


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## How African conceptions of God bear on life's meaning

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### Abstract

Up to now, a very large majority of work in the religious philosophy of life's meaning has presumed a conception of God that is Abrahamic. In contrast, in this article I critically discuss some of the desirable and undesirable facets of Traditional African Religion's salient conceptions of God as they bear on meaning in life. Given an interest in a maximally meaningful life, and supposing meaning would come from fulfilling God's purpose for us, would it be reasonable to prefer God as characteristically conceived by African philosophers of religion to exist instead of the Abrahamic conception of God? At this stage of enquiry, I answer that, in respect of the range of people to whom God's purpose would apply, a more African view of God would plausibly offer a greater meaning, but that, concerning what the content of God's purpose would be, the Abrahamic view appears to offer a greater one. I conclude by reflecting on this mixed verdict and by suggesting respects in which non-purposive facets of the African and Abrahamic conceptions of God could also have implications for life's meaning.

**Keywords:** axiology of theism; God's purpose; meaning of life; pro-theism; traditional African religion

### Introducing African theist axiology

In this article, I critically discuss some of the desirable and undesirable facets of Traditional African Religion's (TAR's) salient conceptions of God as they bear on meaning in life. My question involves operating with the way God is recurrently conceived in English literate texts that have been composed (mainly) by African scholars articulating religious views indigenous to the sub-Saharan region,<sup>1</sup> and considering respects in which God so conceived would be either good or bad in respect of life's meaning. By 'meaning in life', 'life's meaning', and cognate phrases, I roughly have in mind a non-instrumental good that can come in degrees in the life of an individual person and is characterized by features such as what merits pride and admiration, constitutes a good-life story, makes a contribution, and connects with what is greater (Metz 2019a, 3–4) (all of which contrast with considerations about the point of the human race as a whole). Should we want the more African God to exist, supposing we want meaningful lives in these senses?<sup>2</sup>

This question is part of what these days is called the debate about 'pro-theism' versus 'anti-theism' or enquiry into the 'axiology of theism' (Kahane 2011; Kraay 2018; Loughheed

2020). The issue is not at bottom an ethnophilosophical or anthropological one about obtaining an accurate representation of what indigenous Africans have often believed about God. It also is not a metaphysical issue of whether there is evidence supporting a belief that a certain God is real. It further is not an epistemological matter of whether someone should believe that such a God exists. Basically, instead of belief, my focus is on desire; would it be reasonable to want God as typically conceived in the TAR literature to exist, given an interest in a meaningful life? Why or why not?

This way of framing the project naturally invites a comparison class. Should we prefer an African God to exist for the sake of life's meaning *relative to what*, or would TAR's conceptions of God be un/desirable for meaning *in comparison to which other view*? Even if not essential to compare the benefits and costs of an African God with those of another perspective, it could well be revealing to do so. Now, the Anglo-American pro-/anti-theism literature has overwhelmingly compared the Christian conception of God with atheism, that is, enquired into whether it would be better in respect of life's meaning (and other values) for the Christian God to exist relative to the non-existence of that God or any other god.<sup>3</sup> I could follow suit, and compare the un/desirability of African conceptions of God with atheism.<sup>4</sup> However, what I instead elect to do here is to compare the un/desirability of an African God with the Christian and more generally Abrahamic conception of God as commonly interpreted by philosophers and theologians. The Abrahamic God is of course normally construed as a person who is a spiritual substance, who created the physical universe with a plan in mind, and who is morally perfect, all-knowing, and all-powerful.

My question, more fully expressed, is therefore this: 'Should we prefer this Abrahamic God or a more African God, if we want our lives to have the greatest possible meaning in them?' This article is the first systematic argumentative exploration of which God would be preferable in that respect, and in it I conclude with a verdict that is mixed, tentative, and incomplete: as things stand, in one respect it appears that a certain African conception of God would be preferable, while in another the Abrahamic one would be, and a number of other respects need to be explored beyond this article.

In terms of method, I argue in analytic or argumentative fashion, aiming to support controversial claims with premises that are less controversial and provide inferential support as normally conceived in the broadly Aristotelian tradition of logic. Of course, the key question is 'Less controversial to whom?', and here I try as much as possible to appeal to intuitions and value judgements that are widely shared across at least both the Anglo-American and African philosophical traditions. Where intuitions might diverge between adherents to these traditions, I point that out, something that I submit should also be of interest to the field.

In undertaking this project, I often make large generalizations to facilitate philosophical and theological debate that is intercultural. For example, I ascribe certain views to holders of the Abrahamic faiths, not distinguishing between, say, Christianity and Islam, let alone variants of each one. In addition, I downplay disagreements between adherents of TAR, focusing on views that have been widely, even if not universally, shared (at least by academics) across the continent. When writing on Africa, one is expected to try to avoid stereotyping by acknowledging the existence of variety and particularity among its fifty-four countries and its thousands of linguistic and ethnic groups. However, there appears to be enough common ground among sub-Saharan black peoples (or at least their academic exponents) for many African philosophers and social scientists to speak of an overarching belief system routinely called 'Traditional African Religion' in the literature.

