfortable or well-to-do individuals are expected to help in the progress of their societies or people in their immediate societies without invoking the feeling that this act is some sort of transcendental messianic good. Thus, within the context of African communalism, that one fosters harmony – say by helping another individual – is first considered a duty and not necessarily some spectacular moral sacrifice.

From the arguments relating to how the individual’s obligation towards personhood, the common good and harmony appear to be something external to the individual, we are reminded of the second way in which meaning can be thought of in communal terms. Like I stated earlier in the previous chapter, beyond communal normative function (but related to it), meaning can also be thought of as subsisting in a simple communal acknowledgment of a life as meaningful – the criteria for such a recognition would obviously be dependent on the individual’s commitment to the common good and communal harmony. Through a communal acknowledgement, even after the individual dies, his/her life is still considered meaningful and revered as such. A prime example would be the life of Nelson Mandela. Through his constant striving for racial equality and the demise of apartheid, most South Africans, as members of his community, would continue to consider his life meaningful even now, after his demise.
Again, arguments about the value (in terms of meaning) of instrumental values as sources of meaning can be made here. Another argument is that there is something that disconnects the individual from an external recognition of meaning and makes it alien to the individual whose life is adjudged as meaningful. I am inclined to believe that beyond an individual’s recognition of certain values or his/her life as meaningful, any outside recognition is lost to the individual. Whereas it is hard to dismiss with a wave of hand a communal acknowledgement, a willing individual recognition of the acts (which is adjudged by the community as purveyors of meaning) as meaningful is needed. Let us suppose for instance that Nelson Mandela considered his anti-apartheid heroics as a mere duty and nothing special but instead considered his love and devotion to his wife as something fulfilling and meaningful. Notwithstanding the fact that his community may consider his fight against apartheid as the reason why his life is meaningful and irrespective of the fact that, in most traditional African belief systems, the community supersedes the individual, Mr. Mandela would always consider his devotion to his wife as what offered moments of meaningfulness in his life. I am inclined to believe that in this sense, although the communal view is important, the individual view is more important (I shall present more arguments qualifying and supporting this claim in the subsequent section of this chapter). Now to avoid confusion, let me make it expressly clear that when I make arguments (and give examples) about purely objective types of meaning, I do not speak merely about significant actions. Examples of this type only express meaningfulness in terms of objectivity.

Beyond these arguments and criticisms, I do indeed consider the communal normative theory of meaning a credible theory of meaning, only insofar as the individual life involved consciously chooses to invest in communal normativity as a function of meaning in his/her life. Although I am willing to accept that the communal normative function theory can stand as a theory of meaning if one invests in it, it must be remembered that the theory is still a narrow one and cannot account for other routes to meaningfulness.
4.3.4. **Consolationism**

Consolationism stands as a new and novel theory of meaning and one that is quite interesting. For Agada, meaning simply lies in the pursuit and yearning for freedom and/or perfection. He further argues that, whereas this divine purpose and end can never be achieved, we encounter moments of – what he terms – ‘joy’ (i.e. moments of meaningfulness) and it is these moments of joy that console us when we encounter the melancholy involved in realising that what is yearned for is simply unattainable.

Agada’s consolationist path is a compelling one and his attendant views on the meaning of life (as explained earlier) are somewhat persuasive. Nevertheless, there are loose ends and inconsistencies (as I shall identify presently) that invariably question his position and arguments. As minuscule parts and barely significant specks of the known universe, it is hard for humans to categorically claim knowledge about whether the universe has a purpose whether divine or not. For one to possess such knowledge, the universe must be a conscious entity and must indeed have a purpose that it is itself consciously aware of. Second, an external investigator, wishing to understand the purpose of the universe must necessarily be able to extricate herself from the universe itself and examine it in its entirety – assumptions based on nearly infinitesimal parts of the universe cannot present the whole picture with regards to its meaning. Beyond this, the main claim to purposefulness lies in Agada’s claim that the striving for progress in the universe clearly shows a drive towards perfection – evolution, for instance. However, the leap from identifying certain causal dispositions – outcomes that would almost always follow from a certain state of affairs – and equating these with claims about purpose is one that is not tenable. If the above is true, then one needs to accept Agada’s claim of a purposeful universe with a pinch of salt.

With regards to the human person, meaning is invariably envisioned by Agada to be a *yearning in futility* i.e. a yearning for that which cannot be achieved – perfection. The acknowledgement of our inability to ever achieve transcendental freedom i.e. absolute perfection as well as the joy of our existence/yearning, fluidly reacts in the crucible that is the human person to
create consolation – the very substance that for Agada, represents the proper mood of living with inability to grasp the meaning of life. As contributors to the ever-continuing yearning of the universe for freedom, our purpose – the meaning of our existence – is to continue yearning for that freedom even though it is beyond our reach. Although noble, Agada’s position here appears suspect. Humans, if anything, do possess freewill as well as the intellectual capacity to search for meaning personal to themselves and different from that of a universe. For humans, yearning for perfection may not necessarily be the meaning of life for the individual per se, even though it corresponds with the alleged purpose of the universe. The purpose of the universe, if any, seems to be external and alien to the human person, and any drive towards a universal purpose is more automatic than it is conscious (the same way evolution is). Meaning for us involves conscious choice – the ability of an individual or thing to choose for itself what meaning it wishes to ascribe to itself. Thus, whereas a mule may be meaningful to a human being as a beast of burden (external meaning), it may be wrong to conclude that for the mule, the meaning of its life is being a beast of burden. This immediately calls into question the idea that the meaning of a person’s life is merely the yearning for a purpose that is chosen for her by the universe – an idea that is itself doubtful.

4.4. Towards a Proper Theory of Meaning in Life

In the previous sections and chapter, I attempted to tackle the question of meaning from an African perspective and identified some theories of meaning that arise from the traditional African worldview. I have also questioned the credibility of these theories of meaning as real sources of meaning and found that for these theories, although they can stand as theories of meaning, they only do so with certain necessary tweaks viz. the rejection of contested metaphysical views. I also claim that even with these tweaks, they are narrow theories of meaning that may not be able to stand as the only theories of meaning, largely because they cannot give intrinsic weight to subjective aspiration. In my recognition of the various flaws of the theories I have previously outlined, I am inspired to propose a new theory of meaning in life, in response to the frailty of the traditional and
also revised African conceptions of meaning. What I propose is therefore a rival conception of meaning that may not be seen as a characteristically traditional African view but rather one that emerges from the brain of an African, in response to the typically traditional African view and one that I think avoids the problems of the African views. I call this theory of meaning the ‘passionate yearning theory of meaning’.

4.4.1. The Passionate Yearning Theory

In describing what this theory proposes, it is important to note that this theory is hinged on certain foundational criteria and ideas that I shall explain presently. They are important because I find them necessary to any understanding of meaning that is worth considering. One of such cardinal principles is the principle of truth.

In our everyday experiences, we attribute truth values (true or false) to certain matters of fact and statements of claim. So, ‘it is raining outside’ or ‘Nelson is tall’ are all statements that we can ascribe a truth value to, and this is contrasted with other meaningful sentences such as commands or questions to which we may not be able to ascribe truth value. Our commonsensical notions about what truth is, is generally understood to be that truth is ‘the condition of the real, genuine, authentic, or factual’ (Crowe, 2016). Thus, what is true describes a state of affairs as it is in-itself, as generally opposed to how it is not, how it ought to be or how we like to imagine it. In philosophy, the various contentions about truth stem from understanding ‘how we know’ and ‘how best to know’, a problem that has grown with the rise of perspectivism and relativism and led to the emergence of various theories of truth such as the correspondence, coherence, pragmatic, deflationist, realist/anti-realist etc. (Engels, 2014; Glanzberg, 2016; Capps, 2017). Now, because this dissertation is not focused on describing theories of truth, I shall not strive to describe these theories in detail. I only mention them as background knowledge related to why I believe truth is an important factor in any theory of meaning.
Metz (2013a) had made claims suggesting that with regards to supernaturalist theories of meaning, the existence of a supernatural being is not a necessary condition for considering a supernaturalist theory plausible. In his words, the ‘view is about what would confer meaning on life and does not imply that these conditions obtain’ (Metz, 2013a, p. 80). What is implied here is that even materialists can subscribe to a theory of meaning that locates meaning in the supernatural as the emphasis is not focused necessarily on the truth value of the claim but rather on the sufficiency of the theory as a theory of meaning. It may be perfectly rational to think so, but I hesitate to agree fully that the truth value of the claim is largely unimportant with regards to how one understands a theory of meaning. Suppose I imagine that a life spent in an imaginary island, Utopia, worshipping a winged camel would ensure good health, a longer life, a fair distribution of resources and other conditions that would be relevant to meaning. And suppose I am able to build a theory clearly describing how such a life would be meaningful. It seems to me that Metz’s view would intuitively hold that it is prima facie reasonable to say that our lives would be meaningful if we considered the scenario outlined above despite the fact that the claims inherent in that theory may or may not hold. But it is not true, and inconceivable, that such an existence is possible and it is difficult to accept such a theory as a viable theory of meaning since that which does not exist cannot be said to have the ability to influence or confer anything on something that does exist. To then relegate the facticity of a claim to the background is in my mind unattractive and fails to distinguish claims about meaning from wishful thinking. Truth is used in this sense to imply the facticity and reality of a claim, and as such, is important to any theory of meaning on the basis of the fact that it is only those things that are real, or those ideas that are based on fact, that are capable of influencing or conferring the quality of meaningfulness on any theory of meaning.

Arguments can also be made for ideas that follow from true facts. For instance, it is true that there is some justice and injustice in the world. Since justice grants us some sense of satisfaction and injustice allows the exact opposite, one can conveniently claim that more justice may allow for more satisfaction. This is a reasonable claim to make and one that follows from a factual claim. So,
in this sense, claims about meaning that follow from a factual claim – insofar as those claims remain logically consistent – can be allowed. However, if the claims are in-themselves factually untrue and inconceivable – like ideas about the island of utopia above – or fail to logically follow, then such claims must be abandoned. Thus, for instance, the originally described African God purpose theory or the soul/vital force theory or in fact, any such supernaturalist theory of meaning, would be plausible, if and only if claims about the supernatural are real (or at least conceivable) and if those claims conceivably presuppose the possibility of a conferral of some meaning in our lives by those supernatural realities.

Another cardinal idea necessary for any understanding of meaning stems from the moral status of that which serves as a purveyor of meaning. It is often assumed (perhaps even unconsciously) that for anything to count as a purveyor of meaning, it must assume a moral character or at least, not be immoral. This assumption is most profound if one believes that there are some objective characteristics of what would constitute a meaningful life because more often than not, these objective characteristics are usually drawn from moral norms and what is thought of as good behaviour. There is a good reason to accept that morality, or at least a lack of immorality, plays a great role in defining what is meaningful as it plays on our initial intuitions. For instance, let us imagine the life of John Doe who finds the thrill and aesthetic value in collecting beautiful artworks as that which makes his life meaningful. Let us also suppose that as an art collector John Doe discovers that to retrieve any artwork that is of any aesthetic value, he must either bribe museum curators, buy art illegally in the black market or violently raid indigenous villages – he engages in these acts. There is no doubt that the illegalities of John Doe’s actions raise serious moral questions that render John Doe’s passionate drive towards art collection immoral and a less attractive claim to meaningfulness. In fact, in comparing John Doe’s life to one that possessed moral value such as the life of Nelson Mandela, it would be quite rational to consider Mandela’s life as meaningful and John Doe’s life as a direct opposite. Furthermore, comparing John Doe’s life with one whose meaningfulness possesses a non-moral value (such as the life of the lady who finds
meaning in exploring food – the example I gave earlier), the former still comes off as a less attractive life and one that is not meaningful, perhaps on the basis of the moral value it possesses (that is, the immorality of John Doe’s genocidal tendency).

What the above suggests is that there seems to be an unbreakable link between moral value and meaning with moral and some non-moral actions considered as sufficient for meaning, and immoral actions considered not meaningful or meaningless. The question however still remains: is there any reason for one to believe that moral value is a necessary factor in deciding what lives are meaningful and which ones are not? My initial reaction to this question is to reject the claim that moral value is a necessary factor in deciding which lives are meaningful (Wolf, 2010, pp. 3-8), and although this reaction is counter-intuitive, I shall strive to explain why I believe it is the case presently. As humans, we tend to tie morality (and/or non-morality) in a false relationship with meaningfulness especially when meaningfulness is not judged by the subject whose life is under scrutiny but on a set of objective criteria and/or by individual(s) external to the subject. Our instincts towards self-preservation coupled with the realization that morality is usually in our interests and non-morality does not necessarily cause us harm unlike immoral attitudes, enables the sort of reasoning that allows us to almost always prefer acts that are moral to acts that are immoral. This same preference flows through in our judgments about meaningful and meaningless lives. However, there is nothing that suggests that claims about meaningfulness must always coalesce with these primitive preferences i.e. morality. If anything, our preferences only show that our external judgments about meaningfulness, as tied to morality, are driven by the instrumental values we place on other lives as means to our collective ends.

Thus, one of the cardinal points necessary for an understanding of meaningfulness is the idea that morality is not a necessary criterion for meaningfulness. The implication of this line of thinking is the bold claim that even immoral lives can be considered meaningful insofar as it complies with the criteria I have and will set out subsequently. I am however willing to concede that although moral value does nothing by itself to decide what life is meaningful, it is possible to
employ it as a sufficient yardstick for deciding the degree or level of meaningfulness a life possesses.

At the base is a merely meaningful life and this base is generally occupied by lives whose purveyors of meaning perhaps possess an immoral character. Next to this would be a life that is meaningful in non-moral terms and after that would be a life that is meaningful for moral terms. With this gradation of meaningfulness in view, John Doe’s life would be meaningful in-itself but not more meaningful that Lady X’s (whose culinary pursuit is seen as non-moral) life and both lives would not be as meaningful as Nelson Mandela’s. The importance of the idea of the gradation of meaning is, therefore, this: that whereas it is reasonable, attractive and desirable to lead a meaningful life, it would be more desirable and attractive to lead a life that is morally meaningful, so long as the individual identifies with such a project.

The third cardinal idea for this theory of meaning is the idea of intrinsic subjectivity (I will use the term ‘intrinsic-subjectivity’ and ‘subjectivity’ interchangeably). Roughly described, subjectivity (conventionally speaking) can be generally defined as the view that meaningfulness subsists in whatever the individual whose life is under scrutiny considers meaningful (Taylor, 1970, pp. 322-325; Markus, 2003; Hooker, 2008). I stretch this view even further with the idea of intrinsic subjectivity. What this would mean is that insofar as an individual can identify with a certain act or attitude as meaningful, then it is meaningful to some degree (Calhoun, 2015).

Subjectivist theories can be classified in terms of an extreme subjectivism or moderate subjectivism. Extreme subjectivism generally comprises those views that meaningfulness resides in whatever the individual who owns that life decides is meaningful and as such a meaningful life is nothing other than one that is considered meaningful, and strictly so, by the individual whose life is under scrutiny. Moderate subjectivism, on the other hand, can be understood in terms of a theory that acknowledges some objective purveyors of meaning but locates meaning in the individual’s decision to pursue those objective meanings (Wolf, 2010, p. 110). Sometimes, it is not an objective meaning that is set out but some objective criteria for meaning that must guide any conception of
meaning and without which meaningfulness is not achieved. Subjectivism in its most extreme form is usually thought of as unattractive (Markus, 2003, p. 125) because the criteria for meaningfulness are bound to the attitudes and feelings of the individual that may sometimes be whimsical. For instance, if Lady X suddenly decides that her culinary pursuits no longer capture what she imagines makes her life meaningful and then decides that the pursuit of aesthetic pleasure is more attractive (and continues to make these sort of changes), one must – as the extreme view goes – continue to grant and change what makes her life meaningful on the basis of changes in her feelings. I agree that this sort of subjectivism is indeed unattractive as I believe that there are some criteria that guide what we may consider meaningful. Notwithstanding, there appears to be something authentic about the experience of meaningfulness that can only subsist in a subjectivist outlook, rather than on a purely objective one. The major premise here is that meaningfulness must make sense to the individual specifically and must not be disconnected from him. Intuitively, it would seem odd to claim that one’s life is meaningful if such a meaningfulness is lost on the individual. Related to this premise is the view that meaningfulness must not be disconnected from the agent whose life is under review even if his/her life appears meaningful to others. Again, the feeling of meaning is lost on the individual and instead makes sense to others who are external to him/her.

Thus, even if Nelson Mandela’s life appears meaningful to those around him because of his life-long fight against apartheid for example, if we suppose that in his thinking, his fight against apartheid bore no meaning to him and was only a normal/obligatory part of his life, the same way that paying his taxes was, then we would have to suppose that Nelson Mandela’s freedom-fighting activities would not be deemed meaningful. It would seem (and I am willing to accept) that his personal feelings do bear some currency and may be of more importance than the feelings of others on the matter. Thus, objective putative meaningful acts that do not involve an intrinsic acknowledgement from the part of the individual would not count as meaningful act. The imposition of an objective meaning on something and a request to recognise such an imposition as meaningful, insofar as the individual on which it is imposed does not recognise, acknowledge or
pursue such an imposition, is simply a misrecognition – as far as that individual is concerned. Like the sacrificial goat, insofar as it is averse to death, we cannot consider its human imposed meaning of being a sacrificial lamb as meaningful. The variety in opinion with regards to what constitutes a meaningful life only supports this claim as it would be odd to claim that an act or moment in a life is meaningful on the basis of an external conception of meaning. Meaning, I believe, is essentially, even if not exhaustively, a personal matter – something that must involve free actions, what Harry Frankfurt calls willingness (Locke & Frankfurt, 1975, pp. 117-118).

