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Liveliness as a Theory of Meaning in Life: Problems and Prospects

Abstract: Philosophers concerned with explicating ideas of import to various sub-Saharan African cultures have only recently turned to examining questions about the meaning of life. I aim to improve upon that literature by continuing to more fully develop a theory of meaning in life based on the concept of life force which is important to a substantial number of Africans in the sub-Sahara. While traditional life force implies a large invisible ontology which includes God, spirits, departed ancestors, and the living dead, Thaddeus Metz has recently developed an entirely naturalistic version of it known as *liveliness*. However, he also offers two objections which hinge on the idea that the African tradition cannot accommodate intuitions that certain types of knowledge and progress are valuable for their own sakes. I respond by noting that in other work, Metz has developed a defense of the intrinsic value of knowledge by appealing to the idea that meeting a person's existential needs can be important for self-realisation and hence for their meaning. If this is right, then the community ought to support such a person in their pursuit of knowledge even if doing so leads to no useful consequences. I conclude by examining whether this response is more plausible on a traditional understanding of life force instead of on Metz's secular version.

1. Introduction

Contemporary African moral philosophy is a vibrant field, and it is probably fair to say it receives the most attention from those working in the African philosophical tradition. Philosophers working in this field tend to focus on developing normative ethical theories, with metaethical considerations rarely taking centerstage. The result is that though considerations about the meaning in life are sometimes referenced, it is only quite recently that an explicit body of literature devoted to this topic has emerged.

Given the explosion of work on the meaning of life in Anglo-American philosophy over the past 20 years, the time is undoubtedly ripe for cross-cultural dialogue on this important topic. The purpose of this article is to improve upon the current literature on African theories of meaning in life by more fully developing a theory of meaning based on the concept of life force which is important to a substantial number of Africans in the sub-Saharan (see Attoe 2019, 2020, 2021; Metz 2020; Mlungwana 2020).

In Section 2, I explicate the basic ideas involved in the life force theory of meaning. This includes explaining both the ‘traditional’ or ‘religious’ notion of life force which includes Gods, spirits, departed ancestors, and the living dead, etc., in addition to a naturalistic and secular version of it known as liveliness which has been proposed by Thaddeus Metz (see 2012, 2020, 2022a). In Section 3, I outline two recent objections developed by Metz to the liveliness theory of meaning. The first is based on the claim that liveliness cannot account for intuitions about the value of certain types of knowledge because in the African philosophical tradition knowledge or understanding is not usually thought of as valuable in itself. The second is that liveliness cannot account for the value arising from certain types of progress.

In Section 4, I counter that there are resources within the African philosophical tradition to respond to these objections, thereby filling out the liveliness theory of meaning in important ways. Specifically, I respond by noting that in other work Metz has developed a defense of the intrinsic value of knowledge that is consistent with certain African traditions by appealing to the idea that meeting a person’s existential needs can be important for self-realisation and hence for their meaning (2009). If this is right, then the community ought to support such a person in their pursuit of knowledge even if doing so leads to no useful consequences. In Section 5, I examine whether this response is more plausible on a traditional understanding of life force instead of Metz’s secular version. Specifically, I explore whether the interconnectedness of everything implied by traditional life force better explains

why existential needs are important. I argue that recent developments in social epistemology highlight the ability of secular liveliness to make similar claims, thereby denying that a theory of meaning in life based on traditional life force, one quite plausibly labelled ‘religious’ or ‘supernatural,’ better avoids Metz’s objections. In section 6, I suggest that Metz is correct to think the relationship between knowledge and liveliness is not causal. However, I tentatively argue that despite his scepticism, the relationship between them could plausibly be construed as constitutive.

2. Life Force and Meaning in Life

The purpose of this section is to focus on what constitutes a theory of meaning in life based on life force. Before doing so, however, two clarificatory caveats about methodology are in order. First, I am intentionally writing of African theories of meaning *in* life as opposed to meaning *of* life. The latter tends to denote questions about the meaningfulness of the entire human species. Is there a purpose for which humanity was created? Is there something beyond us which we ought to seek connection with? The former, however, is typically about the meaningfulness of an individual’s life. This article focuses on meaning *in* life as this tends to be the focus of discussions of meaning in African philosophy (Metz 2020, 114).