In the following, I discuss two major respects in which God as often conceived in TAR is both distinct from the conception of God in the Abrahamic faiths and is likely to make a

difference in respect of life's meaning. They both concern how to construe the way God would assign us a purpose to fulfil, which is of patent relevance to issues of meaning in life. In particular, I first consider the range of people to whom God's purpose(s) would apply and then what the content of God's purpose(s) would be. I briefly conclude with a bird's-eye view of the findings at this stage and some suggestions for the way forward, including additional, non-purposive respects in which the African and Abrahamic conceptions of God differ and could have a bearing on life's meaning that merit consideration beyond this article.

### The scope of God's purpose

In this section, I begin to discuss some respects in which the purpose of certain African conceptions of God differs from Abrahamic conceptions in a way that is likely to make a difference in respect of life's meaning for us. Specifically, here I address the question of the persons to whom God's purpose(s) would apply. Would God give everyone the same purpose, or would God give each person a unique purpose? The latter idea is salient (which does not mean universal) in the African tradition, and I argue that it is attractive relative to the generic purpose that is characteristic of non-African monotheism.

In the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, the standard approach is to think of God as assigning the same purpose or cluster of purposes to all human persons. The big ones are to love God, love your neighbour, worship God, and unite with God in Heaven. Judaism might seem to be an exception, insofar as many of the commandments in the Torah are thought to apply to Jews alone. However, even on that conception, it is a people as a whole that has been ascribed certain purposes, without purposes being systematically tailored to individuals (granting that some are thought to have been ascribed to prophets). Plus, as Rabbi Hillel is famously taken to have said, 'That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the entire Torah, and the rest is interpretation' (<https://www.sefaria.org/Shabbat.31a>). While there are of course exceptions to the rule (for just one, see Affolter 2007), what is salient in the Abrahamic faiths is the idea that God would not have distinct purposes for each person. At best, if each is given his or her own purpose, it is an instantiation of a generic purpose of, say, advancing the kingdom of God, as opposed to something more unique.

In contrast, what stands out about the African tradition, particularly that in West Africa, is the concept of destiny, the thought being that in the course of creating us God would assign all persons their own purposes, which is not necessarily a strict function of a more overarching purpose (Abraham 1962, 51–61; Gbadegehin 1991, 27–59; *Idem* 2004; Gyekye 1995, 104–128; Paris 1995, 105–113; Adeofe 2004; Lajul 2017; Balogun 2018, 125–146). Not all African religionists think in terms of destiny, but many important ones do, making it of interest to consider how such a view might bear on life's meaning in contrast to the typical Abrahamic conception of God.

Common ground among friends of destiny by and large includes the ideas that: destiny is constitutive of one's identity as a person distinct from others; destiny does not cover every facet of one's life but instead only fundamental aspects such as career, relationships, and death; people usually have access to the talents and opportunities required to achieve their destiny; and destiny is not 'fated' or 'pre-ordained' in the sense of bound to happen to a person regardless of his choices.<sup>5</sup> Beyond this cluster of broadly shared claims, there are some substantial disagreements among African philosophers and theologians about the nature of destiny. These include whether a destiny assigned by God is necessarily good (from the perspective of the human being), whether a person had existed and accepted his destiny before having taken a human form, whether one's destiny can be changed, and whether and, if so, how one can come to know one's destiny. I believe we

need not take sides on these controversies, in order to address the extent to which it would enhance meaning in our lives to be given a unique purpose from God relative to everyone being given the same purpose. My question is this: would it be more desirable in respect of life's meaning if who a person essentially is consisted of being one who God intends to achieve a unique end pertaining to a fundamental aspect of her life that she has the ability to realize by making certain decisions or instead if God gave a human person the same purpose as (nearly) all others?<sup>6</sup>

One apparent problem with a generic purpose is that it would be unfair, since some of us would be better placed to realize it than others (Salles 2010), where the unfairness of the situation would presumably reduce the available meaning to be had from fulfilling the purpose. Some people would have temperaments, resources, and role models that make it easier for them to achieve the same purpose than others. For a concrete example, someone who is reared in a faithful family is going to have an easier time of loving or worshipping God than is someone brought up by atheists or in a Buddhist society that lacks the concept of God. In contrast, if each of us were given a purpose that is particularly suited for our bio-psychological and social conditions, then there would be no unfairness; we could all have an equal chance to realize our respective aims.

A strong way to reply, which many analytic Christian theologians would suggest, is that the relevant purpose, upon careful specification, would involve the exercise of libertarian free will, a sort of free will that is not determined by environmental, social, or genetic conditions. If, for example, our purpose were to believe in God, and specifically in Jesus Christ as our saviour, that would be entirely within our control, on the supposition that we had (or were) souls that were not subject to the laws of nature and could instead intervene in the natural world. (If you were not fortunate enough to hear the good news while on Earth, God would give your soul the opportunity to accept Jesus upon bodily death, so the story goes.) For another example, if our purpose were to make moral decisions, construed as exercising our wills in a certain way, that, too, would be within our grasp, supposing God imbued us with both a conscience and a soul the choices of which were not causally fixed by factors external to it (the view in Swenson 1949). Hence, with the Abrahamic God, everyone would have an equal opportunity to realize the same end, at least if the end were 'internal' to the person in the sense of exhibiting certain mental states that are not determined by anything beyond them.