In relation to my conclusions above, I identify two sets of arguments that may be levelled against claims to subjectivity in meaning. The first is outlined by Metz (2013a, p. 175). He writes:

Not only would it entail that Sisyphus’s life could be meaningful merely for having fulfilled a desire to roll a stone, it would also entail that a person’s existence could become significant by merely staying alive (Kekes 1986: 81); harming others (Dahl 1987: 12); growing more corn to feed more hogs to buy more land to grow more corn…ad infinitum (Wiggins 1988: 137)…[etc].

The point being made here by Metz is that intuitively ridiculous (especially as it relates to immoral and non-moral) claims to meaning would usually pass the subjective test, but, as I stated earlier, I employ a moderate sort of subjectivism that allows for certain objective guides (facticity) which would delineate what would count as truly meaningful, insofar as that meaning is intrinsically derived. Since it is true that these objective factual guides would help in *enhancing* meaningfulness, one can also make the claim that while some meaning can be derived from seemingly ridiculous but intrinsically derived types of pursuits, the individual should only seek the most attractive form of intrinsically derived meaning (as guided by factual claims) as opposed to least attractive forms of meaning (for instance, the type of meaning that may be derived from being a serial killer).

Thus in the case of Mother Teresa who neither loves the needy nor finds her helping of the needy as something pleasurable, or the person who volunteers to be alienated from her projects so that others won’t be alienated from theirs (Metz, 2013a, pp. 135, 183), one can claim that meaning
is possible in both cases, but only insofar those acts were intrinsically derived and acknowledged (the displeasure of doing so notwithstanding). What is important is not the subjective pleasure derived from the act or even the fact that her acts are valued by others, what is important is that those acts are intrinsically derived, factually consistent and wilfully followed despite their consequences.

Also, if one were to suddenly decide that a previously subjectively derived claim to meaningfulness was no longer meaningful, such a claim would not mean an automatic deprivation of meaning. As I see it, this new claim would first have to pass through the facticity test i.e. questions about whether the reasons for claiming that such a life is no longer meaningful are factually true would have to be asked. If it is the case that those reasons are sufficient, then one must abandon that claim to meaning – one must then suspect that the initial claim to meaningfulness was incorrect all along. Thus, if we suppose that Mother Theresa helped the poor in order to fulfil God’s purpose for her and also suppose that Mother Theresa determined it to be true that God did appear to her to inform her of this purpose, only to discover that she was deceived by a master hypnotist who is not God, then it would be fair for her to assume that helping the poor was not God’s purpose for her life and that helping the poor could no longer constitute meaningfulness, insofar as she considers God’s purpose as what makes her life meaningful.

The second criticism one can levy against subjectivism stems from the African view of communal function and is the idea that meaning can (and maybe should) proceed from what I term a communal-perceptive-objectivity rather than from mere individualistic and subjective opinions. In this sense, a life is sufficiently meaningful if a community of other individuals finds that that life is meaningful based on some obviously objective criteria. Beyond the arguments about instrumental value that I had earlier presented, it seems right to agree that, at the very least, this communal acknowledgement of meaningfulness is important in some way. It is precisely for this reason that most individuals would prefer to think that even after death, the meaningfulness of their lives continues through this communal acknowledgement and it is also the reason procreation and the
reverence of ancestors (Mbiti, 1990; Menkiti, 2004a) is important. It is also argued, with regards to this idea, that this communal acknowledgement should, in fact, surpass subjective judgments in terms of importance.

Nevertheless, I still find individual subjectivism supremely attractive. Whereas the views of others are important, I (the individual) am the sole instructor of what is meaningful despite the ‘other’ and, therefore, more important. I am important because, stretching the communal argument further, it is possible to count communal opinions as singularities (i.e. as individual opinions). I shall explain what I mean presently.

Suppose that a community, ‘x’, decides on what actions would enhance harmony and therefore count as what makes a meaningful life and proceeds to label individual lives meaningful based on these criteria. We would think of one individual (as we do now) as a single voice that must now accept that communal acknowledgement. However, suppose we juxtaposed community x’s views with those of communities ‘p’, ‘q’ and ‘r’ who all agree and accept that a set of different principles (different from those of community x) constitutes what meaning in life is. The initial intuition is to hold that meaning as understood by community x would still stand but perhaps only for members of community x and/or those who subscribe to their views. Perhaps, the argument would be that those in community x are privy to certain views, preferences and experiences that may not be available to those in communities p, q and r, and can legitimately make claims about meaning that are different from the other communities. We can even further extend this scenario, with the human race as the community as opposed to other alien races. What is noticeable is the transformation of the community into a subjective singularity when faced with a larger ‘other’. Communal meaning becomes subjective meaning. It is, therefore, odd that it seems counterintuitive to impose the arguments against subjective individualism in this scenario – we readily accept subjectivism in communal terms for certain reasons and then at the same time, suddenly claim that those reasons are invalid when applied to an individual person. Even if we suppose that it is necessary to bite the bullet and claim that when faced with a larger other, the community must
abandon its objective (now subjective) purveyors of meaning, it would not be far-fetched to assume that such an abandonment would continue, perhaps infinitely, insofar as we can think of the possibility of a larger and differing other.

A plausible reply to the criticism levelled above can be that community is a more reliable judge of what is, in fact, meaningful than an individual, even if its views do not make it the case that it is meaningful. It is not a far-fetched claim to suppose that consensus among experts is a powerful sort of justification even in the domain of meaning.

However, I am still inclined to assert that that sort of consensual justification, insofar as it does not tally with the individual’s intrinsic subjective aspirations, may find itself still open to the criticisms/ideas offered above. Questions that are addressed to whose judgment (or personal opinion) is adequate, why one should consider the judgments of one’s own community experts over the community experts of other community and over the position of the individual’s opinion in all this, draw our attention to the fact that perhaps a communal effort at describing meaning might not be the best approach since the individual still seems alienated from what makes her life meaningful. In fact, it is rather drab to suggest that one may not have the capacity to internally and rigorously derive what makes one’s life meaningful – not exercising this capacity itself might be regarded as a hindrance to human flourishing itself. It is for the aforementioned reasons that I find subjectivism to be a crucial part of the theory of meaning I am proposing.

The final cardinal ideas of my theory of meaning are a combination of concepts that I shall describe together. These concepts are passion, yearning and striving. In describing how these concepts are important to our understanding of meaning, it is important that we first explain what we mean exactly when we use these terms. Passion generally connotes an intense fervour, zeal, inclination and dedication about/towards a certain thing, the degree of which is usually above what is normally obtained. In other words, it involves an intense desire that is directed towards a person or a thing. Passion can elicit both physical and rational pleasures – a pleasure that is still recognisable even when that which is the object of passion causes some pain. In this sense, one
might be passionate about football or a football team and still find that passion fulfilling even if painful events, such as bad refereeing decisions or a loss, are a constant feature of football and football teams. Thus, one can even claim that passions transcend ordinary pains or pleasures.

The second concept that I must define is ‘yearning,’ and although it is very closely related to passion and sometimes even used synonymously, I find a slight distinction that necessitates an examination of the concept on its own. Yearning involves a longing for someone or something, especially for something that is not immediately available to the individual who yearns. Whereas passion involves an active emotional inclination towards the object of passion, yearning generally involves a passive longing for a state of affairs. In this sense, one can distinguish the ‘yearning for world peace’ from a ‘passion for world peace’.

Again, one can also distinguish between a yearning for one’s wife and a passion for that wife. Understanding this slight distinction allows an understanding of why I use this concept as something distinct from passion. The use of yearning as a concept necessary in understanding meaning was inspired by Agada’s consolationism (Agada, 2015). Although Agada used the term to describe the universe’s constant yearning for a seemingly impossible state of perfection (or what he calls freedom), I use the term to describe a yearning for anything an individual subjectively wills as meaningful, insofar as it meets the criteria we have, and are attempting to set.

The third concept that I must define is the concept of ‘striving’. Striving is itself different from passion and yearning as it barely deals with one’s emotions in the way the latter concepts do. Striving not only involves a determination or the resolve towards achieving a certain goal, it involves the action of devoting great efforts towards a particular goal or aim. Striving is important to any theory of meaning because it presupposes the investments needed to immerse one’s self in that which s/he supposes grants his/her life meaning.
4.4.2. **Meaning as Passionate Yearning**

With the proper delineation of the principles I consider necessary for any theory of meaning, I shall now give a brief account of what I think constitutes meaning in life. The journey of meaningfulness begins with a subjective yearning for something. It becomes a legitimate yearning only insofar as the rationale behind it is based on some plausible objective claim to truth or facticity (as I have described previously) and it is subjective because the yearning we speak of is borne out of the will of the individual to whom the search for meaning is meaningful. By identifying what one yearns for, the individual is inspired to have a passion for that object of yearning.

This passion envelops the individual’s psyche and enables an emotional attachment to the object of yearning that inspires a strong inclination and devotion towards that object of yearning. Finally, there is the striving for what one yearns for and what one is passionate for. Striving in this sense (like I have mentioned earlier) would involve making efforts to achieve those goals that are implicit in adopting a particular object of yearning. It is this progression that defines meaning in life in my view.

So, for the individual who subjectively locates meaning in his marriage to his wife, meaning would then involve a devotion towards the pursuit of his wife and dedication to making sure his wife is happy. The period of time that this marriage subsists constitutes an episode of meaning in the life of the individual involved. This is especially true because all the criteria that allow for a meaningful life (in the context of the passionate yearning theory) has been met viz. subjectivity (it is acknowledged by the individual), facticity (his wife exists and he loves her), passion, yearning and striving (as encompassed in his devotion to his wife and his striving to make her happy).

One can draw some similarities between the passionate yearning theory and the views of Richard Taylor (1970) where the intrinsic enjoyment of certain actions is what makes a life meaningful irrespective of the overall pointlessness of our lives. So like Sisyphus, life would be meaningful insofar as Sisyphus enjoyed rolling up his rock up the hill. Whereas it is true that enjoyment involves some intrinsic subjectivity like the passionate yearning theory, it is not the same
as the passionate theory since the latter does not place priority over enjoying the act that one is involved in but rather the subjective awareness, acknowledgement and investment in that action as meaningful. Enjoyment, in this instance, is a specific emotion that suggests some form of derivable pleasure. This is naturally at odds with certain acts of meaningfulness that are subjectively acknowledged but not enjoyable. The individual who willingly saves another individual from certain death by losing a few limbs would not find such an attempt at meaning enjoyable but then that does not discount the fact that the intention on the part of the saviour is present.

By being subjectively aware or intrinsically investing in an act of meaningfulness, we can distinguish between duties and obligations from acts that are meaningful insofar as the individual is concerned. Here instances of meaning that are supposedly objective are not ultimately cast aside. What is important for the friend of the passionate yearning theory is the intrinsic willingness to invest in that act, or the acknowledgement of an act that has already been carried out, as meaningful – whether those acts are objectively desirable or subjectively derived. In this way, the individual who actively strives for harmony in his community (an objectively desirable act) and the lady (in a previous example) who decides to invest her time in exploring the various types of foods for the sake of it, is captured within the purview of this theory of meaning – Insofar as their passionate pursuits are intrinsically or subjectively derived.

By choosing a purveyor of meaning that is factually consistent, the passionate yearning theory in effect avoids intrinsic claims to meaning that are based on false premises – for instance, thinking that one’s life is meaningful if one rides a unicorn (when unicorns do not exist) or deciding that one’s life would be meaningful if one lived in an island called Utopia (when such an island does not exist).

Now it is important to note here that the passionate yearning view does not subsist as a path per se – at least not in the convoluted way that most mystics or oriental thinkers like to portray their paths to the good life. The passionate yearning view directs our attention to those conditions that I present as necessary for identifying a certain action or sets of actions as meaningful. However,
contrasting the passionate yearning theory with other views, like the those found in Buddhism, I see a sharp difference – in that the Buddhist view (Edet, 2006) seeks to rid one of the pursuits of desires while the passionate yearning theory does not place limits on human desires. Insofar as one is talking about meaning in life, I posit that the cage-mindset of Buddhist asceticism – and all other types of asceticism – that cocoons the individual into only those actions that avoid desires, limits the range of human flourishing and therefore makes the view less attractive. Indeed, it is hard to deny the meaningfulness of an act – say marriage to a loved one – on the basis of the desires that preclude it. The principles that prop up the passionate yearning theory, as well as the intrinsic subjectivity that underlies it, strive to avoid this sort of cocooning to a reasonable degree.
Chapter 5.

From the preceding chapters, we have discovered a few things in my quest to map out what might count as a theory of meaning in life from an African perspective. We have discovered that in their natural states, these African theories of meaning, as I have so defined, do not count as plausible theories of meaning. In my refinement of some of these theories, I have stated that the African God purpose theory would be plausible if we assume that the Supreme Being exists the way friends of the theory think It does, that It can supply us with meaning and that we subjectively seek to pursue that meaning. I also argued that only a naturalist account of the vital force theory, which involves the expression of one’s creative power, is plausible. Finally, I acknowledged the viability of the communal normative theory of meaning only insofar as the individual subjectively invests in that communal function as a purveyor of meaning. I thus concluded that the most plausible theory is the communal theory that finds currency in a subjective inclination towards normative function for the sake of the common good and harmony. In spite of this, I have considered these new and refined conceptions of meaning narrow and incapable of being a robust conception of meaning.

As a response to this situation, I proposed and outlined the passionate yearning theory of meaning as an alternative and much more robust theory of meaning that better accounts for basic intuitions of what would constitute meaningfulness. I further suggested that because it is nearly impossible to deny instances of meaningfulness in one’s life, it is obvious we accept that meaning in life (as understood from my earlier explanations in the second chapter) is at the very least possible. In this chapter, I present a theory of the meaning of life that I show is plausible. I argue that any ideas about the meaning of life would involve what I have termed ‘ratio-structuralism’. This is the idea that talk of the meaning of life involves claims about coherence – one that makes sense to the individual. Despite this, I further show that a lack of coherence and/or the finality of death undercuts attempts at meaningfulness and motivates meaninglessness.
5.1. The Ratio-Structural Theory of the Meaning of Life: A Brave Attempt

In the second chapter of this work, I had drawn the distinction between meaning in life and the meaning of life. While I have motivated various African theories of meaning in life (and my criticisms of them) and also my alternative view of what meaning in life entails, I have not yet stated my views about what would intuitively constitute a theory of the meaning of life. Like I stated in the second chapter when we talk about the meaning of life, we are generally referring to what makes the entire life of a human person meaningful. It is perhaps easy to give reasons regarding why one might think that the meaning of life is impossible, but it is also important that we try to understand what the ideal is, before suggesting that we lack this ideal.

Meaning in life is possible and it speaks to the various instances in our lives that we consider meaningful – that much is true. However, even though we can legitimately point to instances of meaning and even though this legitimacy is important, one cannot point to those instances of meaningfulness as always constituting a defined narrative that, perhaps, leads to a well-defined end that we are generally satisfied. In this sense, our interest here is with an individual’s life as a whole and not parts in it. It is possible to discuss both aspects of meaningfulness separately. Both aspects of meaningfulness (meaning in vs meaning of) can be spoken about in a mutually exclusive manner and without the need make judgments about whether one aspect affects the other and I have chosen not to make that judgment. It is this thinking that motivates the theory of ratio-structuralism (motivated by African thought) as a veritable theory of the meaning of life.

We can speak of a life-structure in the African sense, where we progress from birth to childhood, to adolescence (via certain rites), to adulthood (via certain rites), to marriage, to parenthood, to death, to ancestorhood and then to fragmentation (as a nameless dead). What this points to is the view that for life as a whole to be considered meaningful, there must be structure to its various parts. It is not enough that we have random instances of meaningfulness scattered around various periods in our lives; there must be some rationale or guiding principle on which these
instances are tied together and comprehensible. The meaning of life must, therefore, involve some sort of coherence, structure and a unified narrative of our various instances of meaning. For the African, this structure is implicit in the normative progression of the individual as Menkiti (2004a) kindly alludes to. Instances of meaning are then sewn into these various points of progression. For instance, between birth and adulthood, the individual engages in those communal rites that ensure that the individual is well equipped for communal life – the sort that fosters harmony. This learning phase itself is a meaningful pursuit since it speaks to the communal normative function theory of meaning (that I spoke of earlier). At the adult stage, having been fully incorporated into the society of humans, the individual fully strives to attain meaning – perhaps by attempting to promote harmony or by trying to fulfil God’s purpose. This flows on through ancestorhood, until the individual is unremembered and (finally) dead to the community (a nameless dead).

For the above-mentioned structure to make any sense there must be a rationale beyond it and this rationale is (and should be) teleological in nature. This rationale is important because, without it, the structure becomes absurd and meaningless since one cannot make sense of it. It is the same way that the magnificent Stonehenge remains a magnificent absurdity because we are yet to find the rationale behind it. For the African, with regards to meaning of life, one can describe this end as God’s purpose. The purpose of this self-causing Supreme Being, in-itself, can stand as the teleological rationale behind the structure I had previously outlined. So, we find here a theory of meaning that allows us to weave our various instances of meaning together in a seamless structure that is in-itself rational. One can also speak about an all-encompassing purpose which gives guidance, coherence and rationale to our lives and the way we live such that the questions like “but what is the point of this?” is answered by that goal, in itself (Tabensky, 2003).

All these are plausible and there are some who may buy into my novel attempt at projecting an African theory of the meaning of life, but there are reasons I find this view fundamentally faulty. Indeed, one’s disagreement or agreement with this critique may influence one’s acceptance or rejection of ratio-structuralism as a veritable theory of the meaning of life. My criticism lies in the
instrumentalism found in this theory with regards to the God’s purpose argument. Like I have alluded to earlier in this chapter, meaningfulness as derived from an external purpose or source is highly unattractive. What this suggests is that both rationale and structure must be intrinsically derived from the individual and not from something external to the individual. Beyond this, there is nothing to suggest that the Supreme Being exists in the way we think It does and that It presents us with Its’ purpose in the way we think it does.