Second, the scope of the claims I am going to make need to be clarified. Placide Tempels’ short book, *Bantu Philosophy*, is widely regarded as one of the first places in which a European mentioned the importance of life force to certain African peoples (1959). But the legacy of Tempels’ work is highly controversial, not only because as a missionary his motivation was primarily colonial, but also because he makes sweeping universal generalisations about *all* Bantu speaking peoples that have turned out to be demonstrably false. Tempels’ work also appears to have prompted debate about the appropriate methodology of ethnophilosophy, in addition to whether this is an appropriate way of philosophising at all (e.g., Agada 2022; Dokman and Cornelli 2022; Matolino 2021). Having said that, Tempels does identify something in life force that is a significant concept for at least some

indigenous Africans. Despite the thousands of linguistic and cultural groups on the continent, many African philosophers refer to ‘African Traditional Religion’ as a synthesis of widely held beliefs (Metz 2022b, 1). Though there have been recent calls to decolonise the African philosophy of religion even further, thereby calling into question the legitimacy of a ‘African Traditional Religion’, Metz’s basic point about “common ground among sub-Saharan black peoples (or at least their academic exponents)” remains accurate (Metz 2022b, 1). My reason for citing him is straightforward in that I believe there is enough common ground to speak of ‘life force’ as a legitimate candidate for a genuinely African theory of meaning. This does not imply that my claims about life force apply to a large number, let alone the majority, of sub-Saharan black peoples. With these methodological clarifications in order, I am now in a position to address life force.

2.1 The Traditional Life Force Theory

What is life force? It is the idea that everything that exists, including both animate and inanimate objects, is imbued with an imperceptible energy. God has the most energy and imparts it to the rest of his creation, including other spirits, departed ancestors, the living dead, humans, animals, flora, and minerals. Tempels says:

[T]he Bantu speak of God himself as “the Strong One”, he who possesses Force in himself. He is also the source of the Force of every creature. God is the “Dijina dikatampe”: the great name, because he is the great Force, the “mukomo”, as our Baluba have it, the one who is stronger than all other (1959, 31).

In particular, God has created humans at the center of the universe (Tempels 1959, 38-40). Since all life force can be strengthened or diminished, the goal of human morality (or perhaps life in general) is to increase life force and avoid its diminishment. This explains why Tempels claims that things like lying, enmity, hatred, jealousy, etc., are things that ought to be avoided (1959, 82). The very worst acts are the ones that involve the premeditated and intentional annihilation of another person’s

life. Such acts are considered to be the very worst sins against God, and the community is justified in preventing them (Tempels 1959, 82). On the other hand, the most important value to promote is life force (or vitality, or life itself) (Tempels 1959, 30).

Now, using the label ‘traditional’ life force is non-standard. However, it is important to distinguish it from Metz’s secular version of life force which I explain below. It will become clear that this distinction is important for my purposes.¹ Before doing so, I will home in on the connection between life force and meaning in life. To begin, I will follow Metz’s explication since his criticisms of it will be my target later.

K.C. Anyanwu says that ‘ultimate reality’ would be without value if it did not contain life force because life itself is the highest value. The way in which a person lives their life is supposed to recognise this fact. (Anyanwu 1987a, 37 cited in Metz 2020, 119). Harvey Sindima suggests that Africans are concerned with living a full life which means achieving one’s full potential (1989, 544 cited in Metz 2020, 119). Noah Dzobo claims there is a ‘creative energy in life’ which helps people achieve wholeness and health. He writes that “the essence of the ideal life is regarded as power and creativity, growth, creative work and increase have become essential values. Powerlessness or loss of vitality, unproductive living, and growthlessness become ultimate evils in our indigenous culture” (Dzobo 1992, 227, 230 quoted in Metz 2020, 119). This implies that procreation is one of the highest values because it is a way to create and increase life force. Likewise, productive work is a way exercise one’s creative potential. A meaningful life is therefore about participating in lifegiving activities.

Turning to additional thinkers beyond those cited by Metz, one finds numerous other statements that affirm the connection between life force and meaning. E. Elochukwu Uzukwu says that a person’s destiny or purpose is about trying to protect and increase life itself, which is

¹ Though I do not deny ‘traditional’ might have unwanted connotations, the same can probably be said for other candidates including ‘religious’ and ‘indigenous’. The reader is free to substitute other terms for ‘traditional’ as they see fit.

synonymous with life force (1982, 196). Pantaleon Iroegbu holds that the highest purpose of life is to *live* for others and God (2005, 448). Bert Hamminga claims that the highest aim in life is to have children with strong life force (2005, 58). Peter Kasenene says that ‘supreme happiness’ amounts to having the strongest life force, while the worst thing that can befall a person is the weakening of their life force through things like illness or injustice (1994, 140). Bénézet Bujo declares that the meaning of life is about the flourishing of life itself (2001, 62). Finally, Laurenti Magesa suggests that meaning is fundamentally about creation, which of course necessarily involves life (1997, 285). According to these thinkers, the purpose of life is to develop the life force in oneself and in others.

2.2 Secular Liveliness and Meaning

At this stage, it is important to explain that though Metz’s ideas are inspired by what I am calling ‘traditional’ life force, a theory that includes a robust supernatural ontology, his own version of the theory is entirely naturalistic. He claims that:

[A]n appeal to vitality to ground a theory of meaning in life is powerful even if it is understood in strictly perceptible or physical terms, which I shall sometimes call “liveliness”. Working with the category of liveliness, some individuals, such as humans and animals, can exhibit it, while others, such as rocks and pens, cannot (Metz 2020, 119).