Now, there is not much evidence that we do in fact have souls or even libertarian free will. A large majority of human actions are predictable, controllable, and uniform, which, as David Hume (1748) argued long ago, is best explained by determinism. However, even if it is dubious that we in this world have the equal ability to achieve the sort of purpose an Abrahamic God would assign, perhaps all that means is that such a God does not exist. The sceptical point does not, strictly speaking, give us reason to deny that we should want such a God to exist insofar as we have an interest in living meaningfully. For all that has been said so far, if the Abrahamic God existed, this God would prescribe an internal purpose, pertaining to something like a person's belief or decision, which purpose could be fulfilled to an equal extent by all human persons because God would also give us a spiritual nature that is not determined by physical factors. It does not appear that one could complain of unfairness, and hence a reduction of meaning for that reason, in that scenario.

Even if a concern about an unequal ability to reach the same end need not taint the Abrahamic God's purpose-giving, there is another concern that is more difficult to rebut. In particular, a view according to which meaning in our lives is exhausted by the extent to which we fulfil a purpose God assigns to all human persons would fail to capture the intuition that meaning in a person's life is substantially a function of her particular self.

This intuition has been explained in a variety of ways that could have a bearing on the present position. Some maintain that what makes a life meaningful is a matter of being unique or individuated (Tshivhase 2013; Kahane 2022), which could be facilitated by each person having a distinct purpose she is well positioned to achieve. Others contend that what makes a life meaningful is authenticity, being true to one's desires and values (Frankfurt 1982; cf. Taylor 1992), which would cohere with a God-based view if God were the one to instil one's deepest mental states in the course of creating one. Still others maintain that what makes life meaningful is a matter of self-realization, developing objectively valuable facets of one's nature in ways that are particularly available to one (Metz 2007, 462–463), where it could be God who is the source of such value (as per Cottingham 2005, 37–57). Yet others hold that meaning in one's life is a matter of one's identity being constituted by a purpose, where, according to this teleological conception of the self, who one is as a person distinct from all other persons is constituted by the fact that one ought to pursue a one-of-a-kind end (Gbadegesin 1991, 27–59; Adeofe 2004; Affolter 2007; cf. Metz 2018, 213–216), such as being a father to two particular sons while contributing to analytic philosophy of life's meaning in the early twenty-first century.

Of these available explanations of why meaning must be tailored to one's self, the latter one is particularly salient among African philosophers, as per the following quotations:

(D)estiny is construed as the meaning of a person – the purpose for which the individual exists as chosen by the other self and sealed by the deity . . . Persons are what they are in virtue of what they are destined to be, their character and the communal influence on them. (Gbadegesin 1991, 58)

My concern with personal identity is concern with my psychic unity, not my soul – unless I am worried about the possibility of life after death. Concern with psychic unity is concern with the extent to which activities in my life fulfill a purpose. The purpose in turn provides meaning to my life, and it is that meaning that evidences to me psychic unity. (Adeofe 2004, 78)

Meyer Fortes, the influential South African-born anthropologist, similarly says of African cultures, 'Destiny is thought of as a component of a person's personhood . . . Destiny distinguishes and indeed creates him as an individual' (Fortes 1987, 149). Another way to appreciate the claim is to recall that often meaning is understood to be what makes sense of or brings coherence to a life (e.g. Seachris 2019); that could be a matter of a purpose constituting who a person essentially is and indicating how she in particular should live when it comes to fundamental matters such as family and career.

Although this is an interesting understanding of both personal identity and meaning in life from the African tradition, one that is under-considered in modern Western philosophy, I do not intend the argument of this section to depend on its truth or justifiability. Instead, the point is that there are many ideas in both the African and Western traditions indicating that what makes a life meaningful is not merely something generic to the human race and is instead, at least in large part, something particular to a person. The destiny view associated with a more African conception of God coheres with that position better than the standard conception of purpose associated with non-African monotheism, and so there is some reason to prefer an African God to exist, insofar as one wants a maximally meaningful life.

Against the destiny view, one might suggest that it would be disrespectful of God to place limits on the range of sources of meaning in our lives, where disrespectful treatment would mean a reduction in the amount of meaning available to us. One theorist asks us to imagine that a person born with the divine purpose of becoming a powerful lawyer who

works for social causes is reared in a family and in other contexts that are fitting for this end (Salles 2010). If the person elected not to fulfil that purpose, she would presumably encounter difficulties, which might seem objectionable. Even if becoming such a lawyer offered the most meaning available to this person, it would arguably be somewhat wrong of God to steer the person into that narrow role, such that her life would not in fact be all that meaningful as a result.

