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A Patient-centred Concept(ion) of Life's Meaningfulness: Lessons from African Perspectives

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Abstract

The literature on the question of life's meaning has primarily focused on agent-centred paths to meaningfulness. This path involves an individual making a concerted effort towards achieving meaningfulness in life. Thus, even in defining meaning or presenting a concept of meaning, philosophers often approach such a description from an agent-centred perspective. In this essay, I articulate a patient-centred approach to meaning particularly from the African philosophical perspective. Drawing chiefly from African relational viewpoints, I develop the "patient-centred variable", which ought to be contemplated by any definition of what meaningfulness entails. This patient-centred variable is the idea that a life can be meaningful (at least, momentarily) if it receives from other people acts that are considered (within a particular societal context) acts of love, communion and/or kindness, which transcend normal relationality among human beings and elicit personal feelings of esteem and worthiness. I begin by extracting clues from African metaphysics and from practical ethical values, which all suggest the plausibility of received meaning. Then I conceptualise what I call the patient-centred variable (PcV), and present it as a plausible and necessary addition (not a stand-alone concept of meaning) to any conceptual analysis of meaning.

Keywords African · Meaning · Patient-centred Variable · Personhood

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1 Introduction

In the old days, maybe even today, love, care and/or relationships were integral parts of day-to-day life (Ramose, 2003). In some ways, it came naturally, as individuals in close-knit societies[1] often shared a certain bond with one another such that the desire to be good to a neighbour, who was more family than a stranger, was inevitable. Other times it was forced. Perhaps "forced" is a strong word, but what I mean is that acting in ways that fostered harmony was often an obligation required of members of these societies (Metz, 2017). It was a normative and a cultural requirement – one that assured the person who engaged in it, and those around him, of his/her personhood (Menkiti, 2004). This particular normative view of personhood was popularized by Ifeanyi Menkiti, whose ideas about personhood were, in turn, influenced by the ideas of Mbiti (1970). The normative view rests on the radical view that community supersedes the individual and that the individual takes possession of her personhood only in reference to that community. This is the point that Menkiti makes when he says:

> It is in rootedness in an ongoing human community that the individual comes to see himself as man, and it is by first knowing this community as a stubborn perduring fact of the psychophysical world that the individual also comes to know himself as a durable, more or less permanent, fact of this world. (1984, pp. 171–172)

To be sure, normative personhood describes the view that one becomes a person by being in a positive relationship with others in her community and by engaging deeply with (that is, positively performing) the communal norms inherent in that society. As Jonathan Chimakonam (2022, p. 93) puts it:

> Achieving personhood is another way of saying that one conducts his or her relationships with other members of the community in line with the prescriptions of the norms, recognises the priority of the community and the finality of her norms.

What has this got to do with the concept of meaning? Scouring through the literature on meaning, one immediately gets the sense that underneath the meaning of 'meaning', is the assumption that meaningfulness is a quest of some sort. One that a subject pursues in some way. The focus, then, is on the individual – the self/ego – who strives to achieve meaningfulness and either fails at it or achieves it. Think of all the major

[1] One could, of course, stretch the idea of relationality to a broader context (beyond "close-knit" societies. However, there have been some criticisms against such a possibility, when the focus is on modern urban societies (See Matolino, 2013). These criticisms often project the idea that (1) relationality (especially the ubuntu kind) does not reflect modern life and/or (2) transporting the values of relationality into modern societies and context would likely fail since societies today are much larger and the social/political contexts are quite different. However, we can be fairly certain that relationality was/is an important value for traditional close-knit societies, as scholars like Mbiti (1970) and Ramose (2003) have noted, and so I begin my arguments from this point – even though it is possible that societies today may or may not showcase this relationality.

concepts of meaning. Thaddeus Metz (2013) talks about actions that merit esteem, that are worth pursuing for their own sake, and that involve a measure of transcendence over and above our animal nature/pleasures. Visak (2017) talks about normative reasons for actions, and I have also tweaked Metz's view to include subjectivity and coherence (Attoe, 2023a). But who must pursue actions that merit esteem and who must transcend? Whose normative reason for action? The answer always points to an active agent who pursues meaning and not a patient who receives meaning. We see this play out in the numerous conceptions of meaning in the literature. It is the agent that must pursue God's purpose, increase his/her vitality, live in communion with others, arrive at heaven, build a good moral character, etc., in order to live a meaningful life. But is this the full story?

There are some clues that suggest that it is not the full story. African thoughts and philosophies provide me with clues to a new approach to understanding the concept of meaning – one that focuses on the possibility of meaning-patiency, rather than an active agent who must strive to accomplish meaning. Notice the difference between meaning-agency and meaning-patiency, when it comes to talk about meaning in/of life. The essential characteristic of a meaning agent is that she pursues or strives for some meaningful pursuit. A meaning patient, on the other hand, is one who does not strive for meaning but receives meaning via certain acts perpetrated by others than herself. This does not mean that meaning patients cannot have yearnings and wishes that articulate a meaningful act, or that that yearning or wishing precludes them from remaining meaning patients. This is because yearning and wishing do not amount to a pursuit or striving for meaning[2]. Since this is true and since meaning agents are characterised by the striving for, and pursuit of, meaningfulness, it must also be true that having certain yearnings, wishes or some mind state that articulates the need for meaningfulness does not make one a meaning agent.