Regarding meaning, the more that one protects or promotes liveliness, the more their life is meaningful (Metz 2020, 119). On this view, the purpose of life is to develop liveliness in oneself and in others, implying that “one’s purpose is to produce in them properties such as health, growth, reproduction, creativity, vibrancy, activity, self-motion, courage, and confidence” (Metz 2020, 119). On the other hand, one ought to avoid and seek to reduce “disease, decay, barrenness, destruction, lethargy, passivity, submission, insecurity, and depression (Metz 2020, 119).

These ideas combine to form the following theory that I will call the *liveliness theory of meaning in life*:

A human person's life is more meaningful, the more that she promotes liveliness in herself and others (Metz 2020, 119-120).

As far as I can tell, Metz is the first person to develop an entirely naturalistic and secular theory of life force. It is a creative and innovative way of attempting to make a concept grounded in the African tradition more palatable to a global audience of philosophers who are likely to reject the supernaturalism implied by the ontology of traditional life force. Metz clearly wants to focus on liveliness without wading into metaphysical controversies, and using a secular approach is a good way of achieving that end.

In grounding a theory of human rights, Metz (2012, 25) claims that the naturalistic version of life force as liveliness is just as compelling as the traditional one, and in *A Relational Moral Theory: African Ethics in and beyond the Continent*, Metz dedicates an entire chapter to examining secular liveliness as a normative moral theory (2022a). In both he works with a secularised notion of liveliness which allows him to avoid metaphysical controversies while still appealing to ideas of import in the African tradition. In sum, he explains that he uses an understanding of life that “is construed in terms of force, not substance; is thought to be perishable, as opposed to eternal; comes in different degrees or kinds; and plausibly varies in value depending on the quantity or quality of it” (2022a, 80). For readers from the Western tradition, it may help to compare this description with the idea of an immaterial soul. Liveliness comes in varying degrees of strength unlike a soul which people either have or do not. While some hold that once a soul is brought into existence, it is indestructible and hence eternal, liveliness can be completely snuffed out. Again, unlike a soul, liveliness can be manifested in various ways, with some instantiations being better than others.

Whether a supernatural concept like life force can indeed be successfully naturalised is obviously controversial. However, my main purpose is not to evaluate whether Metz is justified in naturalising the concept since doing so would take me too far afield from issues of meaning.

3. Two Objections to the Secular Liveliness Theory of Meaning in Life

Though Metz advocates that an African theory of meaning in life based on liveliness ought to be considered as a legitimate contender on a global stage, he claims that it struggles to accommodate certain global intuitions about what confers meaning. The first set of intuitions rests on the idea that some knowledge is intrinsically valuable while the second set affirms the value of progress.

3.1 Knowledge as Intrinsically Valuable

The first set of global intuitions that liveliness struggles to explain have to do with the idea that certain instances of knowledge are intrinsically valuable (Metz 2020, 121). Considering that false beliefs can sometimes detract from meaning, Metz claims that there is something intuitively sad about cult members (Metz 2020, 120-121). Consider the members of the Heaven's Gate cult who committed suicide based on the belief that it would take them to a spacecraft ultimately going to paradise. Metz believes we also rightly pity the schizophrenic who thinks the devil or evil spirits are controlling them. His key claim is that the appropriateness of our reactions is well explained by the fact that having false beliefs about the fundamental nature of reality partly contributes to a reduction of meaning in life (Metz 2020, 120-121).

The problem is that according to Metz, false beliefs do not necessarily reduce a person's liveliness (2020, 21). It is tempting to reply that in the cases of the false beliefs mentioned above the harmful results would clearly decrease a person's liveliness. But the reply would be that if a false belief does not lead to harmful consequences, then it does not reduce the meaning of a person's life (Metz 2020, 121). However, Metz insists that it is the false beliefs themselves, not just their consequences, that at least partly contribute to a loss in meaning. Suppose a person believes a Flying Spaghetti Monster created the human species 10 000 years ago. Metz claims that a person who believes this has a less meaningful life in light of such a belief, even if it does not harm them and in fact makes them feel good (2020, 121).

Alternatively, Metz suggests that liveliness cannot capture global intuitions about how true beliefs can confer meaning on a person's life. He asks us to consider Charles Darwin and the theory of natural selection. Presumably, "the theory of natural selection conferred great meaning on his life, most plausibly in virtue of what the theory is about, and not so much whether it has made (or had been likely to make) people more healthy, creative, or the like" (Metz 2020, 121). Furthermore, the ideas were deemed as 'dangerous' by some, uprooting their important beliefs about how human life arose. Metz claims that even if the theory caused people to feel worse, it was still very important knowledge (Metz 2020, 121). The same would be true of a cosmologist who discovered the fate of the universe, even if that fate was that it would end, and this knowledge caused people's lives to lose meaning and they became depressed (Metz 2020, 121). In short, Metz believes it is intuitively obvious that the discovery of true beliefs can confer meaning on a person's life, but that liveliness has a difficult time explaining why this is the case (Metz 2020, 121).