This objection appears to depend on the idea that God would enable us to pursue only one goal, given our varying contexts. However, if God were a person who is highly (if not perfectly) knowledgeable, powerful, and moral, such a God could and would structure the world so that we would have an equal chance of attaining a variety of goals in the light of our bio-psychological, social, and other physical conditions. Return to the individual whose talents, upbringing, and society give her a good shot at becoming a human rights lawyer. Presumably these features could equally, or at least comparably, enable her to become a philosopher, a social scientist, a debate coach, a labour organizer, a director of an NGO, and many other things. God would plausibly respect our capacity for choice if we were given a variety of possibilities, any one of which we could elect to take up.<sup>7</sup>

It is worth considering, though, whether a variety of purposes would have to be available to a person to avoid the objection that God would unduly restrict our freedom (and hence undercut meaning in our lives) in the course of creating us with an end in mind. If our identities were fixed by a particular divine purpose for us, as per a standard construal of the destiny view, then it would in fact become hard to object that God would be treating us disrespectfully by assigning us only one. To see this, consider an analogy. Imagine someone objecting that he had been created at a particular time and place, on the ground that this restricted the choices he would have liked to be able to make. It would be an odd objection to press, since, according to many widely held accounts of personal identity, a being created at some other time and place would, necessarily, not be him. Similar comments might go for a divine purpose that would be essential to who one is. If our potential human rights lawyer had been assigned a different divine purpose, then it would, necessarily, not be her who has that other end, and so it would make little sense for her to object that having been assigned the end of being a human rights lawyer restricts her choice.

In sum, it appears to me that the balance of argumentation currently favours a destiny-oriented conception of God's purpose. There is reason to hold that a conception of God salient (but not universally held) in the African tradition would offer greater meaning to us than would a characteristically Abrahamic conception of God, when it comes to the scope of the purpose(s) God would assign.

### **The content of God's purpose**

The previous section addressed the question of to whom a given purpose from God should apply if we want the most meaning from fulfilling it, with the discussion having left open the question of what the purpose would be likely to involve. What would God have us do, and which interpretation of the content of God's purpose is preferable, given widely shared views of what would make life meaningful? In this section, I first argue that there are prominent African religious ideals that support a conception of God's purpose that differs from what is characteristically proposed by those in the Western monotheist tradition, after which I provide some reason to prefer the latter.

To some extent, one may reasonably expect overlap between the African and Abrahamic faiths when it comes to what God's purpose would be, at least if it would be a generic one for members of the human race. For a number in both traditions, one of God's purposes for us would be to worship God, where that could presumably be done



in a variety of ways.<sup>8</sup> In addition, for many in both traditions, another of God's purposes for us would be to emulate God so far as our nature permits. The principle of *Imitatio Dei* has been influential in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,<sup>9</sup> as well as in TAR. Consider these remarks of Laurenti Magesa, an important Tanzanian theologian: 'In all religions, but much more obviously in African Religion, the most general moral argument seems to be: "As God is and does, so human beings must be and do" . . . God possesses certain moral qualities that human creatures must emulate' (Magesa 1997, 40). Much obviously depends on how God's nature is conceived, if we are to understand what human beings must be and do.

Here is where one encounters divergence between some influential instances of TAR and the non-African monotheisms. Since they conceive of God's nature differently, the common prescription to emulate God has different implications in respect to the content of God's purpose. As mentioned above, the Abrahamic faiths tend to conceive of God as a spiritual person who created the universe with a plan in mind and who is morally perfect, all-knowing, and all-powerful. In the Western tradition the three 'omniproperties' of omnibenevolence, omniscience, and omnipotence are neatly correlated with 'the good, the true, and the beautiful', roughly, beneficent relationships, knowledge, and creativity. According to an influential Western Christian account of meaning in life, one is to foster the good, the true, and the beautiful in one's life as ways to realize the divine facets of human nature (probably most influentially in the contemporary philosophy of life's meaning, see Cottingham 2005, 37–57).

In contrast, it is common in the African tradition not to think of God fundamentally in terms of the three omniproperties, but rather at bottom in terms of the most intense and complex concentration of vital force, an energy that is (usually) imperceptible to human beings that God has imbued in all concrete things in the world. To say that this is a 'common' view of the nature of God and the universe is not meant to suggest that it is the only or even clearly dominant view among African religionists. There are some exponents of TAR who have ascribed the omniproperties to God, including E. Bolaji Idowu (1973), John S. Mbiti (1975, 49–51), and Kwame Gyekye (1995, 70–71).<sup>10</sup> In addition, there have been some who have explicitly denied a vitalist thesis about the nature of reality, with Didier Kaphagawani (1998, 170–172) and Kwasi Wiredu (2011, xxiv–xxv) having gone out of their way to deny that their respective (Chewa and Akan) peoples believe that everything is (or has) vital force. Acknowledging the plurality of African conceptions of God, my aim in this article is to consider how some of these ideas, particularly ones that differ from standard conceptions of the Abrahamic faiths, bear on life's meaning as God's purpose might constitute it. Several African religionists conceive of God's nature as identical to the strongest and most intricate vital force that is promoted, a view that merits consideration in respect to what God's purpose for us would be.