Now, with this in mind, I draw from various accounts of African relational ontology, and clues from some African values to show that meaning can also be a patient-centred affair – or more poignantly that meaning can be received. This view is largely absent in the literature on meaning, both in the West where the question of life's meaning has received widespread attention, and in African philosophy, where the question of meaning is now being examined more intently. In the Western philosophical tradition, maybe only Clifford Williams, to my knowledge, entertains what may be contorted into a plausible patient-centred conception of meaning when he claims that acquiring the relevant emotion is a route to meaningfulness – since one can argue, if s/he wants, that certain received gestures can be thought of as eliciting such relevant emotions (Williams, 2020, pp. 56–58). Then, again, seeking to acquire the relevant emotion can also be construed as a pursuit. It is important to note, here, that this new concept of meaning is not meant to replace already established views. As a philosopher who agrees with Metz's pluralistic approach to defining meaning, I consider it an ignored (perhaps because it has never been articulated) but important

[2] To be sure, striving and yearning are not the same thing. While yearning relates more to an intense desire for something, striving speaks more to an active pursuit. For example. I can, from the comfort of my couch, yearn earnestly for world peace. I could do so even if I was permanently bedridden and alone. Striving for world peace, on the other hand, requires that I actively pursue those activities that would lead to world peace.

facet that accounts for certain conceptions of meaning that is yet to be captured by the literature. This idea is only meant to augment existing views.

To provide a plausible account of the view, I begin by briefly clarifying what I mean by the concept of meaning and how I distinguish meaning-agency from meaning-patiency, and show how the patient-centred variable may fit into the concept of meaning. In the subsequent sections, I provide some clues from the African (philosophical) context that show the possibility of double-ended relationships and received moments of meaning. Finally, I conceptualise the patient-centred variable as a plausible addition to any concept of meaning and also consider some objections to the view.

2 Some clarifications

Before I begin, it is important that I make a few distinctions and clarifications. First, I must say what I mean by a *concept of meaning*. A concept of meaning is a general account of what all accounts of meaning (and only accounts of meaning) are about (that is, an account that describes what all accounts of meaning are concerned with or focused on). As Thaddeus Metz (2013, p. 19) puts it "The concept of life's meaning is what all and only the competing conceptions of a meaningful life are about; it is that which makes a given theory one of meaningfulness as opposed to one of rightness or happiness." The phrase describes a sort of abstract account of meaning – that is, a description of the meaning of meaning. A concept of meaning can be contrasted with a *conception of meaning*, which is mainly an account or accounts of what may plausibly make a life meaningful. In other words, a *concept of meaning* describes what *conceptions of meaning* are all about (Metz, 2013). In the, largely, Euro-American analytic traditions, various concepts of meaning abound. I will not describe all of them in this paper, as that serves little purpose, but I will categorise them into two main strands. The first strand is what I call 'singular concepts of meaning'. Singular concepts of meaning identify one idea that attempts to describe what all conceptions of meaning are about. Ideas such as transcendence, purpose (see: Metz, 2019, p. 4), love (Wolf, 2010), normative reason for action (Visak, 2017), how much contribution a life has made and is responsible for (Martela, 2017), etc., are examples of such singular concepts of meaning. The problem with singular concepts of meaning is that it is hardly the case that what all possible accounts of meaning are about is captured in one single idea. In other words, they are much too narrow, and are, therefore, not suitable candidates when talking about a concept of meaning. In fact, if a patient-centred notion of meaning is plausible (as I hope to show), then none of these singular concepts capture patient-centred accounts of meaning (Metz, 2022). This brings us to the second strand. The second strand is what I call pluralistic concepts of meaning. Anchoring on the narrowness of the singular concepts, the pluralistic concepts attempt to bypass the problem of narrowness, by bringing together various ideas or variables (as I call them) together to form an account of meaning. One famous pluralistic account is Thaddeus Metz's "family resemblance approach" where he defines meaning as questions about: which ends, besides one's own pleasure as such are most worth pursuing for their own sake; how to transcend one's animal nature; and what

in life merits great esteem or admiration (Metz, 2013, p. 34). I have also, in the past, also proposed a pluralistic account of meaning that modifies Metz's family resemblance view by adding more variables that accommodated some of the missing conceptions of meaning that Metz's view failed to capture (see: Attoe, 2023a) – which brings me to my second clarification.

I must also clarify that the patient-centred notion that I will present in this paper is not a full-blown concept of meaning. It is also not a singular concept of meaning. Instead, what I present here is only a plausible candidate for a facet in any pluralistic account of meaning, which has (as far as I know) been missing in the literature. In other words, the patient-centred notion is not the meaning of meaning, but an important facet in any definition of meaning, one that has been largely ignored in the literature. Similarly, I must also clarify that what I present here is not necessarily a full-blown conception of meaning. My primary aim is to hint at the possibility/plausibility of a patient-centred conception of meaning, which would then have to be captured in any reasonable concept of meaning. So, what I do here is conceptualise the *patient-centred variable* (PcV) that would capture a patient-centred conception of meaning in any pluralistic concept of meaning.