These two cases have to do with knowledge and the heart of the problem here is that the majority of African philosophers tend to deny that knowledge is valuable for its own sake. Knowledge, understanding, true belief, etc., ought to only be pursued if they can be reasonably expected to yield practical benefits (Metz 2020, 122-123). Metz concludes this objection by asking: "Is there really no loss of meaning insofar as one, say, believes that a Flying Spaghetti Monster created us not long ago? Was there really nothing to admire about Darwin's life simply in virtue of his deep insight into how humanity arose?" (Metz 2020, 123).

Elsewhere, Metz addresses five justifications given for using public funds to support a university in an African context. These are that universities foster development (socio-economic), support culture (preserve and transmit it), rectify injustices, foster (normative) personhood, and realise the majority's aspirations (Metz 2009, 185-187). Metz suggests that the latter two justifications should be replaced with the justifications that universities help to realize equal opportunity and facilitate co-

operation (2009, 191-192). His discussion is illuminating because notice that none of these appeal to the fact that knowledge is intrinsically valuable. Indeed, Metz writes that “[i]n a critical survey of dozens of works by African thinkers on the point of higher education, I could not find one that extolled knowledge for its own sake [...] It might be, however that Léopold Senghor would, upon reflection, do so” (Metz 2019, fn1, 2; e.g., Balogun 2008a, 2008b, 2013; Dowling and Seepe 2003; Nabudere 2006; Nwakaeze-Ogugua 2006; Oladipo 1992; Seepe 1998; Wiredu 2004).

3.2 *The Value of Progress*

Arguably, liveliness also has difficulty explaining the value of progress (Metz 2020, 121-123). Metz suggests that many will share the intuition that there is something uniquely valuable about being the first to make a discovery about an item of knowledge. For example:

[C]onsider Albert Einstein’s revelation that space and time are affected by the mass of objects in them. He was the first person, if not to have conceptualised general relativity, then at least to have provided a solid justification of it. Making that breakthrough was meaningful, not merely because of what it was about (as per the previous point), but also because of its novelty. Einstein *advanced* our understanding of the nature of reality, as have those who have recently discovered species of hominids [...] It is hard to see how [...] liveliness [...] can explain the importance of novelty relative to what other enquirers have done in the past (Metz 2020, 121).

It is tempting to reply to Metz that such discoveries would indeed increase the liveliness of the discoverer. For instance, on those admittedly rather rare occasions where I feel I have discovered an important philosophical insight or made an interesting conceptual connection, it is reasonable to describe what I experience as an increase in liveliness. But Metz’s point here is that it is not just the lively *effect* of making a discovery but the accomplishment of making the discovery itself that confers meaning. He asks the reader to consider a person who 50 years after Einstein, having somehow never

heard of his discoveries, replicates them by coincidence. Though the same intellectual labour could have been involved, there is something less impressive in virtue of it occurring after Einstein had already made the discoveries (Metz 2020, 122).

There is therefore a difference between the feelings that might result in liveliness and the fact of making an actual novel discovery. Again, I recall those rather rare occasions where I believe I have made a genuinely novel and interesting philosophical insight only to have a referee inform me that the claim was already made elsewhere in work I overlooked while conducting research. Metz says that the false belief of having made an original discovery is enough to produce relevant feelings of liveliness (Metz 2020, 122). Conversely, someone could make a discovery without knowing it and so feel no increase in liveliness. Yet according to Metz such a discovery remains meaningful (2020, 122). Metz does not deny that the realisation one has made a discovery will increase liveliness. Instead, his point is just that it is the discovery itself that is valuable and so confers meaning, irrespective of whether it also happens to bring an increase in the person's liveliness.

The final problem for the liveliness theory of meaning is its purported inability to account for the ways in which the overall pattern of a life can make it more or less meaningful. Consider that there is pro tanto reason to think a life with less repetition is better than one with a lot of repetition, but that liveliness cannot explain why this is the case (Metz 2020, 122). Additionally, consider that if the total sum of a life is held fixed, a life is more meaningful if it gets better over time instead of worse. Liveliness cannot explain this intuition (Metz 2020, 122). Now, Metz acknowledges that awareness of the fact that one's life is repeating or that it is gradually improving can affect liveliness. However, according to Metz, liveliness cannot explain the intuition behind the idea that all else being equal, a repetitive life is less meaningful than one that is not, even if one is unaware of the repetition. Nor can it explain why a life that gets better over time is more meaningful than a life that gets worse or stays

the same over time even if one is aware of this fact (Metz 2020, 122). For, Metz the strength of these examples about repetition and structure:

[I]turns on an appeal to the importance of progress. Being the first to have made a certain accomplishment and living in a way that consistently improves until the end are both well understood as kinds of advancement. African philosophers do of course distinguish between better and worse ways of living for human beings, and so are committed to maintaining that a human life can usually admit of improvement. However, that point is different from prizing original contributions or linear development in a person's life as meaning-conferring (2020, 123).