Furthermore, this intrinsically derived rationale must continue to satisfy the individual ad infinitum. In other words, this rationale must be satisfactory, and that satisfaction must be permanently apparent to the individual. This is so because in investing in a rationale that is only temporary, we are investing in a rationale that would one day no longer make sense – that in itself seems senseless – thus defeating the whole project. The traditional African appeals to the Supreme Being and the purpose set out by It because that purpose remains satisfactory and sensible to the Supreme Being as most traditional Africans believe that the Supreme Being is eternal. Although this appeal is ultimately misguided (because the purpose is external, and our pursuit of that purpose is only of instrumental value), we can draw from this critique a refined view – one that emphasises the intrinsic origin of both structure and rationale and a permanent understanding of both. Perhaps this is why most individuals find immortality an attractive condition for ultimate meaningfulness. For this to be the case, one can say that it is necessary that both structure and rationale be created by the individual and that the individual must retain an immortal character that continues to recognise and derive satisfaction from that teleological rationale. Unfortunately, we die. Indeed, within the framework of ratio-structuralism, which places some emphasis on subjective awareness of one’s meaningfulness, ultimate meaningfulness is not possible since death cuts away that subjectivity through the death of the individual (as I shall explain in the next section) and through the eventual demise of the human species. Whatever positive effects/value that the individual’s life may have had to others is irrelevant to the point since the enjoyment of that value belongs to another subject (who will also die) and not the dead individual.
In the case of an all-encompassing purpose, some arguments against it can be made. For such an all-encompassing goal to make sense, the finality of death must be put aside, since death would bring to the fore, the pointlessness of such an all-encompassing pursuit. Beyond this, one can further claim that an eternal *telos*, ironically, fails to subsist as *telos*. This is mainly because by pursuing an end that is immortal, one pursues an end that is not an end since such an end can never be achieved – the achievement of such an end denies it its immortal character. An infinite pursuit of an end that is not achievable would be unattractive and I am immediately reminded of Sisyphus’s life. Even if we assume that the individual did live forever and even if we were to presume that the individual could develop a rationale whose *end* is unending – a purpose that ends would only count as a moment of meaning in life – then (the tedium and potential boredom of such a pursuit notwithstanding) one can argue that such an immortal goal thins out in such a way that it no longer becomes a purpose but a routine or at best an obligation – when this happens meaning is lost.

5.2. **On What Is Forgotten: Death as the End**

A major cause of existential anguish for most people is death and the fact that most known biological entities, including man, are subject to death. In this discussion we are not going to dwell on death as it pertains to non-living things like the ‘death’ of a star, concepts like the death of democracy or other living things like goats and amoebas – our focus is on the human person and how the death of a human person may or may not affect his/her meaning in life. Why this exegesis is extremely important is that we need to have a clear and proper understanding of what death is, in order for us to understand the full weight of what death means and how it affects our views on meaning of life. There are widespread disagreements about when a person dies i.e. the exact point an individual dies and/or what factors are necessary for death to occur. This difficulty is not a trivial one. As Arthur Caplan and Robert Arp agree, there are, and probably would continue to be, instances of mistaken deaths and individuals scratching at their coffins or knocking on morgue fridges (Caplan & Arp, 2013, p. 369). Fortunately, in this work, I shall not be presenting an exact
description of what organs must shut down before we can claim death but I shall give a much more
general definition of death, like Sir Henry Thomas’ criteria of bodily decomposition (Caplan & Arp,
2013, p. 370).

I identify two common-sense definitions of what death generally means viz. death as a
cessation of existence and death as a permanent and irreversible cessation of all life processes. The
first instance seems intuitively true, but I can think of at least one counterexample that may
contradict this claim. At the cellular level, cells can divide in such a way that the original cell loses
itself and becomes something different. Embryos, for instance, continue to divide until the embryo
ceases to exist and something new (a foetus) comes into being. Whereas there is a cessation of the
existence of the embryo itself, one cannot say that death has occurred (Luper, 2016). Thus, although
non-existence is generally a condition of death, it is not a sufficient one.

The second definition is a much more attractive one, as it speaks to something essential to
being alive i.e. biological processes necessary for life to occur. As a process, death is seen as the
gradual decline and decay of a biological entity to the point where regeneration is impossible, and
an irreversible decay is inevitable. In the sense of a state, death is seen as the irreversible cessation
of all life processes present in a formerly living organism that has died.

Focusing our ideas about death on the human condition and what it means for a human
person to be dead, one can say that death goes beyond the mere loss of consciousness and instead
relates to the total shut down of brain processes and what that generally entails. However, there is a
slight problem with this line of thinking. This problem basically lies in the fact that it seems a hard
choice to pinpoint the state of affairs that describes what death is, because of the mutual relationship
that exists between the brain and what we may term vital organs (Van de graff, 2002, p. 363; Morris
& Fillenz, 2003, p. 2; Guyton & Hall, 2006). The conundrum is apt when we discover that, for
instance, it is possible for the brain to die and yet the vital functioning of the various vital organs
continues, especially when these functions are aided by machines such as life support machines.
In this case, do we then posit that the person in this situation is dead? The answer to that question is a matter of debate and I may reply that the individual is still alive on the basis of our previous criterion about what it is to die i.e. a permanent cessation of all active biological processes that sustain the existence of a particular entity. In line with this criterion, I submit that the very real question about what point and with what criteria can we legitimately declare a human person dead can be answered thus: a human person is dead if and only if the vital functioning of his/her biology is lost in such a way that not only is his/her brain in its entirety incapable of functioning at any level, his/her various supporting organs are also incapable of functioning at any level.

One thing we must take cognisance of, though, is the fact that the above definition only assumes the human person as only biological and nothing more. For most people, this is not true. For individuals or scholars who follow a dualistic framework, the human person is not only biological but a possessor of an eternal mind, essentially distinct from the biological body. In African metaphysics the similar idea that a person is both spirit and matter in a harmonious sense is widespread (Iroegbu, 1995; McCall, 1995; Chukwuelo, 2014; Ijiomah, 2014). What this idea brings to the table is basically a reason for a re-evaluation of the basic biological notion of what it means to die. By accepting the notion that the individual person is composed of something other than the biological, we inadvertently commit to the fact that our criteria for what it means to die, especially since it refers only to biological components, becomes an inadequate account. More so if we further assume that this non-biological and/or non-natural component continues to live on even after death. In this sense, we must assume that the non-natural bearer of life is the only thing essential to being alive, and that we must redefine what it means and only in a non-natural sense, since the biological components of the human person cease to be the necessary consideration in defining what person alive and what person dead. In African metaphysics, I identify two ways in which one might consider that a person lives on even after what I shall now term, ‘biological death’.

First is in the literal sense i.e. a literal belief that after death, the spirit and/or the vital force continues to live on as ancestor, possibly assuming the personalised character with which it was
known whilst on earth. The second sense in which we can consider that a person lives on is in what I call the ‘memorial sense’. Here, scholars like Mbiti (1990) and Menkiti (2004) are quick to point out that after the death of a person, the individual lives on but basically only in the memory of those who live on after them. Because for most Africans the golden age resides in the past and death ushers the individual into zamani (roughly the past), it is believed, as Mbiti seems to suggest, that those who are dead continue to stay alive but only in the past and thus, in our memories (Mbiti, 1990, p. 24). Death would be probably only subsisting in full force when one is totally forgotten by the community of people who are alive.

I will not deal with this latter sense here as it appears that the sense in which the term ‘alive’ is used is more rhetorical than it is literal. In terms of the former sense though, I deny the existence of a human spirit or vital force generally understood as the immaterial component of the person that lives on after death for reasons I have outlined previously in this chapter. Oddly enough, certain features or characteristics of what is known as the human spirit are often recognised in terms of cognition or what I term ‘mind features.’ I believe it is this cognitive feature that allows those who attest to the existence of spirits to claim that spirits have a personalised character. With research into neuroscience opening up new vistas in brain research, the general direction is towards the idea that cognitive function is basically a function of the human brain and nothing more (Churchland, 1981; Churchland, 2002; Gallagher, 2005). The implications of a neuroscientific understanding eliminate the idea of a spirit that survives biological death and re-establishes our earlier claims about what it means to die i.e. the permanent and irreversible cessation of all biological processes that keeps a person alive.

From the foregoing, we can establish, or at least possess an understanding of, what it means to die from a human perspective. However, as is commonly seen in the human experience of near-death, there is a palpable dread whenever we remember the possibility of dying. Part of this dread is founded on the idea that death is inevitable and there is good reason to believe that it probably is. A cursory glance at other living entities makes it apparent that most of these living things, whether
plant or animal, generally deteriorate after a period and eventually die. Human history has so far failed to genuinely establish a case where a human person has failed to die. Although past events are not necessary conditions for predicting future events in the strictest sense (cue Hume’s problem of induction), it is sensible for us to conclude that, barring a spectacular biological event, no person will fail to die, in much the same way that we can predict the rising of the sun the very next morning, barring any cataclysmic event. In essence, it is quite reasonable for us to conclude that death is an inevitable event as far as human persons are concerned. The inevitability of death itself does not always account for why dread or fear is a common feature of the human understanding of death. Beyond this fear, or because of it, is the existential anguish that inspired Camus’ (1955) absurdism. It seems to me, then, that central to this dread or anguish is the belief that death causes some harm or deprives us of a good and thus is a misfortune. But is this really the case? Answering this question is important as it eventually shows that the meaninglessness that death brings is not itself a harm.

There are many legitimate reasons that may allow us to consider death a harm or misfortune. The first reason would be the idea that death causes real pain which is specific to the body of the person who is dying. There are many cases where this is obvious. Whereas it is true that it is possible for one to die a painful death, it is a different matter to claim that death in-itself causes pain. We may encounter various instances of pain at the point of death, but it is true that we also encounter pain whilst we are still alive and not dying. With our lives possibly spanning out for years and the moments leading up to our demise only lasting for, at most, a few days, it is quite reasonable to assume that one might encounter more instances of pain while alive than while dead and as such, life is to be more feared than death or the point of death. Stretching this argument further, we might also claim that because one must still need to be alive to feel pain, the pain one may feel just before dying or at the point of death is not necessarily a factor of death but a factor of life and as such, claiming that death causes pain is not justifiable because one does not feel pain when one is dead but only when one is alive. A final reason why this line of reasoning is
unattractive is that death is not a concrete reality one can point to but rather a myriad of factors that enables a state of affairs (this state of affairs being a permanent and irreversible cessation of all biological processes necessary for a thing to be alive) and as such cannot be said to in-itself *cause* anything at all.

Another way we can think of death as causing pain is when we take into account the grief and the negative psychological pressure that the loss of a life may incur on those who are bereaved, especially the dead individual’s immediate relatives and his/her community. These psychological effects are quite real and are responsible for a variety of emotional trauma that may plague those left behind and perhaps the fear of causing these emotional problems and also experiencing these problems is perhaps the reason most people fear death and consider it harmful. The intuitive response to this claim is that first, for the individual who is dead, emotional trauma or the realisation that one is the cause of said trauma is never a factor as that individual does not possess the capacity to feel such emotional pain as s/he is not quite alive to do so. For those who outlive the dead individual, although the state of another person being dead might cause some emotional pain, it is again the fact that they are alive that causes them to possess this capacity to feel this pain. One can, therefore, argue that if they never were or if they were, in fact, dead, such pain, emotional or otherwise would never be a factor. It is therefore still plausible to argue that it is not the state of death that causes pain but the state of being alive instead, that causes pain.

Another way one might think that death causes harm is if it is agreed that death deprives us something good – life. For most people, life is something good. The reasons we are more inclined to think so are varied. First, one can argue the mere beauty and variety of our sense experiences are enough to make us think that life is something good. The sounds we hear, the things we see, the food we eat etc. and our internal reflections about these things are things that most people are grateful for and generally consider a good. Our social relationships and the moral goods we encounter are things we consider to be good things. Life can also give us moments of fulfilment and I have also claimed in this work that it is possible to achieve instances of meaning in life and even
when one’s life is riddled with some events that one may consider ‘bad’, it seems that the overall ability to express these feelings and react to these events are in some ways good things. It is thus plausible to think that being alive is a good thing. With this in mind, it is also plausible for one to accept that because death takes away life, which we generally consider to be a good thing, death in-itself causes harm and/or is at least a bad thing. Having experienced the various experiential fancies of life, it would be extremely terrible if we were to lose our lives in much the same way it would be a bad thing to lose our monies without our consent. It can be plausible to make this claim. We would indeed not want to lose the pleasures and experience of life and our consciousness to death.

Notwithstanding, there are times where a constant bombardment of life’s displeasures without reprieve may allow for one to think that life is not a good thing. For an individual whose life constantly features strings of a negativities and whose disposition is not essentially stoic, the displeasures of life continually outweigh whatever good experiences s/he may have, and this would generally account for suicidal considerations – and in this sense, death would be a good thing as it deprives us of harm. Beyond this one can claim that deprivation can be felt only if the dying subject is in some way available to notice or authentically acknowledge this deprivation. I can feel the pain of losing some money inadvertently but only because I am alive and available to that experience. Now, since a loss of consciousness, amongst other things, is implied by death, it is most reasonable to admit that a lack of awareness is common to all dead persons. For the one who has died, the awareness of the deprivation of the life s/he once had is lost. If we agree, as I have stated, that awareness plays a role in understanding that a thing has caused a harm or is bad, then we must agree that it is not a harm or a bad thing for the one who has died to be deprived of life insofar as death makes him/her unaware of that deprivation.

Closely related to the idea that life is a good thing and that since death deprives us of life, death is harmful or a bad thing, is the idea that having more life is more attractive than dying. Like the previous argument, one can argue that because life is in-itself good, it would make more sense to have a longer life, ensuring the continuous goodness and episodes of meaning that life brings.
Death denies us of this goodness since it cut shorts our lives when it could have lasted for an eternity, and perhaps, accompanied by even more pleasures. For this argument to hold any water, we must first assume that an eternal life is also a good one. Initially, it may seem easy to agree with this assumption, but a closer critical look suggests otherwise. If we eliminate death from mortal life, we generally eliminate only the possibility of the permanent and irreversible cessation of the biological processes necessary for life. What this means is that we do not eliminate injury, illness and disease, accidents or any other such catastrophes – we only eliminate the possibility of dying from them. What this means is that in such a scenario, we expose ourselves to lives that are eternally plagued by said catastrophes and that in-itself is not attractive.

Suppose I push this argument further and we agree that such catastrophes are also eliminated, what we are left with is a life devoid of physical suffering and death. Although this is the case, I am inclined to suggest that the reality of eternity i.e. an infinite life, is one that would eventually lead to boredom, as Bernard Williams shows in the Makropulos example (Williams, 2010) and/or water down the quality of our pleasurable or good experiences. As I see it, there seems to be a stretching out of acts or objects of fulfilment by the infinite nature of time. Thus, the infinite possibilities of repetition allow the boredom that eventually thins out the effect of fulfilment that a certain act or thing may deliver. Although one might point to the fact that an individual can constantly change his preferences (Bruckner, 2012), these preferences would be finite and such, no match for the wearing away that infinity brings. To further buttress this point, supposing an individual finds the tasting of fine wine fulfilling, it seems quite plausible to believe that because his life is eternal, the possibly infinite repetition of this source of fulfilment eventually reduces our perception of its value, as is the case with most things that we have too much.

Hunter Steele, on his part, presents an interesting point of consideration when he argues that unlike Williams:

We do not demand of our finite existences that we should never be bored; only that the number of our moments spent in boredom should not exceed a
certain proportion. Why then should we expect any more of eternity? If a reasonably normal and happy man were offered an eternal existence in which he would be no more bored, proportionally, than he ever had been, would he not accept with alacrity? I am convinced that he would; but, according to Williams, the man should refuse. (Steele, 1976, p. 426)

What is of note here is that for Steele, it is perfectly normal that an individual encounters moments of boredom in-between moments of meaningfulness (as is the case in our finite existence). For him, it would be absurd to claim that a small moment of boredom can extinguish past, present or future moments of meaningfulness. While this view does not necessarily tackle Williams’ views that our categorical desires can be extinguished, Jeremy Wisnewski adds the finishing touch to Steele’s argument.

For Wisnewski (2005) categorical desires can be revived over time and thus, an eternal boredom would be impossible. For the immortal individual who finds meaning in learning every musical instrument, or the immortal individual who finds meaning in exploring every possible bodily pleasure, achieving these goals and being bored afterwards becomes a moot point if it so happened that new musical instruments or new devices for the exploration of bodily pleasure are invented after a time (Wisnewski, 2005, pp. 33-35).

Now, these are good responses to the boredom issue, but what these replies fail to understand is that whereas at least some categorical desires can be revived, the reproduction of an activity or the conditions that enable that activity is only a solution to one part of the problem. What is of interest to the immortal individual is whether the sense of satisfaction remains, such that that previous categorical desire remains a desire. Thus, for the musician, Wisnewski would have to show that the musician would, ad infinitum, enjoy playing musical instruments. What the friends of Wisnewski must realise is that beyond the absence of an activity, the eternal repetition of an activity can also cause boredom.
From the above, we can claim that perhaps, more life is not as attractive as was previously thought. If this is the case, then it seems highly unlikely that by depriving us of more life, death deprives us of anything spectacular. This is all assuming that immortality is a possibility (especially material immortality) and that, for some, is a stretch (Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin, 2014, p. 371). It is important to note that this does not imply that death saves us from boredom in such a way that it makes our lives as a whole meaningful since we die. What I mean to say here is that an eternal life might not be meaningful after all and therefore death does not take away any imagined meaningfulness that would have subsisted if we lived forever. This view does not also take away the fact that the nothingness that death brings affects the way we might view our lives as a whole as meaningful – and does so negatively.