Finally, I will clarify what I mean by meaning-agency and meaning-patiency. In ethics, generally speaking, agency, or moral agency, involves the ability to make rational/autonomous decisions about the rightness and wrongness of an action, and the ability to make rational/autonomous decisions to carry out certain acts that are considered morally right or wrong. In other words, a moral agent is the one that makes a choice on whether or not to carry out an action (or whether or not an action is right or wrong), and is usually the subject that is held responsible for the decision that has been made. A moral patient, on the other hand, is an entity that is worthy of moral consideration, and so is the entity whose treatment by a moral agent ought to involve moral considerability. Thus, in a moral transaction, they are objects of moral considerability and not necessarily subjects of moral decision-making. It is easy to see, from the foregoing, that while moral agency involves an active subject (who makes a moral decision), moral patiency involves a passive object that receives moral considerability from moral agents. It is also important to also note that human beings can be both moral agents and moral patients. Now, in relation to the question of life's meaning, the dynamic is similar, although not exactly the same. What I call meaning-agency, involves the active pursuit and striving for subjectively derived ends that are considered meaningful, that transcend our animal nature, and/or that merit great esteem. A meaning-agent would, then, be any individual who *expresses* this capacity for meaningful pursuit[3]. Meaning-patiency, on the other hand, and as I conceive it, points to an individual's capacity to receive meaningfulness, not by an active pursuit of meaning but through the actions of some other individual or entity. The passivity, captured by the absence of the active pursuit of meaning, is essential to the understanding of meaning-patiency since it is this passivity that ensures that the meaning-patient is only a recipient of meaningfulness at a particular instance. It

[3] Notice that merely possessing the capacity for meaningful pursuit is not sufficient for one to be properly described as a meaning agent. This is so because, meaning, traditionally, involves some sort of transcendent pursuit.

is important to also clarify that being a meaning-patient at one time/context does not mean that one cannot be a meaning-agent at another time or context (it is the same way that one might be a moral patient and moral agent in different contexts). The crucial point is that in some instances, meaning-patiency/received meaning is possible, and if it is possible/plausible, the view ought to be articulated in our concept of meaning, at the very least. One might, of course, wonder about the merits of this distinction and/or the possibility of meaning-patiency. However, what follows are a few clues that demand that we take the possibility of meaning patiency, as distinguished from meaning-agency, seriously.

With this in mind, let us examine some clues in African thought that might lead us to this meaning-patiency.

2.1 Clue 1: Relationality and African metaphysics

African metaphysics is a largely communalistic ontology and this communal ontology is something you would find in the works of many African metaphysicians such as Iroegbu (1995), Ramose (1999), Asouzu (2004, 2007), Jonathan Chimakonam and Lucky Ogbonnaya (2021), Attoe, (2022a), etc. *Being*, within the African view is conceived in terms of being-with-others since being-alone (the closest idea to the concept of nothingness in African thought) is considered a pitiful mode of existence. As Asouzu puts it:

> To be in existence, an entity must be perceived by any of the units with which it constitutes a complementary whole relationship within which its existence is co-affirmed. This is why that person is to be pitied who thinks that a subject can afford to live alone (*ka sọ mụ di*). (Asouzu, 2004, p. 277)

So, the relationality that forms the crux of African ontology, is founded on the view that things in the world must always exist as things in relationships with other things.

But what is the nature of this relationship? Asouzu (2004, 2007) considers that relationship to be complementary (one of mutual dependence), where all that exists serves as a missing link of reality. Within the context of his metaphysics, absolutes are impossible, if one is to grasp reality fully and if realities were to fully express themselves as part of the complementary whole. In other words, when we turn our gaze upon a reality and place the mantle of "absolute" on it (for it is the human mind that acknowledges and classifies reality as far as humans are concerned), we prop up that reality as independent, as if it never needed a relationship with other realities in other to be understood or in order to flourish. This is why Asouzu criticises Aristotle when he makes the suggestion that we can know a thing by simple recourse to its essence, not with recourse to its accidental properties (2007, p. 149). For Asouzu, there is a relation – perhaps a necessary relationship, as I have noted elsewhere (Attoe, 2022a) – tying both essences and accidents together.

What we can glean from this brief excursion through the metaphysical views of some African thinkers is that anything that exists serves as a missing link, in two ways. First, a thing in the world, exists as a necessary constituent part of the reality, context, or state of affairs in which it belongs such that without the existence of that

reality in the way it does, reality itself would not be the same. Second, for any reality to be fully understood, and for any reality to gain full expression, it must be understood in relation with/to other things in the world. This is true since isolation begets incompleteness, and incompleteness is wildly unattractive within the African/conversational[4] ontological worldview. For me (see: Attoe, 2022a), being-alone is just plain impossible, so the pity that Asouzu talks about is only reserved for metaphysicians who conceive reality in absolute non-relational terms.

What do all these tell us? If emphasis must be placed on the relationality that exists among things in the world, then we must also remember that relationships are also double-ended, and necessarily so. For once there exists a relationship between one thing and another thing, it is immediately the case that the parties in that relationship both gives and receives. For if Asouzu is right and nothing exists as an absolute/self-sufficient being then there must be something that that being gives to other beings, and takes from other beings by virtue of the relationship of *mutual dependency*. Even among human beings, this is true. For instance, one can imagine a relationship where person A renders help to person B. Person B could respond in three different (maybe complex) ways: positively, negatively, and indifferently. Whichever mode of response B chooses, there is a response, and that response can also affect A positively, indifferently or negatively. One can categorise the relationality among most, if not all, things within the context of (at the very least) these three modes of response – positivity, negativity and/or indifference. Whatever response that one gives and/or receives, whether it boils down to these three responses or not, the bottom line remains that relationships are double-ended – all parties emit and receive positivity, negativity and/or indifference. Similarly, relationships can be one of agency and patiency. If this is true, one can see how meaning patiency is not only supported by the dominant ontology but also see how relationships that other beings have with a specific being legitimises that beings existence.