Though Metz says that his appeals to knowledge and progress in these ways are more typical of the Modern Western tradition than of the African intellectual tradition, he believes that many of his readers, including Africans, will feel the strength of the examples he has offered. In what follows, I am simply going to assume that Metz is correct about this point. If there are African readers or otherwise who do not see the intuitive plausibility of the examples offered by Metz and are simply happy to 'bite the bullet' and deny their implications for meaning, I presume that at least some who are sympathetic to liveliness feel their weight. The rest of this article addresses these objections, thereby expanding the liveliness theory of meaning in life in important ways.²

4. Knowledge and Progress as a Form of Self-Realisation

My primary response to Metz is based on the claim that knowledge and progress can constitute an important form of self-realisation. This is a particularly powerful response because Metz himself defends this claim in other work.³ There he explores different approaches to defend the claim that knowledge is intrinsically valuable in ways that are consistent with African thought (Metz 2019, 11-

³ I cannot locate any place where he himself considers it as a potential response to his objections to liveliness as a theory of meaning.

13). Metz accomplishes this by observing that though the needs that tend to be emphasised in the African tradition are biological or social, there is a third set of ‘existential’ needs that is also important (Metz 2019, 14). Accomplishments that are deserving of lasting admiration and esteem are an important form of self-realisation and thereby meet what might be called an existential need. He writes that:

If people’s dignity gives us moral reason to go out of our way to help them, then the help should include assistance in achieving what is particularly worth having in life, which includes meaning. And if part of caring about people’s good is indeed a matter of enabling them to live meaningfully, and if that includes understanding certain objective truths about humanity and the world in which we live, then it follows that we have some reason to promote some knowledge for its own sake (Metz 2019, 14).

I believe Metz is correct that caring about existential needs is important and I agree that pursuing knowledge (or the type of progress he describes) can contribute to a person’s self-realisation, and merit admiration and esteem, and therefore contribute positively to the meaning in their life.⁴

If existential needs are indeed legitimate, then meeting them is important on a liveliness theory of meaning. Notice that Metz has (perhaps inadvertently) provided a solution to his own objections to the liveliness theory of meaning in life. This is because if a person achieves self-realisation, accomplishing something that merits admiration and esteem, *their liveliness will be increased*. Consider that Noah Dzobo writes, “[t]o our people, value is primarily the power to satisfy human needs” (1992, 224). Knowledge and progress are important forms of self-realisation. The sort of pride and self-worth one might feel is an indication of liveliness, although such feelings are not strictly necessary in order

⁴ Notice that even if this is false, I can still appeal to this as a solution for Metz since it is located within his own work. Assuming what I say next is right, then someone else could raise this objection but not Metz himself (on pains of inconsistency).

for self-realisation itself to occur. It is having one's existential needs met that plausibly contributes to liveliness.

Now, recall the case of the cosmological discovery about the end of the universe. Metz says that if people found the discovery to be depressing, then it would detract from the meaning in their life (2020, 121). But there is no tension between this fact and the claim that the discovery increases the *cosmologist's* liveliness. The consequences of her research may well depress others, but this doesn't change the fact that discovering knowledge or making progress is reasonably connected to her self-realisation and hence to the meaning in her life. Indeed, that liveliness can explain both the increase and decrease of the different parties in this case seems to be a theoretical virtue.

For certain individuals, it is reasonable that knowledge and progress are part of their self-realisation. This is an existential need that ought to be recognised by their community, in addition to the social or biological needs more typically recognised in the African tradition. If such needs are indeed genuine, then they plausibly contribute positively toward a person's liveliness. Thus, Metz's own work on why knowledge is intrinsically valuable in an African context provides the solution to his own problem cases for liveliness.

5. Traditional Life Force, Liveliness, and the Interconnectedness of Everything

Notice that the appeal to self-realisation in the previous section is consistent with both traditional life force and secular liveliness. Though I have confined my discussion to liveliness, I have implicitly assumed that if knowledge and progress were an important part of a person's self-realisation, achieving them would also increase their life force. In this section I examine whether this assumption is well-founded, and so explore the idea that traditional life force is actually better situated to respond to Metz's objections.