Let me say more about the vitalist conception of God, before applying it to considerations of meaning in life. First, God in the African tradition is characteristically defined in terms of the source of all life. One frequently encounters quotes such as these: 'In all the groups we have studied, the Supreme Being, God, is at the summit. He is conceived as the original source of all life and of all the resources of life' (Mulago 1991, 130); and 'The Supreme Being of the African is the Creator, the source of life' (Wiredu 1998, 39 – from which it of course does not yet follow that everything is alive). Furthermore, some in the African tradition understand God to be the source of all life *because* God is (identical to) the greatest vital force who shares a divine spark with everything else God has created. Consider: 'African metaphysics is organized around a number of principles and laws which control the so-called vital forces . . . These forces are hierarchically placed . . . (and) God, the creator and source of all vital forces, is at the apex' (Teffo & Roux 2003, 196); and 'The Supreme Being who created and sustained the universe is seen as the

epitome of force. He dispenses this energy of ontological unity at will to other entities' (Imafidon 2014, 40). The idea that God's nature is essentially a great vital force on the face of it plausibly grounds other features routinely ascribed to God, such as creativity, power, morality, and eternity (or so I have argued in Metz & Molefe 2021, 396–398).

Now, if God's nature is essentially to exhibit the greatest vital force and to spread it, and if 'As God is and does, so human beings must be and do', then one of God's major purposes for us would be to display and promote vitality as much as we can. Peter Kasenene, a Ugandan theologian who has studied religions in Africa, articulates that perspective in the following:

Life-force is granted by God . . . A person is good in so far as he or she promotes, supports or protects his or her life force and the life-force of his or her neighbours. Alternatively, a person is bad or evil in as much as he or she undermines or destroys this life-force. The quest for life and its enhancement is the most fundamental value in African religions which governs all the other values. (Kasenene 1998, 25; see also Mulago 1991; Magesa 1997; Nkemnkia 2004; Onah 2012; Etieyibo 2017; Molefe 2018; Agada 2020)

It follows from this account of what is most important in life that two key prescriptions are to undertake labour for the sake of one's family (and the broader society) as well as to procreate (on which see Dzobo 1992). These are intuitive sources of meaning for both the African and Western traditions, lending some credence to the vitalist account of God's purpose (which, *contra* Kasenene's phrasing, is not found in literally all indigenous African religions).

In the literature on African religions and related views, one finds mention of not merely vitality as our purpose, but also often sociality or relationality and, more specifically, community. For instance, perhaps the most influential discussant of destiny, Segun Gbadegesin, says:

The purpose of individual existence is intricately linked with the purpose of social existence, and cannot be adequately grasped outside it . . . The meaning of one's life is therefore measured by one's commitment to social ideals and communal existence. The question, 'What is your existence for?' (*Kíni o wà fún?*) is not always posed. It is posed when a person has been judged to be useless to his/her community. It is therefore a challenge, a call to serve. It presupposes a conception of human existence which sees it as purposeful, and the purpose is to contribute to the totality of the good in the universe. (Gbadegesin 1991, 58)

Similarly, Monday Igbafen, a scholar of African existentialism, speaks of 'the general African belief that man is created for the purpose of fellowship and mutual help' (2017, 250), and there is likewise the Nigerian Igbo theologian Pantaleon Iroegbu's view that 'the purpose of our life is community-service and community-belongingness' (2005, 442).

There is a natural way of viewing what on the surface appear to be the competing ends of vitality and relationality as ultimately complementary. Specifically, it is *prima facie* attractive, even if not clearly sound, to maintain that relating communally, being in fellowship, and serving others are simply ways to promote vitality as 'the most fundamental value', or at least to hold that these positive other-regarding actions fulfil God's purpose and are meaningful just insofar as they succeed in promoting vitality. This position is explicit in several works by African religionists, including a text by another Nigerian Igbo theologian, Godfrey Onah:



At the centre of traditional African morality is human life. Africans have a sacred reverence for life . . . To protect and nurture their lives, all human beings are inserted within a given community . . . The promotion of life is therefore the determinant principle of African traditional morality and this promotion is guaranteed only in the community. Living harmoniously within a community is therefore a moral obligation ordained by God for the promotion of life. (Onah 2012; see also Kasenene 1994, 142; and Magesa 1997, 81)

By this approach, communal relation is an end, albeit merely an intermediate one that is a reliable means for the promotion of vital force, which is the final end that God has laid down for us by virtue of God's nature. This is not the only way to interpret the purposiveness of relationality (see Tutu 1999, 34–35, 212–214 for a different way), but it is one plausible and salient way to do so.