2.2 Clue 2: The vital force theory

Another aspect of African Metaphysics that provides us with some clues about the possibility of meaning-patiency is the concept of vitality (Kagame, 1956; Dzobo, 1992; Nalwamba & Buitendag, 2017). There is the view, prevalent in the literature, that there exists within all things in the world, a sort of ethereal animating force (called vital force or life force) that largely emanates from the supreme being. As Wilfried Lajul, in expressing the thoughts of Maduabuchi Dukor, states:

> Africans believe that behind every human being or object there is a vital power or soul. Africans personify nature because they believe that there is a spiritual force residing in every object of nature. (Lajul, 2017, p. 28)

[4] Conversational metaphysics, which is the metaphysics of the conversational society of philosophy (a leading movement in African philosophy), emphasises the necessarily mutual relationship among things, where mutual interactions are a necessary facet of being, if being is to ever fully express itself.

Human beings are presumed to have this life force or vitality at a higher and more sophisticated degree than say animals, plants or inanimate things – mainly because ours is imbued with the capacity for intelligence, power, creativity, etc. Others, like Metz (2020) have reconceptualized this spiritual energy in naturalistic terms (what he calls liveliness or creative power), where things like health, growth, creativity, etc., are the relevant features of vitality. Now, what is most relevant from this metaphysical story is the idea that the vital force or life force, especially in humans, is something that can be reduced or increased. A fatal reduction in life force is manifested in illness, death, and/or a meaningless life, and an increase in vital force implies well-being and a meaningful life (Attoe, 2020; Metz, 2020; Mlungwana, 2020). What is more interesting is the idea that levels of vitality are dependent on how a person acts towards others (engaging in positive relations, communal rites and rituals, exercising one's creativity and genius, etc.) (Dzobo, 1992; Nalwamba & Buitendag, 2017). Conversely, the type of encounter a person has with an external agent also determines whether her vitality is increased or reduced. When one prays, it is God who confers more vitality to their lives, not necessarily the act of prayer (Nalwamba & Buitendag, 2017). Also when one is a recipient of malevolence, her vital force is reduced. The controversial Tempels (1959, p. 33), mentions the latter point in the following passage:

> 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.

Metz (2020) also suggests that increasing one's vitality involves both actions that strengthens one's self and actions that strengthen the vitality of others. Thus suggesting that one's action can increase or decrease the vitality of others. If meaning implies the increase in one's liveliness, and one's actions can increase or decrease the liveliness in others, then it must follow that an individual's action can make another individual a recipient of meaningfulness or meaninglessness. If what has been said so far about vitality is true, then one must conclude that vitality, as a route to meaning, is not only dependent on the way an individual pursues vitality or liveliness, it is also dependent on whether other people act in ways that increase the vitality in that specific individual's life.

2.3 Clue 3 – African ethics and values

Our third clue lies in the nature of African ethics itself. Mirroring its ontology, African ethics is also communal in nature. The famous *Nguni* dictum – *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through other persons) (Ramose, 1999, p. 37; Metz, 2017, p. 99) – or John Mbiti's overused iteration of it – "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti, 1970, p. 141) – points to an ethics, a philosophy, where value resides in one's relationship with the other, which, as we have seen, is double-ended. Apart from the fact that personhood can be attained through virtuous acts that show moral excellence, especially in terms of solidarity and a shared iden-

tity, it is also the belongingness in a group that confers on one the status of a person (Menkiti, 2004; Metz, 2020). That is, one's identity, one's personhood, is as much a factor of the group an individual belongs to, and how the individual is perceived in that group. Indeed, one of the most radical examples of such a view is that of African philosopher, Jonathan Chimakonam, whose sense-phenomenalism suggests that an individual's identity is itself determined by those outside the individual, and not necessarily by the individual (Chimakonam et al., 2019).

Thaddeus Metz in his theorizing about African ancillary care, makes some telling remarks that are relevant to the present discussions. In describing African ethics he says:

> More carefully, it is revealing to understand identifying with another (or being close, belonging, etc.) to be the combination of exhibiting certain psychological attitudes of 'we-ness' and cooperative behaviour. The attitudes include a tendency to think of oneself as a member of a group with the other and to refer to oneself as a 'we' (and not merely as an 'I'), *a disposition to feel pride or shame in what another member does*, *and*, *at a higher level of intensity*, *an emotional appreciation of the other's nature and value*. (Metz, 2017, p. 115 emphasis mine)

He also notes:

> And the actions are not merely those likely to be beneficial, that is, to improve the other's state, *but also*, *in the ideal case*, *are ones done for that reason and for the sake of making the other a better person or for the sake of communal relationship itself*. (Metz, 2017, p. 115 emphasis mine)

In the first quote, the reader will notice that within the African communal context, the idea of a shared identity, of belongingness, goes beyond merely sharing a name – we are Umon, we are Yoruba, we are Xhosa, etc. It also involves sharing feelings, attitudes, emotions, pride, contempt, etc., not just in one's actions, but in the actions of others. What this then means is that an individual need not only pursue actions that merit pride and esteem, to feel pride and esteem; when another member of society performs an action that merits the emotions of pride and esteem, those same emotions trickle down and stick to members of his community, who, having never pursued the actions that merited those emotions, nevertheless, shared in that emotion. So, here, we see a situation where an individual, who is a member of a community, receives value on the basis of the actions of another member of his/her society.