One way to motivate the idea that the traditional life force theory fares better than the secular liveliness view in answering Metz's objections has to do with the fact that traditional life force

emphasises the interconnectedness of everything in a way unavailable for secular liveliness. The idea here is that it is easier to explain why achieving knowledge and making progress can increase a person's life force as opposed to liveliness. Here is why: life force says that everything is interconnected in virtue of being imbued with an imperceptible energy that is derived from God. These forces have causal influence on one another in the sense that a person can have their life force increased or decreased by the actions of the others. This metaphysical connection is lost on secular liveliness.

It is less clear that this kind of interconnectedness exists for secular liveliness. Consider a scientist who pursues a line of inquiry because she values knowledge for its own sake. Assume that this is part of her self-realisation, that successfully acquiring knowledge or making progress merits esteem and admiration, and therefore contributes to meaning in life. There could be more reason for the members of a community to care about this sort of existential need on a traditional life force view than on a secular liveliness view. Consider that my liveliness might not be impacted by a scientist who is not supported by her community in her inquiries, even if her liveliness is degraded by the lack of support. Indeed, perhaps I do not even know about the scientist's struggle. On a traditional life force view, however, my force might be diminished in virtue of the scientist's existential needs going unmet. I might experience this decrease even if I am not directly aware of the scientist's needs. This is because of the interconnectedness of everything that exists on a traditional life force view.

Questions could fairly be asked of this metaphysical commitment. Just because two people have a feature in common, it does not entail a *connection*. For example, just because myself and my neighbor both have hearts, it does not follow that we are connected. However, it is clear that at least some expositors of life force really do believe that the sharing of life force establishes the connection. It is more like sharing the same instantiation of the feature, than each person uniquely instantiating a feature in different ways. For instance, it is like each person having a share of the same heart. Elvis Imafidon says that "[t]he immediate implication of the theory of force as an African metaphysical

theory is the notion of the interconnectedness of all things based on a common essence such that beings within an African reality are ontologically bonded and form a web of interacting relationship” (2014, 144). Magesa not only confirms the connection based on life force, but notes that it is ultimately grounded in God (1997, 52; see also Magesa 1997, 91, 154, 285).⁵ Indeed, some go so far as to suggest this interconnectedness implies a metaphysical *sameness*. Anyanwu writes that “[b]ecause everything is filled with force, the African concludes that all things are similar and share the same qualities in spite of apparent differences” (1987b, 249; see also Mulago 1991, 124).⁶ Vincent Mulago adds that the “vital union is the bond joining together, vertically and horizontally, beings living and dead; it is the life-giving principle in all. It is the result of communion, a participation in the *one* reality, the *one* vital principal that unites various beings” (Mulago 1991, 120; emphasis mine). The most significant difficulty for this type of response is that even though life force is described as an interacting web, it is typically thought that forces only relatively near each other can act on each other’s life force. If the scientist’s force is diminished at one end of the web, the web itself is presumably decreased.⁷

It could reasonably be asked why this emphasis on community and interconnectedness is relevant to the problems proposed by Metz. The idea is that interconnectedness serves to better explain why an individual cannot be said to be flourishing unless all members of their community are flourishing. If a community member’s existential needs are unmet, then other members of their community cannot reasonably be thought to flourish. It could further be asked why this type of communal flourishing is important when the questions initially posed are about the meaning in life for *individuals*. One possible answer is that though Metz has construed meaning in life as an individualistic project, it is doubtful that this characterisation is consistent with much of the African Communitarian tradition, including the one that grounds community in virtue of a shared force.

⁷ Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this worry and prompting me to explain this proposal more fully.

Metz's examples have to do with an individual pursuing knowledge or progress not only for their own sake, *but entirely on their own*. Pursuing this type of meaning in a vacuum from one's community is incoherent on traditional life force views. An individual's own life force is connected to everything else in virtue of that force. This emphasis is missing on Metz's secular liveliness view even if it is the case that individuals can impact the liveliness of one another. An individual who pursues knowledge or progress because it is intrinsically valuable might plausibly contribute to the meaning *of their entire community* in virtue of strengthening their own life. The strength of this response will depend on how much one thinks humans impact each other. The type of connectedness described where one strengthens their liveliness and hence contributes to the common good of community members may indeed be rather weak. Still, any promotion of the common good, even if it is weak, is plausibly meaningful. The individualistic terms of Metz's descriptions serve to obscure this fact. While these ideas are hardly decisive, they could be appealed to in an attempt to show that there are resources within traditional life force that make it better able to respond to Metz's objections than the secular liveliness view.

The good news for secular liveliness is that there are resources it can appeal to in order to show that it fares no worse in responding to Metz's objections. These resources can be found in the relatively recent emergence of social epistemology. Notice that Metz often writes as if knowledge is discovered in a vacuum. It is not. In the last 20 years or so, there has been an explosion of work on social epistemology, which highlights the social nature of knowledge acquisition and transmission. Even the most isolated researcher is not in fact very isolated from a community of inquirers. Consider the philosopher who works alone and never collaborates with her colleagues. Such a philosopher is still undoubtedly reading the work of others while conducting their research. Even the lone scientist working by themselves in a lab on a remote island is not conducting experiments without any relevant background knowledge. And much of this background knowledge comes from the work of others.