That said, I shall now speak about a concept that one might think plausibly follows the condition of being dead and, in my mind, generally affects the conditions of our lived experiences – this concept is the idea of nothingness. The idea of nothingness is not a new concept in philosophy, especially in Western metaphysics. There are two senses in which we can think about nothingness. The first is what I shall term an external nothingness. External nothingness generally involves questions about the possibility of total non-existence and whether it is possible for us to conceive of a world that is basically an empty set. Paramount to this sort of thinking is the fact that what is considered are real-world objects in the universe and the possibility of their non-existence. It is basically a discourse on non-being. Adherents to the precepts of African metaphysics would deny such a possibility and would not consider external nothingness a matter of discussion. They would rather argue that because the Supreme Being possesses a necessary existence, it makes no sense to speak about nothingness as this Supreme Being possesses, at least, an infinitely regressive eternal existence.

The second type of nothingness is what I term and identify as ‘internal nothingness’ and it is markedly different from what I have previously explained in my description of external nothingness. Internal nothingness is something specific to the human person and general involves
death and the state of being dead. Internal nothingness generally deals with the question of what it is like to lack awareness or experience. I had stated earlier that we can generally describe death as the permanent and irreversible cessation of all biological processes necessary to keep one alive and also suggested that claims to a spiritual post-life existence on the basis of the existence of an animating spiritual essence, especially in an African context, is a false assumption and because of that existence and death operate at the biological level and nothing more. A principal implication of this sort of thinking is the idea that death implies a lack of consciousness and I shall explain why presently.

To understand how death affects consciousness, it is important to have a general understanding of what consciousness is. Consciousness has been defined in various ways by various scholars but summarily they are saying one thing i.e. that consciousness is the awareness or the state of being aware of one’s surroundings and/or external stimuli or qualia (Chalmers, 1996; Dehaene, 2006, p. 204; Velmans, 2009, p. 3). For most neuroscientists and neurophilosophers, and I am inclined to agree with them, consciousness is at the very least a function or by-product of the brain. Whether one takes an extreme reductionist or eliminative stance or a more moderate epiphenomenal stance, what is clear is that holders of this view generally accept that the brain is in some way responsible for conscious experience. If we hold on to that view, something else is implied. With the permanent degeneration of body cells at the instance of death a definite feature of the dying process, it then becomes obvious that death also implies the permanent degeneration and rotting of the brain. Now, if the brain is responsible for consciousness and the total degeneration of the brain is an attendant consequence of dying, then one can only conclude that death also implies a loss of consciousness or awareness. One can also confidently conclude that this loss of consciousness or awareness would be a permanent one, insofar as it is so far impossible to regenerate a dead and decomposed brain to a state that it continues to function effectively. From the foregoing, it becomes apparent that if we try to imagine the state of what it is like to die, we would only be imagining a state of non-awareness and internal experiential nothingness. We can try to
imagine this sort of scenario because we know what it is like to be unconscious, for instance when we are asleep – a very basic type of nothingness – or when we try to reflect on the vast emptiness of our pre-birth. Combining our intuitions about what it is like to be unaware or unconscious and our ideas of permanence, we can begin to paint a picture (or rather a non-picture) or understand what it is like to be dead or have a permanent and irreversible lack of consciousness. The lack of awareness that death presupposes is exactly the type of consciousness I wish to discuss here.

Earlier I had conceded that it is possible for us to agree that meaning in life is possible. Indeed, this seems obvious because it is almost impossible to deny that there are instances of meaningfulness in a person’s life or while that person is still alive. I had also suggested that a plausible theory of meaning was one that invested in subjectivity as corralled by certain guides and principles of meaning in life I had also presented. While all this is true it is then obvious that with the nothingness that death brings, the subjective character is eliminated. Closely related to the elimination of this subjectivity is the idea that the unawareness, and even the lack of memory that accompanies death, denies the individual both the subjective experience and the subjective remembrance of any instance of meaningfulness his/her life may have had while still alive, and it does so permanently. Even if one takes the panpsychist view that at the very least our consciousness passively remains in the dust we become, the response to this would generally question the value of such a passive consciousness in remembering and acknowledging meaning. This sort of memorial and experiential deprivation can perhaps be added to some of the reasons why death appears harmful. However, although it is possible and perfectly plausible to claim that death cannot in-itself cause us harm as we readily imagine and as such is not necessarily a bad thing (like I have previously argued), we must however note that it does enable meaninglessness with regards to life as a whole, and this must not be forgotten. Furthermore, it is important to note that death enables the meaninglessness of life not meaninglessness in life. Meaning in life is possible and the reality of the various instances of meaning cannot be denied. However, in speaking about a whole life view – meaning of life – death’s power becomes apparent.
5.3. **An Exposition on the Meaninglessness of Life**

Albert Camus, the Algerian-French philosopher, had in the middle of the 20th century asked what he famously considered (and I do too) the most important and fundamental of all philosophical questions – whether life is at all worth living (Camus, 1955, p. 1). This question can be resolved depending on one’s dispositional attitudes towards the question of the meaning of life. I think this is so because although one can live a happy life and consider it to be worth living, the more interesting question of whether life – even that happy life – is ultimately meaningful or meaningless regurgitates the question of whether life is worth living at all – at least I intuitively think that this is the case. For those who ask whether life is ultimately (the word ‘ultimately’, as used here, speaks to a meaninglessness of life, despite the possibility of meaning in life) meaningful, one can say that a life that does not bear the type of coherence that I proposed earlier in my account of ratio-structuralism would not be meaningful. Beyond this, death also speaks to this meaninglessness. It speaks to the final pointlessness of life despite the possibility of meaning in life and in spite of a merely possible ratio-structuralism; the words of Leo Tolstoy capture these underlying thoughts and offer no succour. For him:

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, pp. 29-30)

For Tolstoy, the unbelievable pointlessness of all our achievements, strivings and even our attempts at meaningfulness is something very real and at the same time, something we conveniently try to forget. What brings this pointlessness to fruition is the idea that death generally implies both nothingness and non-existence.

Curiously, though, there are some who think that it is the finality of death that makes life meaningful or at least that death enhances our meaning in life (Trisel, 2015). The idea here is that it is precisely the finitude of human life, and the fact that it would one day end, that enables the rush to achieve more things and pursue meaningfulness before death sets in. The belief is thus that death is a motivating factor that is necessary for achieving meaning.

This is a reasonable claim to make, but there are a few ways one might reply to such a claim about meaningfulness. The first is a weaker argument. Most times, we think of approaching deadlines as inspiring action and haste, and as the cut off time looms, we try to do as much work as we can with the time we have left. But the power of deadlines, I think, lies in the usually negative consequences one may face if that deadline is not met. For others, the power of deadlines lies in their raw willpower and the mental chastisement that may serve as a consequence of not meeting said deadline. What is important here is that, either way, deadlines draw their powers from certain real or willed/imagined consequences. With death, I generally imagine that nothing comes after – neither a life nor a consequence. If consequences do not exist for the dead subject (or the subject who acknowledges his/her coming demise), then it is quite easy to claim that the idea that death is some sort of deadline that motivates us is misleading. If it does motivate us, it motivates us because
we assume that there are consequences for dying without achieving certain goals (which may include meaningful acts), whereas none exists. Adherents of this view are thus motivated for reasons that are not factual or true.

Another reason why we may not think that the acknowledgement of death’s finality is reason to enhance one’s meaning and/or striving for meaning is the idea that because of death’s finality, such a rush is supremely pointless as the subject, once dead, does not retain the capacity to strive for meaning or acknowledge past instances of meaning simply on the basis that the subject who is dead ceases to exist. It is important to note that whereas this claim asserts that death’s finality does not enhance meaning or is not a sufficient reason for an eager striving for meaning, it does not however claim that instances of meaning are not possible or that these instances of meaningfulness are not meaningful in themselves and at the moment they are achieved (which is a different matter altogether).

Now, it is important I show and establish that life is meaningless before I proffer a theory of meaninglessness. Central to any discussion of meaninglessness, in my view, is the finality of death and the pointlessness that that entails – and I have made attempts to describe this finality in the previous chapter. This point is more poignant when we realise that the permanent recognition that is the hallmark of the ratio-structuralist theory of meaning becomes impossible since death is final. The idea that death implies nothingness is important because one central idea when we talk about the concept of the meaning of life is the idea of subjectivity. I stretch the idea further here.

Subjectivity involves a tacit personal decision towards investing in a purveyor of meaning. Beyond this, it also involves a subjective acknowledgement of that meaningfulness so gained, and perhaps the sense of fulfilment and satisfaction that may accrue when one obtains meaningfulness. What immediately strikes me is the fact that meaning must involve a subjective individual that exists. This is true because the reasons for which subjectivity is claimed are active reasons – the decision, investment and acknowledgement of a purveyor of meaning – that seem to require the existence of the subjective individual. In this sense, it would therefore make no sense for us to
consider dead individuals as capable of participating in this sort of active subjectivity on the simple basis of the fact that they do not exist.

The implications of this conclusion are two-fold. First, it implies that individuals who are dead are obviously incapable of expressing meaning because, by virtue of their non-existence, they cannot actively decide to yearn or strive for any purveyor of meaning. Second, death denies the individual a subjective awareness of any previously achieved meaning. Our brains (where our memories reside) eventually cease to exist after death and with it our ability to remember instances of meaningfulness that may have riddled our lives. This lack of memory generally speaks to the potential pointlessness of our past deed and strivings, and with it our final claims to a meaning of life. To further buttress this point, let us suppose that Einstein’s great mathematical equation read thus: ‘\(emc^2 = 0\)’. Despite the fact that on the right-hand side of the equation there are mathematical variables that represent some form of reality, the end product still remains zero. This then means that, whereas the relationship previously concerned existent realities, that relationship results in and is equal to nothing. In the same vein, because death is in our life’s equation, whatever instances of real meaning in life we may make claims to, those efforts only result in (and is equal to) nothingness. Death is what makes the temporal equation of our lives as a whole mathematically equal to meaninglessness.

Beyond this, it also appears that the finality and meaninglessness that death brings, not only captures the individual, but also captures the community as well. If we accept that the lives of most people who have led a meaningful life (and also agree that they have invested in that meaningfulness) can be archived in our collective histories so that their acts of meaningfulness can always be referred to, it is possible to claim that that would imply a post-death survival of such acts of meaningfulness. Throughout history, we have encountered the constant flushing away of civilisations and with it their histories and as such it makes no sense assuming that such a history of meaningfulness would survive time. Beyond this, it is highly plausible to count as inevitable the extinction of the human species – the acknowledgement of this fact generally destroys the argument
for a history of meaning. But there is another way we can think that the death of the human species might enable meaninglessness.

Species extinction is not a new phenomenon and in fact most people suggest that at least 99% of all previous life forms have encountered extinction and, as such, there is good reason to believe that the extinction of the human species will happen (Trisel, 2016, p. 1). The reasons why these thoughts are entertained are varied and not far-fetched. First, we can think of the extinction of the human species as a resultant effect of our own activities. The immediate threat in this instance would be the very real possibility of a worldwide nuclear conflict that would not only decimate human population but also the environment on which we depend. Also, our currently hostile relationship with the environment is putting a nearly irreversible strain on the environment, such that the gradual extinction of all life and the transformation of the planet into a non-habitable planet is a little more than a looming prospect (Poulopoulos, 2016, p. 4). In artificial terms, there is a real and growing debate about the status and threat of computers and artificial intelligence and that the fact that they could be manipulated (or manipulate themselves) into achieving goals that may be anti-human (Bostrom, 2014). Beyond this, other man-made threats, such as overpopulation and even underpopulation etc., are examples of possible ways humans might go extinct by their own hands.

Secondly, we might think of extinction as a resultant effect of natural catastrophes over which we may not have control. In this sense, natural catastrophes such as medical pandemics can in effect wipe out humans. Also, there is talk of supervolcanoes that may adversely affect the climate and/or the food supply chain, leading to a slow extinction (Jones, et al., 2007); there is also talk about possible meteor strikes from outer space that can extinguish human life in the same way dinosaurs were thought to have gone extinct; there is also the possibility of a catastrophic geological phenomenon; and there is also the possibility of an invasion by a hostile and more powerful alien species etc. Finally, from a grander cosmic scale, we can speak of much more inevitable catastrophes that would nevertheless take a longer time to be realised. One is the desertification of
the earth as a result of an increase in the sun’s brightness; another is the eventual expansion of the sun as it becomes a red giant and the subsequent consumption of the earth and other nearby planets by the expanding sun (Carrington, 2000; Schröder & Smith, 2008).

We sometimes assume, in our fealty to anthropocentrism, that the universe was created on our behalf and, as such, the conditions necessary for our survival would always hold. The reality, however, is that we live in a bland, unconscious and remorseless universe that can at any moment offer us apocalyptic catastrophes that can eliminate our species. What the above shows is that there are many ways this can happen and that there are many ways humans can bring about their own extinction.

What is noticed here is that it is possible to transfer the idea of death from an individual consideration to a communal (in the broadest sense of the word) consideration. I had earlier talked about the possibility of obtaining meaning via one’s communal normative function and also via a communal acknowledgement of that function, and I had also attempted to show why that would be an unattractive form of meaning if the individual fails to subjectively invest in that communal function and acknowledgement. It now seems that even if we were able to rationally reject my critique of communal acknowledgement, the pointlessness of life would still subsist as death does not only embrace the human person, it can also embrace humanity as a species.

For those who advocate for a communal sustenance of meaningfulness – i.e. the idea that one’s meaningfulness can outlive him/her insofar as the community continues to acknowledge his/her meaningfulness (in the same way Nelson Mandela’s life might be thought of as meaningful today), the inevitable demise of humanity refuses to consider such accounts of meaning. Our individual strivings and 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. Russell captures this unfortunate fact quite aptly:

Such, in outline, but even more purposeless, more void of meaning, is the world which Science presents for our belief. ... That Man is the product of
causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin,
his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome
of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of
thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all
the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday
brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the
solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must
inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things,
if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy
which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these
truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's
habitation henceforth be safely built. (Russell, 1923, N.P)

Thus, all our strivings and attempts at meaningfulness only become lost and enveloped in the cold
silence of the universe, generally amounting to a (maybe) purposeful rush to cosmic oblivion and
insignificance. It is hard to, in this instance, 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. In the demise of our species, our own lives immediately
become as absurd.

However, there are others like Brooke Trisel who think that a narrative closure is important.
Trisel envisions an ending that goes thus:

Human beings overcame many obstacles and persisted for a long time before
perishing through no fault of their own. They made many great
achievements, including discovering how life originated and formulating a
‘Theory of Everything.’ They knew that their works would be lost when
humanity became extinct, but this did not matter because these works were
created to benefit human beings and they had served their purpose. From the
beginning, human beings struggled with their finitude and other limitations, but using their rationality, they eventually came to appreciate and accept these limitations. (Trisel, 2016, p. 18)

Trisel’s narrative closure is, unfortunately, only a pre-acknowledgement of the impending demise of humanity and an attempt at some form of consolation. This acknowledgement does not, however, provide respite or change the fact that at the end of it all, the nothingness that will follow will only allow a non-remembrance of the achievement of our collective purposes.

In this way, death undercuts coherence, since the individual will no longer be aware of this teleology or coherence once he dies – the teleology itself would make no sense since it becomes a moot point eventually. Indeed, for that teleology to make sense, there must be some permanent acknowledgement of this rationale and coherence. This is impossible since we die.

Whereas personal demise and the demise of our species do not allow us to readily claim that our lives are ultimately meaningful, there is no reason to believe that this meaninglessness is in any way a harm. I had earlier proffered arguments that showed that the deprivation of life through death is in-itself not harmful to the individual who is dead. I had further claimed that whatever harm such a deprivation might bring is only dependent on the fact that the individual who is deprived is aware and as such alive (Suits, 2001). The same argument can be made when we talk about meaningfulness. There is no doubt that laymen and philosophers alike are prone to encountering what is usually termed existential anguish when the fact of our constant struggle, pleasures and pain of our everyday lives meets the inevitability of our deaths (both in individual terms and in communal terms). It can also manifest itself when we realise that the infinite repetition and the eventual thinning out of values (as I have described earlier), which an eternal life would eventually entail, is also a reality that is profoundly true. This is the type of existential anguish that allows us to see the absurdity of Sisyphus’ life and understand Camus’ despair.

The existential crisis we feel when we encounter the utter meaninglessness of our lives is generally hinged on the high hopes and false expectations we set and expect of our lives. The
general instinct is to think that our self-defined place in the world is something that in-itself necessitates meaningfulness. Thus, the reality of meaninglessness offers a counter intuition that seems difficult to harmonise with our previous perceptions of our lives. But meaninglessness is real, or at least there are good reasons to believe it is real, and this reality is neither a pain nor a deprivation in-itself. It is rather a *realisation* and only one we can have while we are still alive.

While it may seem obvious for one to think that meaninglessness causes anguish, we must realise that existential anguish is a direct result of our high expectation as I have just explained. Beyond that, meaninglessness in-itself causes neither pain, nor a crisis nor anguish. It is plausible to think so because (like I had previously explained in the previous chapter) our eventual demise enables a progressively eternal unawareness of this state of meaninglessness. Thus, while meaninglessness is our default state, we must entrench this truth in our psyche as some sort of realisation or propaedeutic and nothing more. We must also recognise our meaninglessness as value-neutral and the death that enables it, a care-less bliss. While one might reply that the absence of a good is itself bad, such an argument would only make sense in a world where goodness is a necessary condition. In such an instance, the absence of such a good would imply a harm, since that goodness is a necessary condition. This is not the case in the world that we live in. Even morally speaking, badness or a harm would imply an active response to a situation, where such a response is bad or harmful one. A response that is *not* good is one that is not actively bad but can also mean a response that is at the same time not actively good. In this instance, if I am indifferent to many people, it would not mean that I am bad towards them or that I have caused them any harm. In the same vein, whereas the presence of meaning (a good) would be desirable, the absence of that good (meaninglessness) is not bad or a harm. We might even want to consider looking forward to it. It is therefore important that while alive, we carefully distinguish between meaninglessness as a realisation and as existential anguish, in order for us to avoid the latter.