In the second quote, Metz also alludes to the fact that actions that are considered morally right are actions that are not only done to benefit others in society but are also actions that make the other person "a better person". The phrase "making the other a better person" can be interpreted in two ways. First is the simpler explanation of improving a person's well-being. Financial help readily comes to mind in this instance. The second explanation is the more complex one that speaks to the idea that it is part of the job of other members of society to mould an individual into someone who is capable of being a *person*, in the normative sense of the word. So,

beyond merely providing for an individual, especially one who is in a disadvantageous position, other members of the community are often obligated to instil in the individual the sort of virtues that would aid him/her lead a meaningful life. The proverb – "it takes a village to raise a child" – is a nice example of what I mean. The proverb emphasises the fact that it is the community's obligation to not only care for a child (aside the care the child receives from his or her parents – when available). If "making the other a better person" goes beyond caring for their welfare to include things like helping them grow virtues, it becomes clear that even personhood (even if only the capacity for personhood) can be something that is received as well as pursued. And we must take a closer look at the sorts of emotions, feelings and attitudes that receiving such care and nurturing elicits in the psyche of the moral patient who receives.

2.4 Clue 4 – Dignity and personhood

Finally, following from clue 3, one can point to African communal notions of dignity as another possible clue. African conceptions of dignity often point to something within the person – an essence, if one must use the word – that grants preciousness, and dignity, to human life. It could be a God-given destiny (Gbadegesin, 2004), or, for some, one's vital force (Dzobo, 1992; Metz, 2012). Communal conceptions of human dignity leverage on relational theories such as Ubuntu (Ramose, 1999), complementarity (Asouzu, 2004), Nmekoka (Chimakonam & Ogbonnaya, 2021), etc., to locate the preciousness of human individuals in their possessing the capacity to commune (see Metz, 2012). Take the ubiquitous Nguni maxim that I mentioned earlier, for instance; *umuntu ngumuntu nga bantu* (a person is a person through other persons). A simple analysis reveals that there are three main parts to the phrase. First is "a person". This first part refers to the human individual pure and simple. According to Motsamai Molefe (2019, Endnote 6), "[*t*]*he first instance of a person should be understood biologically*, *to refer to a human being*, and the second instance captures the normative idea [of personhood] under consideration. For scholars such as Menkiti, the individual, pure and simple, has no moral weight – the individual is simply an *it*. For him, human beings are born as clean moral slates and only begin to acquire personhood once cognitive maturity is attained and the individual is capable of imbibing the cultural norms of the society, to which s/he belongs (Menkiti, 2004, pp. 325–326). By implication, a young baby is an *it*, and so is an individual who has dealt with others so badly, and with such moral turpitude, that personhood eludes him/her. For others like Gyekye (1992), and unlike Menkiti, this first "a person" is not a moral blank slate in the purest sense of the word. Individuals are born with the *capacity for virtue*. It is this capacity that allows them the ability to engage positively with others, and their societies, in a normatively good way. It is this innate capacity, present in all human beings, that makes them precious and not just *its*.

While this capacity is present in all humans, it is something that can be cultivated or grown. This ultimately means that there are degrees to personhood, and while one can be born a person, one can be more of a person as s/he cultivates this capacity. This leads us to the second part of the dictum mentioned earlier; "is a person". This is the individual who has imbibed, cultivated, and expressed the normative views of the

society to which he belongs, over a long period of time, and has, to a certain degree, become (and has been recognized as) a moral genius. This is what some Africans mean when they say that "X is truly a person". While time is a necessary condition if one must say that "X is a person" it is not a sufficient one. This is because it is also possible for an individual to act discordantly with others in their society over a long period of time, and/or fail to contribute to his/her society in ways that are normatively commendable. And so, whether one is a follower of Menkiti or is a follower of Gyekye, the point remains that it takes (a normative type of) effort and time for one to become a person (in the second instance).

This brings us to the third part of the phrase, "…through other persons". This phrase is a crucial part of the whole dictum and it expresses a few things. For a person (in the first instance or P1) to become a person (in the second instance or P2), a relationship with other persons (OP) in the society is necessary and sufficient. This relationship can be in two ways. The first is the more obvious form of relationship, where P1 must engage positively and harmoniously with OP or the societies/communities s/he belongs to, whether morally or/and culturally (by engaging in those norms, rites and rituals, peculiar to that society, that creates a bond among members of the group). The second is the less obvious form of relationship, where P1 is recognized as a person and/or receives goodwill for his/her own sake by others in the society. This is a hard point to argue for but when an individual or a community (OP) forgives a wrongdoer, for instance, the act also re-affirms the fact that the OP considers P1 a P2 that is worthy of forgiveness. The act reaffirms the OP's recognition of the dignity of the individual whether as a P1 (in Gyekye's sense) or as a P1 who had acquired some level of P2 before acting discordantly (in the Menkitean sense).

The same logic applies in other instances – for example, when dealing with a person living with a disability, a severe disability, or a debilitating illness. When OP acts harmoniously with a P1 suffering from such problems, the recognition of the dignity of P1 as a person born with the capacity to commune, re-affirms such a P1's personhood. The more the P1 is recognized as a person worthy of communing with (or as a P2), and the more goodwill and solidarity that P1 receives from OPs, the more personhood that P1 receives. In effect, since personhood is a communal matter (necessarily involving OPs), the more communion between P1 and OP, the more that P1's personhood is elevated through the solidarity shown by OP. If this is the case and the achievement or pursuit of personhood is a route to meaning as I have argued elsewhere (Attoe, 2020), and others like Metz (2020) and Molefe (2020) have similarly argued, then there are some reasons to beieve that the tacit/overt recognition of one's dignity and personnhood (in African relational ethics), especially through a tacit communion with other persons, is enough to confer meaning on an individual's life.