The idea that an individual researcher strikes out entirely on their own to pursue knowledge in a silo is absurd.

Thus far, little work has been conducted connecting ideas in Anglo-American social epistemology to the African philosophical tradition. Surely there is extremely fertile ground in this area for cross-cultural philosophical reflection. My point in highlighting this fact is that there is something reasonably considered ‘un-African’ in the individual who wants to conduct inquiry entirely on their own. Not only that, but the fact that inquiry takes place within an epistemic community (even if an individual inquirer does not want this to be the case) fits well with the common African emphasis on community. Metz can insist that the case of the lone wolf inquirer pursuing knowledge for its own sake, with no background knowledge acquired socially, is logically possible. That may well be, but then appealing to it does not reflect facts about meaning in the actual world.⁸ The common idea in certain branches of African thought, particularly that which is focused on normative personhood, which says individuals cannot exist apart from their communities fits seamlessly with the lessons of social epistemology. Individual knowers do not exist apart from their communities.⁹

Though more cross-cultural dialogue is warranted between Anglo-American social epistemology and the African philosophical tradition, just because an individual cannot acquire knowledge alone, it does not follow that gaining knowledge that is intrinsically valuable but useless will increase a person’s liveliness. What can help to establish this point is drawing a connection between knowledge and self-realisation.

6. Liveliness and Knowledge: Constitutive or Causal?

⁸ Indeed, the type of being who conducts this sort of solo inquiry would be very differently constituted from humans.

⁹ Of course, it is conceivable that a lone star who relies on the work of others, while simply refusing to share their own work and discoveries. The knowledge they gain could contribute to their own self-realization completely apart from any other people. This may well be, but there is some evidence to suggest that group inquiry that fosters epistemic disagreement and divides cognitive labour is more likely to arrive at knowledge (or true belief, or understanding, etc.) The most effective way to pursue self-realization through acquiring knowledge, then, is still within a group context. This is so even for individuals who would prefer to work alone. For more on this see Lougheed 2020; Kitcher 1990.

The idea that knowledge increases liveliness has recently been explicitly defended by Ada Agada:

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 quoted in Metz 2022b, 10).

Metz claims that Agada is unclear on whether the relationship between liveliness and knowledge is causal or constitutive, and that there are problems for either position. On the former view, obtaining knowledge causes an increase in a person's liveliness. Since I agree with Metz that this position will have difficulty explaining why knowledge is intrinsically valuable instead of only valuable as a means, I am going to focus on developing the latter position which says acquiring knowledge constitutes a form of liveliness (see Metz 2022b, 10-11). I therefore build on Agada's account by expanding it and defending it from objections offered by Metz.

Metz writes that if knowledge is constitutive of liveliness, then "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" (Metz 2022b, 10). More precisely, the view can be defined as follows: *S becomes aware at T_1 that proposition P , where the content of P is important.* Metz also adds that establishing greater coherence across one's set of beliefs would come with an increase in life force (Metz 2022b, 10).

According to Metz, the problem with this approach is that it cannot tell us the difference between which truths are important for meaning and those that are trivial (2022b, 10). If a person changes their mind about whether God exists, it is reasonable to think this might come with an increase in liveliness. However, there is no principled way on this view to explain why awareness of

how many redheads live in Beiseker, Alberta would not be an instance of liveliness.¹⁰ But of course, it is absurd to think that such knowledge is important. Metz claims that the topic in question is what matters regarding meaning. It is the propositional content that explains why holding a particular belief happens to be meaningful. But the propositional content is logically distinct from liveliness (Metz 2022b, 10). Now, this is interesting because the worry in this most recent work from Metz is that positing a constitutive relationship between knowledge (or progress) and liveliness is not that it cannot accommodate the claim that certain types of knowledge are intrinsically valuable. Instead, it is the worry that it cannot accommodate the strong intuition that some types of knowledge are more valuable than others.

Recall that the basic values indicative of liveliness are “health, growth, reproduction, creativity, vibrancy, activity, self-motion, courage, and confidence” (Metz 2020, 119). While a person could insist that counting blades of grass or discovering how many redheads there are in Beiseker contributes to their creativity, vibrancy, courage, and confidence, etc., and therefore their self-realisation, there is nothing in the liveliness theory that rules out a person being mistaken about what is lively. It is doubtful that awareness of the number of blades of grass or the number of redheads is really an instance of liveliness. But that a person can be mistaken about what is meaningful merely implies that humans are fallible judges with respect to meaning.¹¹ This fallibility seems to accord well with common human experience about sometimes being mistaken about what sorts of activities would confer meaning on our lives (e.g., Penner 2015, 335). Though acknowledging the fallibility of our judgements should help assuage this worry, it is instructive to briefly consider two alternative responses to account for the difference between trivial and important knowledge that could be appealed to by the proponent of

¹⁰ Metz borrows this case from Hurka 1994, 155.