So far in this section, I have pointed out that many adherents to TAR and the Abrahamic faiths accept that one of God's purposes would be for us to emulate God, but that, given differing conceptions of God, there are competing conceptions of what it would mean to do so. For much of the Western monotheist tradition, one is to realize the good, the true, and the beautiful as manifestations of God's omniproperties, while for a notable part of the African tradition, since God is identified as the person with the greatest vital force who spreads it across the universe, one is to exhibit and promote vitality. Now, is one of these conceptions of God, and by extension God's purpose for us, preferable in regard to meaning in life?

To answer this question, it will help to point to specific activities that realizing the good, the true, and the beautiful would involve but that exhibiting/promoting vitality would not (or vice versa). On the face of it, the good (i.e. beneficent relationships) would be roughly equivalent to doing what would enhance others' vitality (or otherwise promote their well-being and excellence), while the beautiful (i.e. creativity) would itself be a form of vitality and would reliably occasion it in others. Where the two approaches instead seem most readily to split apart concerns the true, which is shorthand for knowledge and understanding and in fact, more broadly, for intellectual enquiry of certain valuable kinds that might be, say, justified but not literally true. I now argue that, if the African vitalist conceptions of God and God's purpose were correct, then our lives would not be particularly meaningful in virtue of certain impractical kinds of epistemic states, but, upon reflection, it seems that these could in fact substantially enhance the meaningfulness of our lives.<sup>11</sup>

Consider the view that one's life is more meaningful, the more one avoids false and unjustified beliefs about the fundamental nature of reality or of the human race, and also the more one has knowledge about them. For example, one's life would be less meaningful if one believed that the Flying Spaghetti Monster is the ruler of the universe, and it would be more meaningful if one stopped believing that. For another example, one's life would be less meaningful if one had no understanding of either gravity or the origin of the human species, and it would be more meaningful if one came to accept Einstein's conception of General Relativity and Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection. Avoiding certain mistaken beliefs and ignorance, holding particular true and justified beliefs, and especially discovering the latter can be notable sources of meaning in life. However, since these epistemic states do not seem to be a matter of notable vital force, the African vitalist conceptions of God and of God's purpose are somewhat unattractive for being unable to account for their meaningfulness.

There are two natural ways to reply on behalf of the present instance of TAR, which are different ways of interpreting an account of meaning in life grounded on vitality that has recently been advanced by the creative African philosopher Ada Agada. He says,

Since vital force is the energy of life, determining the mode and extent of survival, it stands to reason that a meaningful life will be one that maximises vital force in all aspects of a person's life. Positive states of mind and affects like optimism, hopefulness and joy are to be maximised, while negative states of mind and affects like pessimism, nihilism, fearfulness and sadness are to be minimised. Knowledge must be pursued and ignorance rejected. (Agada 2020, 103)

In this passage Agada is claiming that with an increase of knowledge comes an increase in vital force, but notice that the phrasing is vague in respect to whether he is positing a causal or constitutive relationship between these two variables. In the rest of the section, I argue that neither sort of relationship between them can account for the intuitive degree of meaningfulness present in some impractical instances of knowledge.

First, suppose that there were a constitutive relationship between knowledge (or perhaps valuable epistemic states more broadly) and vitality. That would be to hold that certain kinds of awareness, say, accurately apprehending the fundamental nature of reality and of humanity are themselves instances of robust vitality, where vitality is what accounts for the intuitive meaning involved. For example, it plausibly involves some vitality to change one's mind about which sort of being (if any) is in charge of the universe. It would also plausibly be a matter of enhanced vital force for one to impart greater coherence to one's thoughts, weeding out unjustified beliefs about how the universe is organized and how human nature functions.

These points indeed merit consideration, but, upon reflection, I do not think they can adequately differentiate between which truths are particularly important to apprehend and which are not. Yes, changing one's mind about which sort of being is in charge of the universe would plausibly involve some vitality (and hence some meaning by the present account), but, then, so would changing one's mind about how many redheads there are in Beiseker, Alberta (the case comes from Hurka 1993, 155). There could well be a comparable strength or complexity in one's vital force in the two cases, and hence it cannot be vital force that best accounts for the intuition that it is more important to know which (if any) being rules the universe than to know how many redheads there are in a certain city. Similar remarks apply to the vitality involved in obtaining a greater harmony in one's thoughts about a given topic.

I submit that it is instead *the nature of the topic* that crucially matters. *What the thinking is about, namely its propositional object*, appears essential to best explaining the difference between which knowledge is particularly meaningful to apprehend and which is not. However, the object of belief is logically independent of the vitality of the believing, that is, of any plausible understanding of the extent to which the thinking is vibrant.

Similar remarks apply to a causal relationship that might be posited between knowledge (or perhaps valuable epistemic states more broadly) and vitality. By this approach, knowledge is expected to foster vitality in the knower and those she can affect, at least to a greater degree than ignorance is, where the resultant vital force accounts for the meaningfulness of the knowledge. For example, once we came to understand Einstein's account of the nature of gravity, we were placed in a better position to foster substantial vitality as a result by then being able to position satellites accurately.