From the foregoing, I summarise my characterisation of meaninglessness as follows. What is true is the fact of the inevitability of our death. It is also true that this death implies an
unawareness, which in turn deprives us of our memories of the instances of meaningfulness we may have had while still alive. It is also death that deprives us of the subjective autonomy that allows us to choose and invest in what is meaningful. Subjectivity involves the active investment of an individual in the pursuit of a self-defined object of meaning in life. It also involves an acknowledgement that one considers a certain thing an object or instance of meaningfulness. Victor Frankl captures this fact when he states, ‘Meaning must be found; it cannot be given. And it must be found by oneself, by one’s own conscience’ (2010, p. 46). The truth of death, however, denies the individual the ability to subsist as a subjective character and this, in turn, denies the individual the ability to actively create instances of meaning since the individual is dead. Even worse, it denies the individual the ability to acknowledge past instances of meaning and because death denies us of a subjective character or indeed any existence at all, the passionate yearning and striving for meaning ends with the death of the individual.

Furthermore, the fact of the inevitable demise of the human species obviously denies us of some communal memoriam and enables a permanent silence of the species. This is especially so for those who may insist on communal acknowledgement as a source of meaning. What follows from this would be the unattractiveness and ultimate meaninglessness of the repetitiveness and thinning out of our self-professed bearers of meaning in view of the unlikely possibility of a progressively infinite and eternal existence. I am immediately reminded of Sisyphus as described by Camus (1955). Suppose, like Sisyphus we are able to chain death and avoid it, perhaps through an unprecedented breakthrough in medical science that would enable us to live forever and not age. What becomes apparent is that like Sisyphus who was eventually punished for this feat, our eternal existence would also be chastised by the type of infinite boredom and redundancy that may translate to a lack of meaning. Now Sisyphus’ punishment was that he was to push a rock up a mountain only to watch it roll back down to the bottom once he reached the top of the mountain. Although it is unlikely that an eternal life is equivalent to Sisyphus’ fate, I draw similarities between his fate
and an eternal life. If one lived forever, it is easy to speculate that such an individual would attempt to resume his/her attempts at meaning in life.

Like Sisyphus, those attempts are metaphorically equivalent to successfully pushing the rock to the top of the mountain. Unfortunately, eternity assumes the position of that which continually drags those attempts at meaningfulness again to the bottom, requiring us to start again. This up-down process is one that would always continue insofar as the individual intends to invest in a meaningful existence. In such a situation, objects of meaning eventually lose their meaningfulness with the erosion of time are transformed into objects of mere living. By objects of mere living, I mean those things we do routinely, those things we do because we are obligated to do them and those things we do because they are merely part of our living. In this sense, brushing our teeth in the morning, paying taxes/obeying the law and eating a meal would be examples of objects of mere living in the senses that I have described them. The continuous repetition of our attempts at meaning because of an eternal life only transforms those strivings at meaning in life (or the achievement of meaning in life) into nothing more than routine behaviour – a complete thinning out of their value – even despite Fischer’s claims about the possibility of repeatable pleasures (Fischer, 1994). The absurdity and meaninglessness that such a transformation brings would appear to make the achievement of meaning in life seem an impossible feat if one lived forever. Although Camus suggests revolt (we shall examine the concept a bit more in the next section) as a possible reply to this situation, I envision such a reply as speaking only to the situation of life’s absurdity and meaninglessness, and this is something markedly different from a consideration of revolt as meaning-conferring.

Beyond all this, the permanent recognition and satisfaction that is required in the ratio-structural theory is also defeated, even if we continue to stay alive for eternity. This is because conceiving of a teleology (the rationale that weaves together instances of meaning) that is infinite is itself an absurd contradiction – since teleology usually means an end and infinity does not suggest an end. One good reply to my view would be the idea that even if one transits to an eternal life –
like the Christian view of an eternal life in a new heaven and a new earth after our current lives—then it would be plausible to judge our whole lives on earth on the basis of its attainment of an end in the sense of a closure. In the Christian theological case, this end would be the attainment of a blissful eternal life—a ‘lived happily ever after’ if you will (Seachris, 2011, pp. 148-150). While this is a plausible way to circumvent the problem of an immortal life and the lack of an ending that entails, what this account seems to gloss over is the fact that, whereas such ends like a blissful eternal life might be the goal, both the subject and the act of living does not cease—at least presumably so. In other words, there is a subject who continues to live forever and have lived experiences. If this is the case, one must then ask: how does the individual understand and experience an eternal life (perhaps of bliss) and how does the individual appraise such an existence. If such questions can be asked (and I think they should), then questions about meaning and/or appraising one’s life would still subsist. In this case, it would not be enough to stop at appraising our earthly lives in the context of the attainment of some transcendental end only—also appraising the hereafter cannot be ignored. If this is the case, then questions such as those about tedium and/or boredom would still come to the fore.
Chapter 6.

In the previous chapter, I alluded to the fact that although death does not allow us to talk about meaning, considered in terms of the whole of our lives, a longer life or an eternal life would equally not grant us the meaningfulness we desire. In the case of a longer life, death still plays the role of establishing nothingness and in the case of an eternal life (so far, an impossible feat), issues bordering around boredom, the higher chance of susceptibility to constant harm and the eventual redundancy of our values and sources of meaning (due to the infinite nature of our now eternal lives), generally make personal immortality unattractive. These allusions leave me inclined to consider the view that life is ultimately meaningless and as such deny a meaning of life considered as a whole.

From the foregoing, I shall in this chapter examine other responses to meaninglessness and propose the philosophy of indifference – one that leads to both suicide and living for living sake – as the proper mode/mood for living with meaninglessness and also attempt to address other issue(s) that may be implied in adopting the view that life is ultimately meaningless such as anti-natalism.

6.1. Indifference and Living a Meaningless Life: Beyond Agada’s Consolationism

If all I have said is true and life as a whole is ultimately meaningless, then what we are faced with is not a task of creating new meaning or building from the ashes of meaninglessness, but rather a need to create a framework for how to live with meaninglessness. Why this ‘need’ is important is leveraged on the fact that meaninglessness and its absurd character is a serious matter, and our basic emotions of despair and melancholy can allow a deep anguish that usually depreciates the quality of our waking hours – those moments when we pause from our routines and think about our existential conditions – and our lives in general. Even though the striving for such a quality is ultimately futile, we are mainly creatures of the now and any anguish affecting our ‘now period’ affects our lives
immediately and negatively. But we must transcend the now. We must understand meaninglessness for what it truly is rather than how it tends to make us feel and also re-evaluate our emotional reactions towards meaninglessness in light of our new understanding of it. The relevance of these emotions is downplayed here because not only are our emotions hinged on the belief that meaninglessness is a bad thing, they also possess no real benefits nor present a positive account on how to deal with meaninglessness. Thus, we must transcend emotions. It is through this transcendence that we shall be able to avoid the misread existential anguish we feel and understand that the reasons we commit to and base our melancholy (i.e. the meaninglessness of our lives) are ultimately valueless.

We can think of life as a forest with many paths all leading to a deep abyss from which we cannot escape – an abyss that is immediately visible, once we take our eyes off our paths and simply look ahead. In the beginning of our conscious lives (this time by ‘conscious’, I mean our awareness that life ends), we are unwillingly thrust into this forest, forced to choose our paths and forced to keep moving as the past quickly swallows up the present, leaving us with only memories of the past, a future oblivion and an ever-mobile present. Often times, we choose the broadest paths as it gives us room to manoeuvre and an imagined comfort that tells us that what lies ahead is equally as smooth and attractive. This is the path that defines most hopeful claims to a genuine meaning of life.

For most Africans, the chosen path is a strange one. Because we know what lies ahead, we sometimes look up in search for solace, but a closer and more critical look only aids us to see a very indifferent blue sky and white clouds or at best a Supreme Being for whom this game we call our lives is a necessary amusement. Realising that there is no solace in an upward-looking metaphysics, we look forward but only at those far in front of us who are closer to the abyss, glorifying them and creating a longing for the abyss, and falsely imagining that what lies ahead and the longing by those behind us to be where we are is desirable. We even look to those beside us and seek to encourage and help them in a bid to make our foray into the abyss an easier task, perhaps in order to put on a
greater show for the Supreme Being in the sky above. Maybe the path chosen might grant us a few quirks, but the fact remains that we are all heading into an abyss of oblivion and that seems to whitewash whatever quirks we may have navigating through this maze. Also, it seems to me that the path of false hope, beautiful as it may seem, only misguides and aids a fearful encounter with the abyss and a harder fall.

What is more attractive in my view is a path that is guided by the true facts of our existence – one that would enable an expectation, but only for what is to come, thus aiding an easier and more willing plunge into nothingness.

There is thus a need to redirect our steps towards the path that best characterises what is most true and expected. But what is this path and what is it? This is the question this section aims to discover. By urging a redirection, it is obvious that whatever path we choose may run contrary to our normal and typically African intuitions about how we must understand and view our existence since understanding is all we can do in the face of meaninglessness.

The first path I shall consider is one that is common to most people and this path involves a reverse forgetfulness. I had earlier claimed that death involves a full unawareness and forgetfulness of our past lives and its contents, whether moments of pleasure, pain or meaning. I also claimed that this forgetfulness finally denies us of any satisfaction that was previously gained by achieving certain instances of meaning in our lives whilst still alive. It turns out that such a forgetfulness might work well in our strivings towards death – if the tables are turned and the idea reversed. Perhaps it might serve us well to rather invest in a forward-thinking forgetfulness. In other words, rather than the eventual forgetfulness that death brings, the fact that death comes should be what is forgotten. By setting ourselves up to be willingly oblivious of the fact of our death, we simply enjoy life, its pleasures and its instances of meaning, seemingly unperturbed by what is to come (Ecclesiastes 2:1-11). This strategy initially seems to be an attractive one, as it allows us to enjoy the perks of life and then suddenly encounter death without having much to do with the melancholy that meaninglessness usually elicits in our minds.
There are some ways that the feat described above can be achieved. The first is by concentrating deeply on those activities that life allows such that one is always looking at everything except what is in front – death. It is similar to hope or what Kierkegaard calls a ‘leap of faith’ but different in other ways too. The difference between hope and what I am proposing is that, whereas hope subsists as an ultimately futile attempt at grasping at meaning while sidestepping the finality of death, reverse forgetfulness is not an attempt at meaning and only subsists as a means of fully investing in our daily activities or more meaningful acts such that forgetting the meaninglessness our lives becomes a possibility. As Camus avers, the existential crisis most people experience is brought about when we pause to take stock of our lives. For him:

It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me…. I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. …If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious…. The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious. (Camus, 1955, pp. 76-77)

The simple solution would then be that we consciously seek to avoid this pause – this moment of contemplation that allows us to ponder about the situation of our meaninglessness. Indeed, we can try do so and we even try to do so unconsciously as we get caught up with our existence. As Camus puts it:

I come at last to death and to the attitude we have toward it. On this point everything has been said and it is only proper to avoid pathos. Yet one will never be sufficiently surprised that everyone lives as if no one ‘knew’. (Camus, 1955, p. 11)
By always moving and always acting, it is possible that the forgetfulness we seek will be in our grasp. This sort of thinking is a call to get lost in life. Not lost in the sense of an inactive participation in life but rather an active participation that allows one to forget about life and the fact that death is a precondition of life. This sort of thinking is probably what inspired Camus to consider the condition of Sisyphus a ‘lucid invitation to live and to create, in the very midst of the desert’ (Camus, 1955, p. 1).

This all seems like a plausible outlook that one can imbibe as a response to the reality of meaninglessness and it would seem perfect for the individual who dies instantly while actively mobile. But there are reasons why I think that this path should be avoided. I begin with the weaker argument and that is the fact that it is nigh impossible to live one’s life in such a way that the pause that forces us to look into the abyss of the nothingness that is to come ceases to be a factor. Death is something we cannot avoid thinking about as it meets us in various ways, for instance like the moments we are forced to think about our existence and when we encounter death in other people’s lives. Indeed, the chances of dying instantly whilst busy with life are quite slim and I consider it more tragic to come face to face with meaninglessness at the time of our deaths, having worked so hard to forget that inevitable reality. This is mainly because in seeing a lifelong delusion – one that was built up to circumvent a problem – crumble in the face of the problem it was meant to circumvent, the helplessness and defeat become apparent.

Another reason one might consider reverse forgetfulness unattractive is that in the pursuit of forgetfulness, the individual side-lines what we may consider the very condition of our existence, which is that it ends in death, and instead concentrates on what does not aid our understanding of this condition – epistemological suicide. More so, neglecting the value of understanding the inevitability of death and the oblivion that follows allows the individual to falsely hold on to ideas and values that make his/her life inauthentic. Thus, not unlike hope, the individual believes that a focus on a present oblivion rather than a later one can allow us to enjoy an easier ride. It may do so,
but the path that best characterises our existence should be one that immerses itself in the facts of our existence, rather than one that shies away from it.

For those who might disagree and find an appeal to facts unnecessary, a few considerations may be taken into account. The first point is the sheer will to discover the truth that is common to most individuals. Indeed, human development has generally been a function of the improvement of our knowledge base through the accumulation of new truths and the shedding away of old lies. Gaining knowledge is, however, something different from living by it. Indeed, it is evident that most times only those (f)acts that positively serve our interests are the ones we are more likely to conform to and live by. Those that do not serve our interest are either suppressed, ignored or painted as untruths. Living on the basis of facts involves a certain transcendence of our animal preference to something much more profound. An existence that is guided by facts is one that pursues true authenticity and I think that transcending one’s animal nature in this context – living authentically – is a value worth pursuing. One can even say that living in this way would allow some meaning in life (Kekes, 2010, p. 79; Benatar, 2017, p. 63).

With the seeming unattractiveness of a reverse forgetfulness through a deep immersion in the activities of one’s life, I shall propose another path that may correspond fully with our cause. This route is inspired by Camus. Camus claims that one route most people tend to take is what he terms ‘philosophical suicide’. Philosophical suicide involves an abandonment of truth in search of hope. Hope is understood here as nothing more than holding onto the belief that there is an ‘other side’ after death, where our journey continues in a meaningful way. It is the hope that life continues after death. Hope can also subsist even before death – when we believe that there are instances of meaning that sustain throughout our lives and, perhaps, after we die. In this sense, it is not a matter of the person outliving his demise but rather his/her meaning in life outliving his/her death. In the search for hope (in terms of the meaning of our lives) and since this search generally involves the sacrifice of our philosophical attitudes in favour of some sort of faith, we willingly kill off our philosophical attitudes. These philosophical attitudes are enamoured by the unattractiveness that
comes with building one’s outlook on views that are decidedly not true. It is unattractive in much the same way that lies are not attractive.

However, Camus argues that a more viable option is that of revolt. Like Sisyphus, we must understand our meaningless fate and then seek to live through it with a sort of superiority or transcendence over it. According to Camus:

One of the only coherent philosophical positions is thus revolt. It is a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity. It is an insistence upon an impossible transparency. It challenges the world anew every second….metaphysical revolt extends awareness to the whole of experience. It is that constant presence of man in his own eyes. It is not aspiration, for it is devoid of hope. That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it. (1955, p. 36)

Revolt speaks to the strength of the human willpower to still challenge its fate, even though it is an inevitable fate. For Camus, it is revolt that gives value to life (1955, p. 36). It is revolt that offers succour to a decidedly absurd life.

This view is perhaps similar to Nietzsche’s advocation for the human person to transcend the human condition and become a superman by expressing the will-to-power (Nietzsche, 2006). In the sense of what we are talking about, the will-to-power would be an expression of the human resistance to meaninglessness – a subjective decision to encounter meaninglessness head-on with courage. By affirming one’s own sovereignty and choosing the values that one finds worth pursuing, we become the masters of our fate whose ability to create meaning corrals the meaninglessness of our situation.

However, it is the thinking that revolt gives value (or by extension, meaning) to life that I disagree with presently. Perhaps, like many other things, it is in the sense of a value in life and/or a meaning in life that such a drive towards revolt would make sense. However, I do not accept this is true when we begin to talk about the meaning of life. When talking about the meaning of life, revolt
prostrates before death, nothingness and meaninglessness. If one chooses revolt as a means to the
meaning of life, then that revolt is useless since it does nothing to counter the eternal
nothingness/unawareness that death brings. Beyond this, one reason why one might employ revolt
has to do with the thinking that meaninglessness is itself something bad or negative. If this is the
thinking, then the use of revolt seems redundant, since I had earlier established that
meaninglessness is value-neutral and not a harm.

Another route that one might follow is the path of consolation. Like I stated in the third
chapter, Agada’s view is grounded on the pursuit of perfection (which for him is the ultimate
meaning of life and universal existence). Unfortunately, perfection is an unattainable or, more
charitably, a yet to be achieved ideal. Still, in attempting to achieve meaning, one encounters
instances of joy and consolation in sadness. The meaning of life, therefore, boils down to the
interplay between joy, sadness and consolation. Thus, for Agada, living with meaninglessness is
ultimately dependent on our mood and ability to console ourselves despite our inability to attain
meaning.

However, like the other paths that I have described, there appear to be certain flaws that
make the path of consolation also unattractive. From the preceding arguments, one would think that
Agada’s idea of consolationism seems misappropriated. The melancholy of pessimism and the joy
of existing to yearn that individuals feel appears to be directed to the wrong thing – a yet to be
achieved meaningfulness that is based on the illusion that a yet to be achieved meaningfulness
exists. One would prefer that consolationism be directed to the melancholy of a futile existence that
the finality that death presupposes, which often outweighs any joy that possessing meaning in life
may bring. Whether this consolation is a viable mood for living with meaninglessness is another
matter altogether. I would like to think that it is not. Consolationism is first a reaction to pessimism
or melancholy. Pessimism, I believe, is an attitude of negative thinking (Thacker, 2015, p. 3) and for
Agada, it is the sadness we feel as we realise that the perfection – the meaning – which the universe
yearns for cannot be achieved. We are then consoled by the moments of positivity that we
encounter as we still continue to yearn (despite the melancholy of an unachievable purpose). Meaninglessness, we must note at this point, is markedly different from pessimism.