¹¹ Of course, I have been implying that that the theory of liveliness an objectivist theory. A subjectivist about meaning would have an easier time dealing with this case, though the theory would then be subject to the other problems associated with subjectivism about meaning. (See Metz 2013, 165-169)

the liveliness theory of meaning. I suggest that the first alternative is not very promising but that the second is worth serious consideration.

The first alternative account can be found in recent discussions in epistemology to help explain the difference between trivial and important beliefs. For example, Jane Friedman explores the consequences of a principle first offered by Gilbert Harman about what to believe that has been met with sympathy by many epistemologists: “Clutter Avoidance. One should not clutter one’s mind with trivialities” (Friedman 2018, 568; see also Harman 1986, 12; Christensen 1994; Feldman 2000; Williamson 1998). Friedman says that a belief is trivial for a person if they have no interest in it (Friedman 2018, 569). What makes her discussion normative is the suggestion that people should avoid forming beliefs on trivial matters. Yet it is quickly apparent that a defense of this principle will be of no help here. Suppose that a person really insists that identifying the number of redheads is important for self-realisation; or in Friedman’s terminology they insist that it really is in their interests. This discussion in epistemology is not addressing the more fundamental question about what in fact is trivial and important.

The second alternative approach is to attempt to offer a more tangible set of criteria about how to differentiate between important and trivial knowledge. Interestingly, Metz’s own theory of meaning in life could be appealed to for such criteria.¹² His own account of meaning says, roughly, that what confers meaning on our life transcends our animal nature, is worth pursuing for its own sake, and merits our esteem and admiration (see Metz 2013). Not only can meriting esteem and admiration help explain why knowledge and progress are valuable in the first place (as shown above), but they are intuitively helpful criteria for distinguishing between important and trivial types of knowledge. Knowledge about the number of redheads in a small northern Canadian town does not merit esteem and admiration. However, discovering who if anyone created and controls the universe,

¹² Thanks to anonymous referee for this suggestion.

if anyone does (assuming such a discovery is even possible), does merit esteem and admiration. Again, this means that meriting esteem and admiration can be understood as indicators of whether awareness of a certain truth should be considered an instance of liveliness. Notice that this account need not deny that humans are fallible about what merits esteem and admiration. Of course, much more remains to be said, but this is the makings of a way to tell the difference between trivial and important types of knowledge that is consistent with the claim that knowledge is constitutive of liveliness. It is interesting that once again a potential solution appears within Metz's own work.

Finally, if it turns out that liveliness really is worse off regarding distinguishing between trivial and important knowledge than other theories of meaning, it does not follow the theory ought to be rejected. Remember that my purpose has been to explore the plausibility of a theory of meaning grounded in liveliness and just because it turns out to be deficient in this matter, it does not mean the theory should be altogether jettisoned. After all, there were reasonable answers to all of Metz's other objections and this may be reason enough to seriously consider the liveliness theory of meaning.

7. Conclusion

African theories of meaning in life are beginning to receive more attention in the literature. The secular liveliness theory of meaning in life says that a life is more meaningful the more it promotes liveliness in others and in oneself. Metz believes that this theory has difficulty accommodating two sets of intuitions. He claims that a liveliness theory of meaning cannot explain why pursuing knowledge because it is intrinsically valuable can confer meaning on a life nor can it explain a similar claim regarding the value of progress. I argued that a solution to this problem can be found in other parts of Metz's own work. Elsewhere he suggests that African theories of meaning should also consider existential needs beyond just the social and biological. Pursuing knowledge or progress for its own sake is an existential need that can contribute to a person's self-realisation and thereby confers meaning on their life. But an accomplishment that merits admiration and esteem plausibly increases a person's

liveliness. So, liveliness can explain how pursuing knowledge and progress can confer meaning on a person's life once such pursuits are recognised as an existential need. Recent insights from social epistemology explain why the interconnectedness that is posited by traditional life force does not serve to bolster this answer any better than secular liveliness. Finally, I conclude that, contra Metz, it is reasonable to think that the knowledge that would increase one's liveliness is constitutive of it. The sort of knowledge that is valuable will be closely connected to a person's self-realisation. This means that discovering this type of knowledge is likely to merit our esteem and admiration. Still, humans are ultimately fallible judges about meaning and can therefore be mistaken about what instances of knowledge are constitutive of liveliness. My conclusions here are tentative, and more work remains to be done exploring the potential differences between traditional life force and secular liveliness. As is stands, I have shown that there are reasonable responses to Metz's objections to the liveliness theory of meaning in life and as such it merits consideration amongst both African theories of meaning and globally better-known alternatives.

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