I must note, at this point, that scholars like Menkiti would mostly disagree. Based on the premise that personhood is the sort of thing that one must achieve, the idea that personhood can also be passively received, can be problematic. In his words:

> Although Mbiti himself does not spell this out in his own work, it bears mentioning, rightaway, that the force of the statement "I am because we are" is not such as to directly translate into another set of related statements, for example, "He is because we are" or "You are because we are." Its sense is not that of a

> person speaking on behalf of, or in reference to, another, but rather of an individual, who recognizes the sources of his or her own humanity, and so realizes, with internal assurance, that in the absence of others, no grounds exist for a claim regarding the individual's own standing as a person. The notion at work here is the notion of an extended self. (Menkiti, 2004, p. 324).

It is a good thing that Menkiti uses the term "directly translate", as it allows us to manoeuvre through some of the examples that I have provided before and, perhaps, also tells us that some special cases exist, or that some special conditions (like an intense form of communion) need to be present if one must say "you are because we are".

3 The patient-centred variable: Meaning as received

So, how is meaningfulness received? How does one conceptualise such a thing? In the previous sections, I had provided some clues, from the ontological to the axiological, that show that relationality is double-ended and that meaning can be received. Now, I must go a step further and present the patient-centred notion as a plausible *variable/facet* in/of any concept of meaning. For if it is true that moments of meaning can be received, then any *concept* of meaning must include meaning-patiency.

3.1 Meaning Sense

From the clues we have examined above, it becomes very clear that certain specific received gestures may provide one with received meaning. For instance, if one were to take the vital force theory, and its attendant conception of meaning, seriously, then an arbitrary imbuement of vitality into the life of an individual by God, or the receipt of gestures of positive interaction from others in the society, would increase the individual's vitality, and, consequently, the meaningfulness of their lives. In this type of example, meaning-patiency is already hinged on the theory of vitality and so requires no explanation outside the theory itself. However, I draw the reader's attention to a standalone idea that also leads to meaning-patiency, which we can describe and analyse as an aspect of meaning-patiency that is unhinged from other established conceptions of meaning. This is the idea of meaning sense.

There is something in the human psyche that gets excited whenever it strives for meaning or attains meaning. This excitement is a positive one, for if it were negative then the pursuit of meaning would not be desirable. Indeed, this excitement is so strong that it does not matter whether the route to meaning is pleasurable or painful. Take, for instance, the life of a certain freedom fighter, Nelson, who takes it that putting an end to the subjugation and discrimination of his people by racist powers would make his life more meaningful. Whether Nelson's pursuit of this goal puts him in great peril (like torture or prison time), or whether he later goes on to become the leader of his country and pursues his goal in the comfort of a presidential palace, is irrelevant/moot. It is that desire, yearning, pursuit or even attainment of his goal, for its own sake, that excites him. What follows from this point is that meaning or the

pursuit of meaning could also excite something in us – a psychological state or thing – that we must name.

This thing or state is not necessarily the will, although it may be a component of it. Why I think so is because many activities or desires excite our will, even though those activities or desires are not objects or purveyors of meaning. At the same time, it is often subjective acknowledgement that imbues a proposed purveyor of meaning with the sort of authenticity (at least, in the mind of the subject) that legitimizes that proposed purveyor of meaning as an actual purveyor of meaning [See (Attoe, 2022b, pp. 1586–1590) for an extensive discussion on why subjective acknowledgement is important in any account of meaning in life]. This subject state or thing is what releases the relevant emotions of great esteem and admiration, whether on the part of a patient or an agent, whenever an act of meaning is encountered, pursued or achieved. In other words, beyond conceptual articulation, there is something inherent in the human being that identifies a meaningful act as something meaningful. I call this psychological state or thing – meaning sense.

Now, I do not make the claim that this meaning sense is necessarily a concrete item in reality that one can point to. I place it in the same category as things like, intelligence, causality, relationality, etc., which are not actual things in the world but names that describe some sort of capacity that is often brought about by several moving parts that are in relationship with each other. Perhaps one can point to an actual brain state, but that is beside the point. What is of importance is the idea that it is this meaning sense is a capacity, (which one can assume is) present in all conscious and rational individuals, that allows them to identify and respond to a moment of meaningfulness in their lives. This meaning sense is augmented by knowledge and encounters with certain communal/objective values. And so, in a way, its strength increases, and the intuition becomes more reliable, the more it encounters, considers, examines and acknowledges certain objective values that are recognized as desirable. Thus, for one who is invested in learning about communal values and/or learning about meaningfulness, his/her meaning is stronger and, sometimes, more reliable than, say, that of an immoral person who does not care about normative values and barely muses about life's meaning, if at all.

I had earlier stated that in African metaphysics, and even ethics, relationality is double-ended – both given and received. P1/P2 are the vessels on which relationships are exchanged (received and given). Within P1 is meaning sense. Meaning sense specifically recognizes a *meaningful* exchange and it is that recognition that informs P1 that his/her life is meaningful, and/or that s/he has encountered a moment of meaningfulness in his/her life. This is not to say that meaning sense incorporates within it some special metaphysical sensor for identifying meaning. The knowledge, or recognition, of the contextual norms within a given society, which stipulates acts that are worthy for their own sake and/or merit esteem and admiration – and one can find variation among societies in relation to context and time – is what informs the individual of a potentially received meaningfulness. What we then have, in the idea of meaning sense, is something that recognises the power of subjective acknowledgement and desire in identifying what makes a life meaningful, while, at the same time imbuing some objective cultural values and contexts as the raw data that informs the individual's recognition of what makes a life meaningful.