Secondly, consolationism and indeed any active reaction to the meaninglessness of life is in-itself meaningless and futile. Perhaps it may serve well as a means of attaining instances of meaning but when we begin to talk from a general whole-life view, such meaningfulness becomes difficult. For all our optimism and pessimism (both reactionary attitudes), the nothingness that death presents and the eternal lack of awareness that it brings invariably make such attitudes an ultimately profound waste of time. Following this, our aim should not be finding ways of fighting and overcoming meaninglessness but rather finding a way to *live with it*. The path I seek addresses the latter and consolationism seems to fail with regards to the latter.

All is not lost, though, and, despite my problems with Agada’s consolationism, its ideas about joy and melancholy inadvertently introduce us to another path that will characterise the proper attitude towards meaninglessness. In examining Agada’s view, I find similarities between his ideas about mood (i.e. joy and melancholy) and Friedrich Nietzsche’s views about life as both a tragedy and a comedy. It is through Nietzsche’s analysis (which culminates in his idea of laughter) that I shall consider ‘laughter’ as a derivative attitude resulting from our understanding of the meaninglessness of our existence – one that can replace despair and anguish as a truly value-neutral reaction to meaninglessness.

For Nietzsche, life should be characterised by a benign admission of the meaninglessness of life (Nietzsche, 1882, pp. 27-28). However, what is tragic is not this meaninglessness but rather our various futile attempts at finding meaningfulness or purpose in a world without purpose. One can even argue that engaging in these futile attempts enhances the meaninglessness of our lives even more. Nietzsche argues that in our search for an ideal and in our interpretations of the universe and/or life as purposeful, we lose track of the comedy of our existence and focus on things that are embellished with futility (Nietzsche, 1882, p. 28). Nietzsche further argues that the perpetration of this tragedy is goaded on by what he refers to as ‘ethical teachers’. These ethical teachers are
basically those supposed moral sages (such as Jesus Christ, Buddha, etc.) who pop up at the different times in human existence to reinforce the belief that life can be ultimately meaningful and that our existence has or serves a purpose (Nietzsche, 1882, p. 28).

What is interesting here is that, unlike Agada, the melancholy of our existence is not only fuelled by our inability to grasp the ever-eluding purpose of perfection, the melancholy or tragedy of our existence is also fuelled by our belief that our lives are meaningful and that there is an ultimate purpose out there that we must fulfil. This tragedy is further deepened by the fact that our belief in meaning ensures that we seek out an alternate existence of false hope rather than the real and authentic existence that purely describes our existence – a meaningless existence. Nietzsche further points out, ‘At present, things are still quite different; at present, the comedy of existence has not yet 'become conscious' of itself; at present, we still live in the age of tragedy, in the age of moralities and religions’ (Nietzsche, 1882, p. 28). Whereas society today seems to be carried away by this alternate understanding of our existence and considers it to be the norm, I think it is pertinent that we immediately ‘become conscious’ of the meaninglessness of our lives – what Nietzsche might call the ‘comedy of our existence – and I do not shy away from this responsibility.

I think it is our fixation with the idea of an (un)attainable ideal (i.e. meaning of life), as well as the belief that our lives are things that are capable of a linear movement towards an ultimate ideal of meaning, which deceives us and enables our existential anguish. Perhaps what the consolationist says about our desperate yearning for perfection (a purpose I claim does not exist) is in some sense true. What is not true however is that the moments of joy (i.e. the moments of meaning in life) can indeed console us when taking a comprehensive perspective on our lives. Perhaps what is needed is a re-evaluation of our mindsets, with regards to our understanding of our existential condition and what it means to be alive.

It is my view that we must take a step back and rid ourselves of the assumption that the meaning of our lives is out there that we could grasp if we tried hard enough. We must instead agree that our lives are as indifferent to us as is any material object and we must, in turn, be indifferent to
it. Like Nietzsche (1882) suggests, we must see ourselves as both actor and audience in the play that is existence, one whose plot is fully determined by the actors involved and at the same time serves no apparent or subtle purpose. By doing so, we can also develop a mindset that totally recognises this play and perhaps even laugh at it for what it truly is – a meaningless play that abruptly ends with the demise of the subjective character. Perhaps by dulling the expectations we have of our lives we can begin to find the proper foundation with which to live with it. It is within this purview that I in the next section propose the philosophy of indifference as the proper path or the proper way to live with meaninglessness.

6.2. The Philosophy of Indifference: An Introduction

A popular African proverb states that when it rains, no roof is discriminated against. It is quite right to think in such a way especially when one is speaking about something that is inevitable and has so far confronted every wo/man without fail. I speak about death and the meaninglessness of our lives that comes in its wake. In much the same way that one cannot will the rain to stop, it is highly unlikely that it is possible for mortal men to will away death and meaninglessness with the wave of the hand or indeed any other sophisticated gesture. Since we must step outside as it rains, it is inevitable that without an umbrella (which we cannot have), one would get wet no matter what building one steps out from and no matter how dry one previously made one’s clothes. In a situation where wetness is inevitable, it would make no sense believing that the prior state of dryness covers for the infinite moment in the rain and it would make no sense showing gallantry despite the wetness since such gallantry does not change the fact that one is wet. The best thing one can do then is to simply realise that s/he must indeed go outside, that s/he would inevitably get wet and more poignantly, that nothing can be done about it. Beyond taking the inevitable step and accepting in one’s mind the thing I have previously just said, nothing more can be done, as further actions only lead to futility.
It is this sort of thinking that inspires what I term the ‘philosophy of indifference’. In trying to decipher what is the proper mode or mood for living with the meaninglessness of our lives, I introduce the philosophy of indifference as the proper mode of living with meaninglessness. Notice here that I do not claim that it is the only way that one can live with meaninglessness. What I mean when I consider the philosophy of indifference as the proper mode of living with meaninglessness is that I find it the most attractive of all the other modes of living with meaninglessness and I also consider it the mode that best encapsulates our existential condition. I shall explain why this is so as I delve into the concept itself in the subsequent sections. It is important to, at this juncture, contrast the stoic idea of ‘indifference’ and the philosophy of indifference that I propose. The indifference of the stoics focused on events in life and sort to find agreeable, any turn that their lives took – whether such a turn was of value or harmful to them. The indifference I speak of, first, focuses quite specifically on the meaning of life and the attendant choice between suicide and living for living sake. It finds life, considered as a whole as meaningless and value-neutral. Thus, whereas it is plausible to claim that most stoics will agree that life is meaningful, agree that sometimes life is not pleasurable and that one must be indifferent either ways, the philosophy of indifference that I propound finds life meaningless, finds that meaninglessness value-neutral, and finds both suicide and living for living sake as equally viable.

6.2.1. Indifference and Its Noetic Propaedeutic

In this section, the first thing I must do is unpack what I mean by ‘noetic propaedeutic’ and how exactly I use the phrase in this work. First, I begin with the term ‘noetic’, which must be distinguished from ‘noetics’ which is, generally speaking, the study of the mind and/or intellect (Noetics, 2018). ‘Noetic’, as I use it here, refers to anything related to mental states or based on the intellect. A propaedeutic, on the other hand, refers to any preliminary knowledge, study or
instruction that enables one to properly understand a certain course of study. In the sense with which I use the term here, a ‘propaedeutic’ would refer to the preliminary ideas or principles that guide our understanding of a certain situation, state of affairs or (in the case of this work) our existential condition. Put together, ‘noetic propaedeutic’ would, in the context of my thesis, represent the intellectual principle that directs the individual towards the proper mindset and/or attitude necessary for understanding the condition of meaninglessness that inevitably pervades our existence.

Deciding what this noetic propaedeutic should be (with regards to living with meaninglessness) is quite a simple task. The situation of life’s meaninglessness in-itself serves or should serve as the proper propaedeutic for living with meaninglessness. As I have previously suggested, neither hope (broadly construed) nor revolt nor even consolationism can serve as attractive modes of living with meaninglessness, as they seem to either drag us away from the reality of our existential situation or seek to offer respite to the perceived anguish of meaninglessness – an exercise that constantly reeks of futility. Perhaps an existence that is not futile would embrace these paths as reasonable. Unfortunately, futility is something that is part and parcel of our existence, since we die. It, therefore, seems that the most attractive propaedeutic that we can muster subsists simply in the strong acknowledgement of the meaninglessness of our lives. In other words, the proper propaedeutic for living with meaninglessness is a constant acknowledgement of the ultimate meaninglessness of our lives and the application of that acknowledgement as a precondition that guides any action that affects our existence. This propaedeutic encourages the abandonment of any attempt at responding to meaninglessness – I shall explain what I mean presently.
6.2.2. The Philosophy of Indifference and (Not) Responding to Meaninglessness

To properly understand what I mean by responding to meaninglessness it is pertinent that I draw a sharp distinction between a ‘response to’ meaninglessness and a ‘response because of’ meaninglessness. To understand the distinction between the two, consider the following: Suppose a person mistakenly puts his hand in a fire or steps on hot coal. A *response because of* is the pain one feels because of the fire. Due to the stimulus, the individual’s nerve endings fire electrochemical impulses straight to the brain. The brain, in turn, interprets this signal as pain and sends it back to the affected area. The pain we feel is a mental reaction because of the stimulus (i.e. the fire or hot coal). A ‘response to’ the stimulus would generally involve the individual’s attempt at removing his or her hand from the fire. It is a ‘response to’ because the action that accompanies it strives to remedy the situation in such a way that the ill-effects of the stimuli (for instance the burns associated with stepping on coal or putting one’s hand in the fire) cease to be a factor. Whereas a ‘response because of’ is an inevitable effect of the situation, it is not always the case that a ‘response to’ that situation – i.e. removing one’s hand from the fire or jumping out of the coal – is equally as inevitable. Indeed, some situations require that the individual resist responding to the situation, even though the ‘response because of’ that situation still remains – for instance, consider a situation where one had to put one’s hand in the fire to save a baby’s life or step on hot coal to avoid being shot by muggers.

The situation of the current existential condition of our lives is not similar to the final scenario I just painted, which required that the individual resist the urge to respond to his or her situation. The meaninglessness of our lives requires that we avoid a response to our existential condition but for different reasons altogether. In respect to the previous example, consider the following: Suppose the fire we spoke of was not a localised fire but an unlikely fire that engulfed the entire earth or that the entire earth was covered in smouldering hot pieces of coal. In such a scenario the fire is everywhere and there can be no removing of one’s hand from the fire or jumping
away from the pieces of hot coal. This is obviously because one would only be removing his hand from one part of the fire to another or would be jumping from one piece of coal to another, endlessly. What the above scenario presupposes is that attempts at responding to these all-pervading stimuli are ultimately responses in futility for the mere fact that any such response always leads to the very same situation that the individual is attempting to avoid.

One can draw parallels between the scenario painted above, the condition of meaninglessness and the need for a noetic propaedeutic that does not respond to meaninglessness. Like the fire or hot coal that pervades the whole world, the inevitability of death ensures the sure-fire nothingness that the condition of being dead presupposes. It introduces us to an all-pervading meaninglessness of life that faces us head-on no matter which direction we turn to and no matter what actions we take. Thus, like the individual who cannot strive to respond to the fiery stimuli (since it engulfs him/her totally and such a striving would not change his/her condition) or delude herself into believing that the pains associated with fires are worth experiencing, we cannot actively strive to respond to the meaninglessness of our lives since meaninglessness encompasses our lives and such a striving will not change the condition of meaninglessness – rendering any such response to meaninglessness an exercise in futility.

In all this, we must not forget that unlike being engulfed in flames, the condition of meaninglessness does not necessarily imply a miserable and painful existential condition. Notwithstanding, for most people who recognise the meaninglessness of their lives there is some resentment for that condition and a sense of a disappointment that there is ultimately nothing more to life than an inevitable death, an accompanying nothingness and an ultimate meaninglessness. But this sort of thinking smacks of a deep pessimism that does not truly represent the condition of meaninglessness. I agree that the disappointment such individuals feel is generally a reaction to the incommensurability of the condition of meaninglessness and an ideal (usually an impossible ideal) that we believe our lives are striving to become and wherein we locate the meaning of our lives.

What this means is that consciously and sometimes unconsciously, we get caught up in the mire of
being and becoming – with our existence representing the ‘becoming’ and meaningfulness inextricably tied with the achievement of ‘being’ from a becoming. One can further argue that it is perhaps the case that these ideals are borne out of a belief in a divine or cosmic purpose that human persons should pursue. This alignment is in turn precipitated by the attainment of ‘being’ (as described above). Unfortunately, though, there is nothing that suggests that there is anything more to the universe than what exists. There is no underlying logic or purpose to the universe and the randomness embedded in reality only strives to show that it is not true that such an ideal exists. If we agree that what I posit is true, then we must also invariably agree that the universe is, in-itself, ultimately valueless.

The disappointment about the meaninglessness of life is seemingly tied to a different type of understanding of the world (i.e. a belief in a value-laden universe) that is not commensurate with the world as it actually is (i.e. a valueless universe). Understanding the world as it is not only re-adjusts our understanding of it but also modifies our reactions towards the valuelessness and meaninglessness that it represents. In a valueless and meaningless world, it would be an emotional misdirection for one to express disappointment or anguish and other similar feelings rather than a neutral or non-feeling (understood here to mean an avoidance of sentiment). Indifference also involves an acknowledgement of the fact that a value-neutral and meaningless world must only always elicit a non-feeling or indifference, since value neutrality and meaninglessness, by their mere neutrality, should not in-itself provoke either positive or negative feelings. Indeed, for the individual who walks past me in the street and is indifferent towards me – at best, glancing towards me to briefly acknowledge the impression my existence has created in his brain – it would be foolhardy for me to leap for joy because of that show of indifference or to go home sad because of it. In the same vein, reacting to the value-neutral meaninglessness that characterises our lives would be unattractive.

One can, however, point to values created in the world by humans. How might we respond or react to them? It is true that we do create some values, at least in our day-to-day lives but we
must also ask about the place of those values in relation to the overall meaninglessness of our lives. That I have love for ‘x’ at the moment, a value, does nothing to mediate the fact that my life as a whole is meaningless. If this is the case, then it would also be odd for me to claim that my love for ‘x’ must somehow affect my indifference towards the fact that my life as a whole is meaningless. It would amount to, for instance, expecting the painkilling effect of a painkiller on an individual to somehow affect the ultimate outcome of the terminal disease affecting that individual.

It is important to note here that meaninglessness is not synonymous with the deprivation of a good (which is a much more moral claim). Indeed, any drive towards negative sentiments such as disappointment, existential anguish, pessimism, despair etc. (which are attitudes to meaninglessness), or positive feelings such as revolt, hope etc. (which are responses or reactions to meaninglessness), only arises from a misunderstanding of the world as it is and/or meaninglessness as it should be perceived (with regards to attitudes), and a need to derive meaningfulness where there is none (with regards to ‘responses to’).

More arguments can also be made for certain acts of meaninglessness that are also harmful acts. Metz (2013a, p. 64) had coined the term ‘anti-matter’ to express the ‘concept of the disvaluable scale of meaning…’. This is similar to Stephen Campbell’s concept of anti-meaning (Campbell, 2015, p. 704), where something more than the meaninglessness of life is supposed viz. its polar opposite – investing in evil or harm. However, I do not agree with this thinking in its entirety. Whereas a senseless act like blowing up the sphinx for no reason is meaningless and causes a harm, the negative reaction we feel is not directed at the meaninglessness of the act itself, it is rather directed to the harm to others that that particular meaningless act has caused, and this is in my view a strictly moral question. Indeed, it is not the absence of a good that should elicit a negative response, it is the presence of a harm that should. It would be a good, for instance, if everyone I liked, fell in love with me. But this is not the case; most individuals I like are indifferent towards me. However, that indifference cannot elicit a negative response on my part. What would elicit a negative response on my part would be a negative attitude – say hate – from the people I meet, since
hate that is expressed causes some harm. That reaction subsists as a push-back against that harm. Thus, the lack of a good or an indifferent action that is not bad, cannot be said to be a harmful act. Meaninglessness is in-itself value-neutral, but when an immoral act is also a meaningless act, then the disvalue that is often alluded is not resident in the meaninglessness of the act but to the property of immorality that is associated with it. Let us also keep in mind that these sorts of examples may be seen as referring only to meaninglessness in life rather than of life.

Unlike revolt, which encourages some response to the situation of meaningless, this approach to meaningless acknowledges the finality of death, the futility of any response to the meaninglessness of life and the value-neutrality of meaninglessness, by not responding to the meaningless of life.

Unlike hope, i.e. the belief that the meaning of life exists and the quest for it remains relevant, this approach avoids the problems inherent in such a pursuit – problems that arise from the finality of death, as I have previously explained – by simply acknowledging this finality and taking that acknowledgement to its logical conclusion viz. suicide and living for living sake. Indeed, it is the embrace of this logical conclusion that differentiates similar views about the meaninglessness of life like Nagel’s (1987) from my indifference approach.

6.2.3. **Indifference and (Not) Living - Suicide**

So, what does it mean then to live a meaningless life with the propaedeutic of indifference? Well, one quote from Nietzsche encapsulates my response to the above question, and it is stated thus: ‘Pursue your best or your worst desires, and above all, perish!’ (Nietzsche, 1882, p. 27). An existence that is ultimately meaningless is one that seems to deny the subjective individual of the need to make certain judgments about his/her existence. It is an existence that enjoins one to fully express the noetic propaedeutic of indifference – this propaedeutic being a mental acknowledgement of the condition of meaninglessness as well as a non-reactionary attitude towards the fact of life’s meaninglessness. In living one’s life, acknowledging the meaninglessness of life
can adopt two modes. The first mode is through suicide and the second mode is through what I call living for living sake.