Again, I am willing to grant that it is normally the case that knowledge will be likely to produce more vitality than ignorance, but I doubt that the expected value of vitality production in the long run tracks our intuitions about which instances of knowledge are particularly meaningful. To see the point, consider knowledge of how the universe will end. If a cosmologist were to make a firm discovery about this matter, it would be quite important. However, the importance would implausibly correspond to the amount of vitality likely to result from the knowledge; after all, it would not affect people's day-to-day

lives in any concrete way. In addition, the reason to congratulate the cosmologist would not be that her discovery is expected to bring about vital force, whether in her own mind or beyond it; it would rather have to do with the object of her knowledge, that is, what she has discovered, which does not track how energetic people's believing or other activities are.<sup>12</sup>

Although it appears difficult for the vitalist strain of African religio-philosophical thought to capture the judgement that the object of belief has a substantial bearing on its degree of meaningfulness, it appears easier for the Judaeo-Christian-Muslim understanding of God's purpose as a source of meaning in our lives to do so. It is a standard part of the latter tradition to hold, for example, that it is crucial for one to believe that God exists, but not that it is crucial to know how many redheads there are in Beiseker (or how many granules of sand are on a beach). Not all truths are equally important to know, for typical strands of the Abrahamic faiths. The logic of these faiths can plausibly explain why the object of true beliefs would play a key role in ranking their importance: one is to develop one's divine nature as much as one can, where knowledge of the existence of God and of the fundamental nature of the universe would be much more divine than knowledge of the number of redheads in a certain city. The former sorts of knowledge would provide a much bigger picture, and in the ideal case a sort of God's eye point of view, quite unlike the latter instance of knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

In sum, the discussion in this section has been supposing that we could enhance the meaning in our lives by fulfilling God's purpose and that God's purpose for us would include emulating God. The question has then become how to conceive God's nature and hence which kinds of lives it follows we should lead in order to imitate God. For those who share the judgement that one significant source of meaning is constituted by an improved understanding of the fundamentals of the world and our place in it, there is some reason to favour the Abrahamic conception of God relative to the African vitalist conception. A directive to develop the sorts of knowledge that an omniscient God would have more easily grounds the judgement that certain kinds of knowledge for its own sake are substantially meaning-conferring than does a directive to exhibit and promote vitality. There might be other facets of indigenous African culture that would support the great importance of certain instances of impractical knowledge (perhaps, say, the veneration of elders), but the present point is that a God-based purpose theory that prescribes emulating God *qua* vital force does not appear to do so with ease.

### Concluding remarks about African theist axiology

In this article I have examined two differences between God as often understood in TAR and God as standardly construed by the Abrahamic faiths, and have drawn out their implications for meaning in life. Specifically, I have considered to whom God would assign a given purpose and what the content of the purpose would be, and then appealed to widely shared intuitions about the nature of meaningfulness to judge whether the African or Abrahamic approaches would offer us more of it. When it comes to the scope of God's purpose, I found reason to favour an African conception of God according to which God would be an agent who gives us a destiny, that is, assigns a purpose that is tailor-made for each individual's abilities and opportunities and constitutes their identity. An individualized purpose promises more meaning than a generic one that applies to all human persons. With regard to the content of God's purpose, in contrast, I contended that there is reason to prefer the Abrahamic God relative to an interpretation of God salient among TAR adherents as consisting ultimately of vital force. Insofar as God as generally conceived would intend for us to realize attributes we share with the divine, a God construed in terms of the three omniproperties would make better sense of why certain impractical

kinds of knowledge can be quite meaningful to discover and transmit than would a God whose nature consists fundamentally of vitality.

If one were creating a religion, perhaps one should think of God as both prescribing us to obtain as godlike an epistemic state as we can and assigning people destinies. Or maybe in claiming that God's purposes would be utterly particularized, one should drop the view that God's purpose for all of us would be to emulate God. One major project in the future would be to develop an African religio-philosophy that is maximally coherent and plausible in respect of the value of life's meaning.

However, setting aside that grand project, much more needs to be done to explore the meaning-conferring capacities of various African conceptions of God relative to the Abrahamic God. In this article I have focused on their purposive features, as ones particularly relevant to thinking about meaning in life. However, non-purposive features could also have a bearing on the ability of God to make our lives meaningful. Here are three that are worth considering in future work. First, the Abrahamic God is often thought of creating matter out of nothing, whereas the African God is often conceived as 'creating' the universe in the sense of shaping raw materials that have always already existed (e.g. Wiredu 1998, 29–31; *Idem* 2011, xxii–xxiv; *Idem* 2012, 34–35; Oladipo 2004, 359). Second, while the Abrahamic God is commonly understood to be beyond space altogether, an influential African conception of God is that God, despite being imperceptible, has a spatial location (Wiredu 1998, 23–24, 30; *Idem* 2011, xvii–xxvii; *Idem* 2012, 34). Third, whereas the Abrahamic God is conceived as revealing states of mind by communicating directly to human beings, say, by speaking to prophets or authoring written texts, the African God is normally treated as hidden from us<sup>14</sup> and instead communicating directly only to ancestors (whose messages, in turn, only diviners are well trained to receive) (Gyekye 1995, 135–138, 206–208; Magesa 1997, 43–44; Oladipo 2004, 361). Might these differences in creative power, spatial location, and communicative engagement have a bearing on the quality or quantity of meaning available to us?