So, when a meaning agent performs an act that is meaningful, like Nelson fighting for the freedom of his society, the performance of that meaningful act excites within him a recognition of the fact that the societal contextual norms, which he has imbibed throughout his life, approves that act as a meaningful one. Similarly, when a meaning-patient receives a meaningful gesture, the receipt of that gesture excites within him a recognition of the societal and contextual norms that indicate that the performance of that gesture acknowledges his humanity or personhood in such a way that his life is meaningful. Within the African context, one way that received gestures excite an individual's meaning sense, is when that action improves her personhood (P1, in the Gyekyean sense, or P2, in the Menkitian sense). Thus, when Nelson's father recognizes the fact that Nelson goes out of his way to take care of his every need, making sure that he is not lacking in care, Nelson's father feels his humanity/dignity grow. That gesture and relationship with his son tells Nelson's father that he has been recognized as a person with personhood, who is therefore worthy of relationships with other persons. If anything, that act validates his humanness, if one were to take the ubuntu/relational view seriously. When Nelson's sister, who is living with a disability, is given the utmost care attention, and when her society makes accessibility a priority, Nelson's sister feels her personhood (or her vitality, if you like) elevated to a higher degree since those acts of relationality allow her to feel worthy. In all these actions, what is described is the attainment or, at least, elevation of one's personhood (or even one's dignity) *through* other persons. I am immediately reminded of Metz's comment below:

> It is not just that relating to others is a necessary condition of cultivating personhood, but, more strongly, that relationships are what constitute one's higher self. To be in relation with others is (at least in large part) to be a real person. (Metz, 2022)

Within the societal context of much of traditional African thought, relationality and the attainment of personhood, is the sort of thing that makes life meaningful. By implication, it is the sort of thing that can excite one's meaning sense.

Even if one does not preach relationality and communalism like Ramose and Menkiti, or one comes from a societal context in which the normative notion of personhood is not as strong, one can still recognize instances where this patient-centred notion holds. A good example would be the Make-a-Wish Foundation, which strives to accomplish some of the wishes of children with terminal cancer. While we may commend actors like Johnny Depp or wrestlers like John Cena, for making the time to grant these children some of their wishes – we can even say they are doing something meaningful – one can also focus on the child who may not be actively striving for meaning but who is, nevertheless, a recipient of such gestures. The elevation of that child's dignity, through the understanding that s/he is worthy enough, as an end in himself/herself, to receive that extra act of kindness, elicits a sort of personal esteem (that transcends his/her everyday feeling of esteem in her life) that enables feelings of meaningfulness (that excites her meaning sense) within her.

Following what I have said so far, I crystallise the patient-centred variable (PcV) into the following terse statement:

PcV: *A life can be meaningful (fully or momentarily) if it receives from other person(s) acts that are considered (within a particular societal context) acts of love, communion and/or kindness, acts that transcend normal relationality among human beings, and acts that elicit personal feelings of esteem and worthiness in the psyche of the meaning-patient who is receiving, such that they are recognized as acts of received meaning by their meaning sense.*

To be sure, the idea does not only concern those who may be frail, or indisposed in some way. As we have discussed, sometimes people who are not indisposed or frail can be recipients of meaning. When one supposedly receives profound blessings or recognition from God, that person's life is meaningful, not by virtue of acting, but by virtue of receiving God's blessing or acknowledgement – insofar as it is true that God exists and is the sort of being that can bless or acknowledge a human being unconditionally. Notice that in the patient-centred notion of meaning, meaning is simply conferred on the patient on the basis of some form of relational gesture, and not on the basis of any actions on the part of the patient (who would have been transformed into a meaning-agent by virtue of acting) that may have led to a later conferral of meaning. It is one thing to be blessed unconditionally by God's love/whim, and to be blessed by God in the future for diligently obeying divine law in the past. While the latter captures the agent-centred conferral of meaning, the former captures what I mean by received meaning or patient-centred meaning.

If all I have said so far is plausible, we must begin to revise our preferred concept of meaning by including the patient-centred variable in order to capture any account of meaning that may be patient-centred. I will start by modifying my preferred concept of meaning as follows:

To ask about meaning is to pose questions such as: which subjectively pursued ends, besides one's own pleasure as such are worth pursuing for their own sake; how to transcend one's animal nature; what in life merits great esteem or admiration; what received gestures of love and communion (within one's societal context) transcend normal relationality among human beings and/or elicit personal feelings of esteem and worthiness; and what overarching goal or purpose ties meaningful actions in a life, considered as a whole, together into one comprehensible and coherent narrative.