Any discussion about suicide, whether as it relates to indifference or any other thing for that matter, must start with a definition of what suicide is as distinguished from what it is not. A layman’s definition of what suicide is would describe it simply as the act of intentionally taking one’s life. Thus, the general consensus is that for a death to be ruled as suicide two factors are necessary and sufficient. First, the death of the individual must be seen as originating from the actions of the same dead or dying individual and not as a direct effect of someone else’s action and/or prompting. Second, the death of the individual must be seen as also originating from the dead or dying individual’s will and intentionalitly, i.e. it must result from the determination and resolve of the individual to actually want to cause his or her own death. These two factors are usually seen as essential for a death to be ruled as suicide. For Richard Brandt:

‘Suicide’ is conveniently defined...as doing something which results in one’s death, either from the intention of ending one’s life or the intention to bring about some other state of affairs (such as relief from pain) which one thinks it certain or highly probable can be achieved only by means of death or will produce death. (Brandt, 1979, p. 460)

What can also be derived from the above definition is the idea that suicide is thought of as providing some sort of relief. This relief may subsist as relief from a physical pain (for instance, if one is suffering from an excruciatingly painful cancer or other painful diseases), or a mental pain (for instance, pain from the psychological effects of bullying, the death of a loved one and/or other such monumental losses) etc.

The definitions laid out above seem to capture the essence of what a suicidal death is, which includes intentionality and a direct responsibility for the cause of one’s death. But there are certain instances where this definition might be misleading. In instances where an individual willingly sacrifices his/her life for the sake of others – for instance, Jesus Christ, who is thought of as
sacrificing his life for mankind, or soldiers in the battlefield who are known to have sacrificed their lives for the sake of their comrades etc., – there is both intentionality and direct responsibility, but it is hard to think of such deaths as representative of suicide. In fact, such altruistic deaths are in-themselves seen as morally acceptable and commendable. Also, in certain other cultures, other forms of self-immolation that are not particularly considered altruistic are also not thought of as suicide in the sense that we think of it today. In traditional Japanese cultures for instance, seppuku, i.e. a ritual that involves self-disembowelment, is seen as something that brings honour (while avoiding certain dishonour/shame, avoiding torture by one’s enemies and/or atoning for a serious crime) to the individual (usually a samurai) who performs it (Fusé, 1980, p. 57).

Thus, it is not always the case that every instance of intentionally causing one’s own death can be regarded as suicide. Considering this, a revision of our definition of suicide is pertinent and such a definition must take into cognisance those situations where certain instances of self-immolation may not be understood in the same category as suicide. I, therefore, define suicide as the deliberate and willful cessation of one’s own life, by one’s own actions and for non-altruistic reasons.

Since suicide involves self-destruction, the question that immediately becomes apparent is how suicide features in the discussion of the best mode of living with meaninglessness. Perhaps I must rephrase the language I use and instead consider suicide a possible mode of dying because of meaninglessness.

Earlier I had concluded that all reactions to meaninglessness are deeply misguided as they are not only attempts in futility, they also originate from a certain disappointment that arises from the incommensurability of the world as it is and the ideal world we hope to achieve. The fact that this ideal world – where the meaning of life is thought to be hiding – does not exist enables the thinking that such feelings of disappointment are generally unfounded. These conclusions seem to question the resort to suicide as one of the modes of living with meaninglessness (understood now as dying because of meaninglessness).
Our general understanding of suicide seems to suggest that this supreme type of self-negation can only arise from a deep-rooted disappointment with life or a deep-rooted pain because of life. What this seems to suggest is that suicide is a response to certain conditions of life that are generally unpalatable to the individual who commits suicide. It would indeed be odd for one to have suicidal thoughts because s/he thinks his/her life is great – except of course the individual finds guilt in having a nice life as opposed to others who don’t – and as such it seems obvious that suicide is a response to some pain or disappointment. If the preceding statements are correct, then suicide as a response to meaninglessness seems to be contrary to two fundamental ideas I had previously outlined, viz. the absence of disappointment because of the valueless nature of the world and our existence (hence the lack of need for suicide) and the principle of indifference that abhors a response to meaninglessness. While all these seem to be valid points, I think there are certain ways one might think of suicide that would enable an escape from these sorts of critiques.

Rather than accept that suicide is a response to meaninglessness, one can think of it as the most powerful expression of a response because of meaninglessness. It is by taking one’s life that the individual fully accepts the condition of meaninglessness in the strongest possible way. This powerful acceptance can be thought of in terms of the final logical conclusion to the acknowledgement of the meaninglessness of life – i.e. the noetic propaedeutic of indifference. In this sense, one would not think of suicide as a response to meaninglessness but rather as a physical expression of the complete acceptance of the noetic propaedeutic of indifference. It is reasonable to then say that if life as a whole was meaningful, then suicide would not be attractive, since the indifference that drives it would be unnecessary. If this is true, then it is also reasonable to say that suicide need not only imply (or be pursued) because life is bad, it can also be pursued because there is an absence of meaning in terms of life as a whole. The question that however requires an answer is the question of why an individual must express the acknowledgement of meaninglessness in such a powerful way and/or in such a way that is usually considered morally wrong. The response to this question, I suspect. lies in another question: why not?
From an African point of view, suicide would involve the greatest form of abnegation of not only an individual’s life but also the individual’s life in harmony with the community. In Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, the main protagonist Okonkwo takes his own life because of his inability to understand the changes around him, the cowardice of his once-powerful countrymen and the humiliation from colonial justice that was expected because of his murder of a colonial government official. The repercussions of his suicide resonated throughout the fabric of his community. First, his suicide was considered an abomination to the earth goddess and as such there was a need for the community to embark on certain cleansing rituals. Second, his body could be moved only by individuals who were not linked to his community since his death was a ‘bad’ one. Third, his body had to be thrown into the evil forest without any of the burial rites or ritual expected in the death of a prominent individual. Although Achebe’s book is fictional, one can glean from it the attitude of most African towards suicide. For most (especially traditional) Africans, suicide involves a forced removal of the individual from the community to which s/he belongs, and this removal generally permits a grave distortion of the relational fabric of the community. By denying others in the community the chance of fostering a communal relationship with him/her in such a powerful manner, the individual (who has committed the suicide) is thought of as not only denying harmony but also causing discord. The latter part is perhaps grounded by the fact that for those for whom s/he had a close relationship (close friends and family members), such a death might enable physical suffering, mental suffering and even economic suffering. Thus, suicide was considered not only immoral but also a grave abomination – the graveness of which is fully expressed by the rituals involved in addressing a suicide and restructuring the community thereafter. Beyond this, the great premium placed on human life and the thinking that one’s life belonged to the community denied the individual the moral autonomy or right to suicide. Suicide thus disallowed the proper functioning of the community towards harmony. To further buttress this point, Innocent Asouzu avers that:
...suicide was rare and when it did occur, it was considered an abomination and a radical form of self-abnegation and self-negation whose impact went beyond the action of the victim into the totality of his world.... It is an absolute rejection of the immense opportunities offered by a world of harmonious complements. For this reason, the traditional African speculative mind identified suicide as abominable and with it, all acts that smack on self-negation. As a negation of the complementary unity of consciousness, the Igbo committed a suicide victim, symbolically, into the state of non-being, which is represented by the evil forest. (Asouzu, 2004, p. 178)

What can be gathered from the above is that, because of the grave consequences of committing suicide, suicide in traditional Africa was a rare occurrence. The toxic manner in which the individual (who committed suicide) disassociated and removed his/herself from the community as well as the destruction of one of the most prized asset of the community – an individual’s life – allowed for the extreme rejection of suicide as manner of not-living. Whereas it is perhaps reasonable to argue for the right to life and the right to die – since it seems that the individual should have at least some (if not full) autonomy over his/her only innate property (I use property in the sense of a belonging or possession) i.e. his/her life – it seems that for the African that autonomy is void insofar as the individual’s autonomy is submerged in and lost to the community such that it is the community that invariably ‘owns’ the individual’s life.

Thus, as a response to the ‘why not?’ question I posed earlier, the response from African philosophers such as Asouzu is that suicide not only denies one’s community and one’s family a more robust complementary relationship that would have been occasioned by the attainment of the full normative and relational potentials of the individual, it also serves as the individual’s negation of what Asouzu terms ‘complementary unity of consciousness’. By removing one’s self as a missing link in the complementary chain through suicide, the individual who invests in suicide only breaks his/her society in ways that violently distort the essence of that community. One might
further add that this negation of being and the embrace of non-being retards the attainment of full vitality – which can be considered as an attribute of meaning in life from an African perspective – and as such, is a function of the meaninglessness that it ironically tries to avoid. Although it might be easier to present the seemingly weak argument that in suicide one only refuses to be in communion with others – something that seems far less a crime than actively striving for discord – and therefore does something that is simply and only not-wrong, a greater problem such an argument may encounter (and indeed any argument for suicide) is the harm that suicide causes if one was before his death responsible for dependent(s). Again, although one can argue that a natural death offers the same deprivation without the label of immorality, it is also true that the subjective decision to commit suicide is an act that directly causes harm to other people, namely the individual’s dependent(s). It is difficult to offer rebuttals to these very legitimate claims and perhaps the traditional African response to the ‘why not?’ question seems too strong.

Unfortunately, this response, in my opinion, falls under the weight of the sheer valuelessness and meaninglessness of life. Whereas one might consider an investment in complementary harmony as something of great value and meaning in life, it is hardly the case that this importance escapes the finality of death and the nothingness that immediately follows it. That we venerate certain forms of meaning in life says nothing about the fact that life ultimately ends. It also says nothing of the view because death is an eternal state; that one dies today or at a later date does nothing to change the eternality of nothingness. Also, the answer to the ‘why not?’ question given in our brief exposition about African views of suicide offers no response to the supposition that in causing one’s death, one hastens the nothingness that is to come anyway rather than continually entertain a meaningless and often absurd existence. Finally, the response above says nothing of the view that there is no chance that by living-till-death one can encounter the meaning of life and as such the point of living-till-death smacks of a futility that cannot be denied. A suitable answer to the ‘why not?’ question – one that fully addresses the concerns raised above – is yet impossible and may remain so because of the inevitability of death and (at best) the boredom or
(worse) lack of meaning of an eternal life. It is in the silence of a no-answer that I locate the legitimacy of suicide as a possible mode of living with meaninglessness (or dying because of it). More so, to live only implies to die and to die is to not exist, and soon enough, to not exist only metamorphoses to a never had been. Suicide not only aids this eventual and inevitable progression, it seems to be a proper affirmation of the condition of life – which is ultimately lifelessness. Whereas the lack of meaning of life is not necessarily a bad thing, it is also, on the whole, a largely pointless affair that is sure to end in one’s demise. Now, since one’s demise is neither good nor bad and meaning in life is good, one would think that that would always count in favour of living and perhaps the pursuit of meaning in life. However, suicide or indeed any of the two principles of the philosophy of indifference only takes effect once we begin to talk about the meaning of life. Thus, whereas the pursuit of the meaning in life is a good thing and the principle of suicide should not be invoked to trump such a pursuit of moments of meaningfulness, once we begin to talk about meaning in life within the ambit of talk about the meaning of life, then one cannot but introduce the philosophy of indifference. In other words, once we begin to think that meaning in life somehow affects (perhaps positively) the general outlook of our entire existence as a whole (meaning of life), the principle of indifference must be invoked. This is what gives power to the view that suicide can subsist as a mode of living with (or dying because of) meaninglessness.

So, even if one can argue that specific moments of meaningfulness only make sense within those moments themselves and beyond that – insofar as we begin to focus our gaze on the value of that moment of meaningfulness in relation to our lives as a whole – their value begins to be called into question. While it is plausible to argue that we can focus our gaze on moments of meaningfulness in our lives, I agree with Nagel (1987, pp. 96-97) that avoiding that gaze towards the meaning of our lives as a whole is difficult, if not impossible. If this is true, then meaning in life, as something that always tips the scale to allow us to consider living as more attractive, would always be called into question as soon as we begin to consider our lives as a whole.
Now, let us not also forget that (like I have stated earlier) there are two modes of living with meaninglessness – both of which are equally valid. As is the case with all pointless affairs, continuing is as much a valid response as not continuing. It is just as valid because the outcome remains the same regardless. Death is always the final factor.

6.2.4. **Indifference and Living for Living’s Sake**

Is suicide the only mode of indifference? The answer to this question lies in the words of Nietzsche as I had previously stated viz. ‘Pursue your best or your worst desires, and above all, perish!’(Nietzsche, 1882, p. 27). Whereas suicide expresses a dying because of meaninglessness, it is not the case that it is impossible to live despite meaninglessness. This second part gains some legitimacy from the fact that whereas the end is perishing, one can die to attain a perishing and one can also live to attain a perishing.

What the above implies is that one can, therefore, strive for suicide in the same manner that one may also want to strive to live for living sake. A suicidal response is equally as valid a response to meaninglessness as living for living sake. Why equal? Well, because there is no reason not to strive for either of them insofar as the end result is an inevitable perishing. These two modes are ultimately more attractive than other modes of living with meaninglessness (such as faith, revolt, etc.) because they both embrace the character of meaninglessness in its entirety. It is in the light of the above that I introduce and explain what I mean when I talk about living for living sake as another mode of expressing indifference towards the condition of meaninglessness. I do this by explaining the various conditions that form the essence of living for living sake.

6.2.4.1. **Abandonment of Hope**

The very first condition I shall speak about is the abandonment of hope and this condition is one of the cardinal principles of the noetic propaedeutic of indifference in general. One can think of
the abandonment of hope in two senses. First, to abandon hope is a total rejection of any claims to a meaning of life, whether such a claim is a direct claim to a meaning of life or a proxy claim that feeds on the more readily acceptable claim of a meaning in life as a route to a meaning of life. The total rejection of any claims to a meaning of life is based on the very fact of the inevitability of death and the nothingness that that presents. It is also precipitated in the boredom that an immortal/eternal life would eventually entail. Even beyond this boredom, one can further claim that although the attainment of some achievement or satisfaction in life satisfies for a while, any further lack of discontent removes that sense of contentment and replaces it with the burden of a dull life. Schopenhauer expresses this claim fully when he states:

Life presents itself chiefly as a task—the task, I mean, of subsisting at all, *gagner sa vie*. If this is accomplished, life is a burden, and then there comes the second task of doing something with that which has been won—of warding off boredom, which, like a bird of prey, hovers over us, ready to fall wherever it sees a life secure from need. The first task is to win something; the second, to banish the feeling that it has been won; otherwise it is a burden. (Schopenhauer, 1851, p. 10)

Thus, even if we do gain certain instances of meaning in life, such instances of meaning do not speak to the meaning of life since such a life is brought to nought by death. Even if we possessed an eternal life or an immortal life that were not boring, instances of meaning in life would be watered down through the cycle of infinite repetitions. Even if one attained something that is considered remotely close to a meaning of life, the burden of such an achievement *vis a vis* a dull life eventually turns such a life to one that is not meaningful – more so since that individual would have to live with an infinite dullness. It then does seem that no matter wherever the individual turns s/he is faced with the fact of meaninglessness and this fact truly speaks to the meaninglessness of our accidental lives as a whole.
With all these in mind – especially with regards to my very last claim – it makes sense to claim that one should abandon all hope, as such hope bears no semblance to the true character of life i.e. that life considered as a whole is meaninglessness. This ultimately leads us to the second sense in which one can think of the abandonment of hope and that is the active striving for meaningfulness. Whereas the former sense involves a mental rejection of hope, this latter sense involves the rejection of a real-world striving for the meaning of life. This striving is represented in the misplaced heroism we find in both the active striving towards a hopeful end and/or in the striving to create meaning, where there is none.

6.2.4.2. The Propaedeutic of Indifference and Living to Die

From the abandonment described above, the individual is left with nothing more than a truly indifferent attitude towards his/her existence as a whole and what I refer to as a ‘living to die’. Living to die is a direct offspring of the abandonment of hope and the inevitability of death, nothingness and ultimate meaninglessness. Indeed, this inevitability is sanctioned by our knowledge of the fact that every birthday, hour, or second we live through, we inch ever closer to our demise and the nothingness and meaninglessness that that entails. In living to die, the individual succumbs to meaninglessness and lives only in expectation of it (meaninglessness).

Living to die implies an existence of contrasts where each contrast is equally as valid as the other. It means deciding to pursue one’s desire or deciding not to do so. It involves pursuing morality and not pursuing morality etc. It is pursuing one’s best and/or worst desires or any of those things we suppose constitute meaning in life – whatever they may be. It is however very important to note that what legitimises the freedom of pursuit earlier alluded to is the full acknowledgement of the noetic propaedeutic of indifference – the abandonment of hope – as we strive to pursue them. Its legitimacy lies in our understanding (and constant acknowledgement of this understanding) of the fact that the end-result of this pursuit is the abyss of nothingness and meaninglessness. Equally as important to this theory is the full acknowledgement of the fact that our striving is not a striving for
meaningfulness or revolt or meaning through revolt, but rather, simply, a living. Living to die as a mode of indifference is not a denial of life (as is the case when one adopts an ascetic lifestyle), but is a plain acceptance of our desires as facts of life, which we can pursue (since it is part and parcel of our existence and insofar as it is not a striving for the meaning of life) or decide not to pursue (since meaninglessness remains whether we decide to pursue them or not).

6.2.4.3. The Principle of Laughter

From the preceding explanations of the principle of the abandonment of hope and living to die, I introduce the last principle of the mode of living for living sake – the principle of laughter. This principle is influenced by Nietzsche’s (1882) philosophy and its allusions about the true state of our existential condition as people living in this world.