Finally, I remind the reader that in this article I have addressed only one major facet of TAR in respect of its implications for life's meaning, namely, God, having left aside altogether the afterlife (see note 2). A related project that would complement this one would be to answer the question of whether, for instance, the ancestral realm of TAR would be preferable to the Heaven of the Abrahamic faiths. What this conclusion reveals is how much more axiology of African theism there is yet to be done.

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## Notes

1. Some might question the accuracy of what academics, even ones based in Africa, have said about TAR as a philosophy lived by African peoples. For the purposes of this article, I do not question the African academics when they ascribe certain views to their societies, leaving that for intellectual historians and anthropologists of religion. I am particularly interested in addressing the conceptions of God in the literature composed by African philosophers and theologians, and submit that this would be a worthwhile project even in the event that these views were somewhat distorted from what indigenous African peoples have themselves held.

Regardless of where the ideas associated with what I sometimes abbreviate as ‘African God’ came from, they merit philosophical exploration as a rival to those of the ‘Abrahamic God’.

2. For the sake of depth, I set aside discussion of TAR’s conceptions of the afterlife. They, too, would be worth evaluating in terms of their meaningfulness, and in particular relative to the way the afterlife is typically conceived in the Abrahamic faiths. For some discussion of that, see Wiredu (1992) and Metz and Molefe (2021, 402–406).

3. As Lougheed (2022, 5) has recently pointed out, in the course of himself making one of the first exceptions to the rule.

4. Which is what Lougheed (2022, 37–70) does.

5. Of course, there are thinkers who do reject some of these claims, say, favouring a fatalist account of destiny as representative of (some) African peoples’ worldviews (e.g. Ogbujah 2007). However, beyond being at least commonly held, the above claims – unlike fatalism, for instance – will be found particularly attractive by contemporary philosophers of life’s meaning.

6. Some admittedly reject the idea that any purpose from God could be at all meaning-conferring, say, because God does not exist (e.g. Attoe 2021) or because it would be degrading to be assigned a purpose (the *locus classicus* is Baier 1957, but see also Salles 2010 and Kahane 2011). The debate above assumes for the sake of argument that in principle a purpose assigned by God could be *pro tanto* meaning-conferring, so as to facilitate enquiry into what that purpose would have to be like to confer the most meaning.

7. This and the following reply were first made in Metz (2013, 108–109).

8. That point might or might not be consistent with the positing of a destiny for each of us, as per the previous section. In drawing on various ideas about God salient in the African religio-philosophical literature, I am not supposing they all cohere, on which I reflect briefly in the conclusion.

9. For a brief overview, see Metz (2021, 33–34).

10. There are also some exponents of TAR who hold what is becoming known as the ‘limited view’ of God’s nature (cf. Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Agada forthcoming), according to which, although God knows the most of anyone, God is not omniscient, or although God is stronger than anything else in the world, God is not omnipotent, or although God is morally better than anyone else, God is not morally perfect. I suspect that the limited view coheres well with a vitalist conception of God’s nature, but I do not work to show that here and I note that it has been defended independently of it. For adherents to the limited view, see especially those working in the Nigerian-Yoruba tradition, including Bewaji (1998, 8–10); Fayemi (2012, 7–8, 11); and Balogun (2018, 191–192).

11. Using some ideas in Metz (2019b, 11–13 and 2020, 120–122) as a springboard.

12. It has been suggested to me that, from the vitalist standpoint, the proper aim is to develop stronger and more complex life force over the course of a life, so that we cannot necessarily expect to find much meaning with any given presence of life force. However, I suspect this perspective would make it all the more difficult for the vitalist to make sense of the present intuitions, which are the judgements that improving one’s knowledge about certain fundamental matters can directly confer some substantial meaning on a life, apart from their place in a life as a whole.

13. Another way in which the friend of the vitalist approach to God’s purpose could reply to the objection that it has difficulty capturing the intuitive degree of importance of certain kinds of knowledge would be to argue, by appeal to pragmatic considerations, that the intuition should be dropped (or that many interlocutors might fail to have the intuition at all due to a pragmatic orientation). Space precludes an adequate critical exploration of this reply.

14. Note that ‘hidden’ is not meant to suggest inactive. God in the African tradition is not characteristically conceived in deist terms, and instead is viewed as doing much to support life, for example (on which see Nkulu-N’Sengha 2009, 287–289). That point is consistent with the claim that, even if God hears our prayers (though often African people address ancestors or lesser divinities directly, on which see Oladipo 2004, 357), God does not communicate directly to us, but rather through intermediaries.

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