3.2 Some objections

1. *If a certain reaction is necessary, or if one needs to acknowledge the received meaning as such, then this would reduce the view to an agent-centered view*[5]: My response to this objection is that meaning-patiency, as I define it, denotes a lack of *pursuit* of meaning, and does not denote a lack of reaction to a moment of meaning. The reason for this thinking is that one's reaction to received meaning

[5] Many thanks to a reviewer for this objection.

or attitude towards received meaning does not imply an active pursuit of meaning (meaning-agency). We often consider animals, for instance, as moral patients. These animals may not always be aware of our goodwill actions but sometimes they are and/or may react to that goodwill in certain ways. So, while a cow may not realise and/or react to the goodwill of the vegetarian, one can plausibly claim that the feeding of a homeless hungry dog by a human moral agent would elicit some reaction (whatever it may be) from the dog, perhaps even necessarily. But that reaction does not preclude the dog from remaining a moral patient. Meaning-agency, as I see it, implies an active pursuit of meaning – the individual takes responsibility for the acquisition of meaning. If true, then neither received meaning, or the reaction to, and/or recognition of, received meaning constitutes a pursuit of meaning and (by extension) meaning-patiency. Notice that what is important is the active pursuit (agency) or passive receipt (patiency) of meaning. If an individual has certain wishes or expectations, those expectations do not translate to an active pursuit. A person, x, might wish that he could save his community from a tyrant, and may even recognise saving his community from a tyrant could be a moment of meaningfulness. Without *acting* on his wish and striving for/pursuing that goal, agent-centred meaning does not apply (i.e. we cannot claim that wishing for something good can make a life meaningful – whether from an agent-centred or patient-centred perspective). Also, if the tyrant was overthrown by other agents who share x's wishes, y and z, it is difficult to attribute to x the achievement of meaningfulness that is *agent centred*. So it is not the case that bearing wishes, attitudes or reactions amounts to agent-centred meaningfulness. Agreeing that it is an agent-centred pursuit would be stretching agent-centred meaning far too thin.

2. *If we suppose that being aware of certain gestures of received meaning is important*, *then individuals who cannot be aware of such gestures*, *or even show an aversion towards such gestures*, *cannot be recipients of meaning*[6]: This would naturally follow from the patient-centred view but only if one is a subjectivist about meaning. Subjectivists often believe that the relevant subject, whose life is under scrutiny, ought to acknowledge an act/her life as one that is meaningful before it is recognized as such (Attoe, 2022b). However, one can also appeal to objectivist views about meaning, where the subject's attitude is unnecessary. So if elevating one's personhood is seen as objectively meaningful[7], then receiving gestures that elevate a meaning-patient's personhood would be seen as meaningful, whether or not the patient agrees or is incapable of agreeing. There are also examples in African metaphysics, where meaning is conferred on ancestors and sustained via tribal memory (continuous remembrance by those left behind) (Attoe, 2023b). Beyond these, notice that the point of this essay is to show the plausibility of received meaning. Insofar as plausible examples exist, the view is tenable and must be acknowledged – the impossibility of received meaning in one specific scenario/example does not negate evidence of received meaning in

[6] Many thanks to a reviewer for a related objection.

[7] In much the same way that one could objectively consider Nelson Mandela's life as meaningful, whether or not Mandela subjectively agreed.

another plausible scenario/example. If received meaning is at all possible/plausible, then the patient-centred view is plausible.

4 Conclusion

As I have stated in this paper, discussions on life's meaning have often been articulated from an agent-centred perspective. While this is not problematic, I have attempted to show that discussions on meaning can also be articulated from a patient-centred perspective. In other words, I have attempted to show that, from some African perspectives, meaning in life could also be received and/or conferred without any active pursuits by the subject. To argue out this point, I relied on certain clues in the literature on African philosophy.

The first clue that I considered was the idea of relationality in African metaphysics, where I argued that the double-ended nature of relationships and the idea that the existence of a thing can also be legitimised insofar as that thing is related with suggested that there was some power to received relationships. The second clue that I considered was from the vital force theory (of meaning), which suggested that certain received actions (the malevolence of other beings and/or positive relations) does influence the level of one's vitality. In this way, if meaningfulness is established through the augmentation of one's vitality, then received acts of positive relations could make one's life more meaningful. Other clues from African ethics/values, and the idea of dignity, suggest that feelings of great esteem and admiration, as well as personhood, could be passively received by an individual by virtue of being part of a community (shared identity and solidarity).

Having shown that received meaning was plausible, I further attempted to introduce this possibility as an important facet or variable for any (especially pluralistic) definition of meaning since, if my arguments are plausible, any discussion about the meaning of meaning ought to capture this variable. This patient-centred variable (PcV) was defined as follows: *A life can be meaningful (fully or momentarily) if it receives from other person(s) acts that are considered (within a particular societal context) acts of love*, *communion and/or kindness*, *acts that transcend normal relationality among human beings*, *and acts that elicit personal feelings of esteem and worthiness in the psyche of the meaning-patient who is receiving*, *such that they are recognized as acts of received meaning by their meaning sense.* Following this, I reworked my preferred definition of life's meaning (which, as I have said, is based on my reworking of Thaddeus Metz's account) as follows: *to ask about meaning is to pose questions such as: which subjectively pursued ends*, *besides one's own pleasure as such are worth pursuing for their own sake; how to transcend one's animal nature; what in life merits great esteem or admiration; what received gestures of love and communion (within one's societal context) transcend normal relationality among human beings and/or elicit personal feelings of esteem and worthiness; and what overarching goal or purpose ties meaningful actions in a life*, *considered as a whole*, *together into one comprehensible and coherent narrative.*

With the patient-centred variable articulated, what would be interesting for future research would be exploring/examining the points of disagreement that philosophers may have concerning this patient-centred view. Such discussions would surely expand the frontiers of our discussions about meaning. Furthermore, I believe it would be worthwhile for philosophers interested in questions about meaning in life to propose conceptions of meaning in/of life that reflect the patient-centred variable. This paper has hinted at some possibilities such as new versions of the vital force theory of meaning and the personhood theory of meaning, which propose the possibility of conferred meaning through received actions.

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