For most people, the hope for meaning and the striving for it are borne out of the belief that beyond the world as we know it lies an ideal that we must strive for and this ideal is not different from the freedom/perfection that Agada (2015) claims the universe, as well as the humans in it, constantly yearn for. In this ideal or in the pursuit of it lies the expected meaning of life. For Nietzsche, this belief is further reinforced by teachers, scholars and/or philosophers who pander to this hopefulness from time to time. However, as I earlier stated, one must abandon all hope or striving for the meaning of life as well as abandon any attempt at revolting against meaninglessness. The reason for this abandonment is ultimately founded on the accidental, valueless and meaningless character of our existence in the world. Unlike claims to hope, what we know about our existential condition only points to what I have just stated. Thus, the need to dismantle all claims to hope and silence the teachers of it is of utmost importance and preludes the principle of laughter. Nietzsche aptly captures this point when he states:

There is no denying that in the long run each of these great teachers of a purpose was vanquished by laughter, reason and nature: the brief tragedy always changed and returned into the eternal comedy of existence, and the
'waves of uncountable laughter' - to cite Aeschylus - must in the end also come crashing down on the greatest of these tragedians. (Nietzsche, 1882, p. 29)

In dismantling and abandoning hope, the individual is left alone with an understanding of the world as it is, and s/he must tailor his/her life in accordance with this new understanding of the world, hence the project of indifference that I have so far tried to present and project. Taking a step back to revisit our understanding of the world as it enables us to discover something that would otherwise have been missed – laughter. The fact of our lives is that it is ultimately meaningless but the absurdity of our being alive and still having to live it (if one decides to live for living sake), often leads to despair, but this despair is only a function of the belief in hope and/or hope for meaningfulness. For those who dismantle feelings of hope from their psyche, what is left is, at worst, an indifferent character or, at best, a comic understanding of the character of our existence. Like spectators of a play in which we are actors, the philosophical step-back allows us to watch ourselves struggle from one absurdity to the other in a bid to attain an ultimate meaningfulness that is not existent in a play that we know will ultimately come to an end. As spectators we cannot grieve over the plot – it is not a tragedy. We should only be amused by it and the absurdities therein. It is therefore important to replace the feeling of despair that is usually associated with the knowledge of our meaningless existence with laughter.

Laughter is thus taking a step back to understand the true state of our condition and at the same time finding amusement in that condition. Laughter is then some sort of transcendence – one that goes beyond the condition of meaninglessness but is at the same time true to all we have said about meaninglessness and the propaedeutic of indifference. In laughter we find a valueless response (valueless in the sense that it offers neither hope nor stands as respite from meaninglessness) that at the same time offers a true understanding of our existential situation. Laughter is the ultimate recognition of the cosmic joke that is our existence and indulging in it. It is for this reason that one can consider laughter the more appropriate emotion as we encounter the
meaninglessness of life. It is also for this reason that laughter is different from other attitudes like scorn, revolt and defiance because these attitudes presuppose a harm or a discontent that one must work against in a bid to recover meaning through the backdoor. Laughter does not recover meaning, since there is no meaning of life to be recovered. When we laugh, it is not an expression of joy (since we can laugh in the most trying of times), an expression of sadness (since we can laugh in our happiest moment) or a form of revolt (since laughter does not preclude the hope/faith that undergirds revolt). It is only recognised as an appropriately valueless emotion when faced with meaninglessness and when employing the philosophy of indifference. It is meant as a replacement for existential angst.

6.3. Indifference and the Future of Human Existence: Towards an Anti-Natalist Destiny and Specie Suicide?

In the previous chapter(s) I have made certain claims about meaning in life, the meaning of life and the meaninglessness of life. It is only pertinent that in this section of this work I take the principle of indifference, and indeed all that I have said, to its logical conclusion. In other words, I shall be asking questions that relate to human existence in general (i.e. the totality of all individual existences). The two major questions that I shall attempt to answer are the following: If life is meaningless, is it then moral to procreate? And if life is meaningless, is it valuable or is it immoral to advocate for (what I term) species suicide? In my answer to these questions, I claim that one must adopt an indifferent approach – i.e. one that is not averse to procreating or not procreating, living as a species or dying as a species.

What has held firmly for most Africans from pre-colonial times up until (and to a large extent) the contemporary period is the great value, sacredness and sanctity of human life (I had earlier alluded to this in the third chapter of this thesis). Even though the wanton killings in both war and peacetime in most African societies today seem to betray this fact, at a foundational level, the idea of the sanctity of human life is often not a matter of debate. For most Africans, the highest
good is characterised by the bid to get more life. This view is captured by Theophilus Nwala when he states that for most Igbos (a tribe in Eastern Nigeria), ‘the *summum bonum* or highest value is Ndu (life)’ (Nwala, 1985, p. 144). He further shows that expressions of the importance of human life are seen in the names that most Igbos bear, certain rituals and social ceremonies, certain prayers and certain anecdotes (Nwala, 1985, p. 144). For Iroegbu, his views about how Africans see life are quite similar to Nwala’s. For him:

> To touch a person’s life, starkly put, to shed blood, especially innocent blood is the greatest evil on earth: against the earth, and against humanity. It is Nso-Ala (taboo) that has the weightiest sanction in the world. Others who threaten or harass lives are proportionately sanctioned according to their evils. Witches and wizards who constitute recurring menaces to other people’s lives were hated public enemies. Given the opportunity, the community would summarily eliminate them. Those who should, but are unable to produce life, that is infertile and barren people were scorned at. The African natural procreative law reads: *Onye a muru, O muta IBE ya* (whoever is born, should give birth to others). (1994, p. 84)

The negative destruction of life without proper cause is, for most Africans, the greatest abomination and the greatest of all sins, which is often punished by the forceful extraction of the perpetrator from the community – essentially a transmutation of the perpetrator from a state of being to that of non-being. For most Africans, it is the value of the sanctity of human life that informs the drive towards marriage whose primary aim is procreation and a continuous contribution to the cycle of life (Kyalo, 2012; Matolino, 2017). It is also from the great value placed on human life that certain other African values that speak to human flourishing are founded. Why such value is placed on human life is mainly due to its expression of the divine character (i.e. it is believed to flow from the Supreme Being), the raw dignity inherent in every person and/or the role it plays in establishing, augmenting and sustaining communal harmony.
While all this is interesting, juxtaposing the African view about life and the meaninglessness of life (as I have previously analysed it) proves difficult, since it would be hard to think of life as ultimately meriting honour, if it is ultimately meaningless. Indeed, we can talk about other sorts of values like dignity or morality, but these types of values are not fully captured when we are talking about the meaning of life. While dignity and morality may help foster respect and proper social relations, it does not erase the meaninglessness of life. As well, the value of dignity and morality or the disvalue of a lack of it is moot, if the human species is no longer available. Thus, one’s raw dignity, for instance, offers no reprieve from meaninglessness and so possessing dignity does not come into play when we are trying to decide whether we should procreate or not leave behind our meaningless lives. To suggest a displacement of this most cherished value challenges the very core of traditional African morality and the traditional African views about life. However, this is precisely the challenge that the logic of this project has led us to and I intend to pursue it.

By displacing the value of the sanctity of human life from our contemporary understanding of life on the basis of its meaninglessness, one of the questions that immediately arises is the question of the need for procreation. For some scholars and even lay individuals, procreation is often seen as an inconvenience, a harm and/or a downright immoral act, especially in respect to a child who is being brought into the world. As it is, the world is wrought with many challenges and harms, which may arise from at least two causal factors namely, nature itself – for instance, famines, debilitating deformities, earthquakes, floods and other such natural disasters – and other human beings – for instance, wars, murders, slavery, sexual exploitations, emotional heartbreaks etc. In consonance with these harms, there appears to be a little chance of gaining some pleasure and even when gained, such pleasures are fleeting. Hence, the probability of coming across a harm and the drive towards entropy appear far greater than the chance of coming across some pleasure. This, in turn, allows the view that coming into existence is, at best, unattractive (Benatar, 2017). Even more poignant is David Benatar’s view of why coming into existence is a harm. He states, ‘I have argued that so long as a life contains even the smallest quantity of bad, coming into existence
is a harm’ (Benatar, 2008, p. 60). A crucial premise for him is that the goods of existence are not ‘real advantages’ over non-existence since there would be no one deprived of them in the latter case, making their absence not bad. In his words, ‘…the pleasures of the existent, although good, are not an advantage over non-existence, because the absence of pleasures is not bad. For the good to be an advantage over non-existence, it would have to have been the case that its absence were bad’ (Benatar, 2008, p. 41).

Benatar’s view is interesting, as it refuses to consider some sort of utilitarian weighing up of the qualities of life and rather points to even the most remote instance of harm as sufficient for us to think that it is a harm to come into existence. I believe that why Benatar thinks this is the case is that non-existence and the nothingness that it brings offers a blissful non-awareness of neither pain or pleasure, which is interrupted by a coming into existence – and an existence that always contains a previously unfelt harm.

One can reject the anti-natalist’s harm thesis, but that rejection would not answer the question of whether one should strive to procreate since life is meaningless. Indeed, for most individuals, it is the tension and intense struggle between harm, no-harm and pleasure in our lives that make life an interesting and comic experience. It is not always the case that harm is considered a reason not to live. Thus, especially for those who intend to live for living sake, harm might not subsist as a sufficient reason for not coming into existence or bringing others into existence. To answer the question of whether it is worth bringing others into existence or procreating since life is meaninglessness, what is required is a different analysis of the anti-natalist debate.

To answer the previously set out question, one might need to ask whether coming to existence deprives us of something better and whether briefly existing, only to be plunged back into nothingness/meaninglessness, is profitable. With regards to these questions, one might turn to Schopenhauer for a reply. For him, life is:

…an unprofitable episode, disturbing the blessed calm of non-existence.

And, in any case, even though things have gone with you tolerably well, the
longer you live the more clearly you will feel that, on the whole, life is a

disappointment, nay, a cheat. (Schopenhauer, 2004, p. 3)

What one can draw from the above is the fact that by bringing an individual into existence, one
unwittingly introduces the individual into a short period of unprofitable meaninglessness – this is
especially so for those seeking for the meaning of life. Admittedly, it is also true that this short
meaningless episode that is our lives eventually flows back to nothingness and non-awareness.
Following this, it might then be convenient to claim that the eventual meaninglessness of life is a far
less attractive proposition than the supreme calm of non-existence.

However, such an appraisal is flawed and especially so for one major reason. By accepting
this view, one commits to two related ideas viz. that the meaninglessness of life is in-itself a harm
and as such meaninglessness possesses at least a negative value. With regards to the latter, I had
earlier made the claim that meaninglessness in-itself possesses no intrinsic value, whether positive
or negative. If this is true, it then implies that meaninglessness in-itself cannot be a harm (a negative
value) since meaninglessness itself is valueless, thus refuting the initial claim.

To then answer the question of procreation, I revert to the principle of indifference. What
this means is that one must consider both a will to procreate and not procreate, insofar as both
options lead to the same conclusion – that whatever life is brought into being remains nothing more
than an inconsequential blob sandwiched between nothingness/non-existence and whatever life is
not brought into being expresses the same nothingness.

This sort of indifferent thinking can be extended to the idea of species suicide. Species
suicide, as I define it, is the deliberate and total annihilation of a species by that species (in this
case, the human species). If life is meaningless, then, for some, it might make sense to curtail the
meaninglessness of our lives by collectively ending our existence as a species, since the absence of
human life avoids the question of meaninglessness. While this appears to follow some logic, one
must apply the principle of indifference and acknowledge that both a willingness of the human
species to go extinct and the will to thrive for living sake are two equally valid routes, insofar as one
retains the propaedeutic of indifference. This fact is especially true since the demise of the human species is almost as inevitable as the death of a single individual.
Conclusion

In the preceding chapters we have sought to answer the question(s): what are the African conceptions of the meaning of life? Which one, if any, is defensible? And what does it entail for how to live? African philosophers have not addressed these questions in as much depth as I have done in this thesis. The paucity of views directly addressing these questions in the African philosophical literature does not mean that there are no related ideas from which African conceptions of meaning can be drawn. Thus, in answering the primary questions of this research I have not only delineated what I mean when I speak about the meaning in/of life, I have also painstakingly drawn from related ideas spread throughout African philosophical literature that indirectly express Africa conceptions of meaning in life. From the literature, I have constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed the following as plausible African theories of meaning in life: the African God-purpose theory, the African vital force theory, the communal normative function theory and consolationism.

Whereas these are prima facie plausible theories of meaningfulness, I have however found them to not be without problems. For the African God’s purpose theory, I have shown that even beyond the criticism that the Supreme Being may not behave in the way we like to think It does, any purpose meted out by it and carried out by humans may only show the instrumental nature of such a pursuit. For the vital force theory of meaning, I showed that the theory was based on a spirit-based metaphysic that is not supported by fact. Taking this into consideration, I proposed a naturalistic version of the vital force theory, where meaning is derived from the expression of one’s creative genius. However, I further claimed that the naturalised version of the vital force theory does not necessarily express the intrinsic acknowledgement needed in any viable theory of meaningfulness. For the communal normative theory, I concluded that such a theory of meaning is much too narrow and does not capture other types of meaning that may not express a communal function. Finally, for the consolationist theory of meaning, I argued that it is implausible to assume that the universe pursues a purpose on the basis of some causal dispositions. I also concluded that
even if we were to concede the existence of such a purpose, it would also be the case that that purpose would assume an external instrumental value to the individual and therefore be an unattractive form of meaning.

Thus, in light of the above, I invented the passionate yearning theory as an alternative view to the traditional African conception of meaning in life. Passionate yearning, as I presented it, was understood and differentiated from other views in terms of the criteria of intrinsic subjectivity, facticity, passion, yearning and striving.

I also presented a novel theory of what would count as the meaning of life that is largely inspired by African views, which I termed ‘ratio-structuralism’. I, however, rejected the idea that the meaning of life is possible since the conditions associated with ratio-structuralism do not hold in reality, and instead posited that life is ultimately meaningless. I considered life meaningless on the basis of the fact that our existence does not allow for us to accept ratio-structuralism (which I consider to be the best attempt at a theory of the meaning of life). With the meaninglessness of our lives an apparent condition of our existence, I devised the philosophy of indifference as a means of addressing the question of how to live with the meaninglessness of life. Unlike revolt, which encourages the individual to take up a defiant stance against meaninglessness, the philosophy of indifference simply acknowledges the meaninglessness of life and the futility of any attempts to respond to it.

Despite this, I revisit and reiterate my views on one particular issue of contention, and I believe that it is fitting that I conclude this thesis by revisiting my thoughts on the issue of how one should react or reconcile the possibility of meaning in life with the apparent meaningless of our lives?

In a good plate of chow fang, there are many tasteful ingredients and indeed one cannot deny that those ingredients are tasteful (if indeed they are). It is, however, also true that the tastefulness of ingredients does not always make for a tasty chow fang meal. The tastefulness (or lack of it) of the meal is generally dependent on the skill of the chef and/or the manner in which
those tasteful ingredients are put together. Also, if the ingredients are not tasty, it is usually the case that the meal, no matter how well put together it is, would not be tasty. We can consider meaning in life as tasteful ingredients and the meaning of life as the meal as a whole (as prepared). It is important to think more about the meaning of life than meaning in life. Though there are those who may live to enjoy moments of meaningfulness in life, it would be more attractive for these moments to make some sense in terms of the meaning of life. Indeed, one might order a plate of *chow fang* just to eat up some specific ingredients and enjoy but it would intuitively be more attractive if one orders *chow fang* in order to enjoy the meal as a whole rather than a specific ingredient. We can find meaning in life (the tasteful ingredient) by employing the passionate yearning theory. We can also try to attain meaning of life by combining these ingredients via ratio-structuralism, in order to judge if the meal as whole is tasteful. Unfortunately, ratio-structuralism (and I posit that this is the best mode of attaining meaning of life that we have to offer) only tells us that it is possible to combine ingredients in such a way as to make a meal tasteful. However, this claim does not say anything about the meal in front of me and whether it is worth eating. Worst still that I have eaten that meal would eventually be forgotten as soon as I leave my table – and I am always required to leave my table. This is what makes the meaninglessness of life so overwhelming, despite the possibility of meaning in life.

One does not find a *chow fang* meal tasteful by eating the ingredients used to make it separately, one after the other. This does not mean that one cannot find pleasure in eating those ingredients separately (they can be tasteful on their own), the point, however, is that if it is indeed *chow fang* that one is hoping to eat, feeding on the ingredients one-by-one would not help in achieving this purpose. As such, one cannot attain meaning of life by only investing in moments of meaningfulness, tasteful as they may be – if indeed it is the meaning of life that one seeks. In other words, thinking that the meaning of life can be affected by moments of meaning in life would be a bad transposition. It would amount to claiming that a plate of *chow fang* is delicious by simply eating one ingredient from that plate of food. If the aim is to achieve meaningfulness for our lives as
a whole, we must be content with the distaste of a badly prepared meal and swallow it indifferently (in the manner I have prescribed) – this is only if we decide we do not favour leaving this appalling restaurant and its meal behind. If one decides to pursue moments of meaningfulness then the meaninglessness of life and the indifference approach would only begin to subsist, once we begin to think that those moments of meaningfulness should somehow bear on the meaning of our lives as whole.

In summary, life as a whole is ultimately meaningless and the moments of meaningfulness that we can acquire cannot change this fact. This, I know, is ultimately a contentious claim, but I have presented reasons as to why I think this is so. While I consider this a fact that cannot change, there are many who will disagree with me and I invite them to try their hands in finding the proper combination for unlocking meaningfulness. For those who agree with me and are condemned to this distasteful meal of life, we would welcome any attempt that seemingly succeeds at a proper meal – at meaningfulness. That this would be possible, I am highly sceptical.
References


