

# On Pursuit of the Purpose of Life: The Shona Metaphysical Perspective

by

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## Abstract

This paper concerns the question of the purpose of human life heretofore referred to as life, as it is traditionally viewed by the *Shona* people of Mozambique and Zimbabwe. To most ‘ordinary people’, the question has no immediate answer. To others, there are *cu de sacs*- dead ends in the debate on purpose of life. To partisans of either position, the question is unworthy discussing. The question however has invited and incited serious debates among metaphysicians and philosophers of religion. It continues to provoke debate because of its continued relevance not only in the *Shona* culture but to others in Africa and the world-over. There is need therefore for comprehensive research on purpose of life especially from an African perspective where research on the issue is sketchy. This concept paper therefore examines how we can seek to understand the purpose of human life on earth. Logic and *Shona* metaphysics are used to demonstrate that life on earth exists for a purpose. The paper goes further to establish ‘love’ as the purpose of life that the *Shona* people of Mozambique and Zimbabwe acknowledge and foster in their respective societies. In the light of this, the paper contends that the purpose of life acknowledged by the *Shona* can also apply and cut across other cultures in the region and the world over.

**Key words:** Pursuit, Purpose of life, African philosophy, *Shona* people, metaphysical perspective

## Introduction

The question whether life on earth has a purpose or not has always been central in the history of humanity since time immemorial. It has been considered by Albert Camus (1981) to be one of the most profound and critical of all metaphysical questions. For Camus and rightly so, “whether one is optimistic or pessimistic about life; whether one is a theist or an atheist, the question has to be faced once raised” (ibid). It is a question that affects anyone of us in one way or another. Achebe seems to concur with the idea that life on earth has a purpose. On describing Africans and their philosophy of life, he affirms that “being an African is more than just a matter of passports or of individual volition” (1990) but of sensibility. For Achebe and convincingly so being an African carries penalties or obligations. Okot p’ Bitek (2005) picks up this argument and stresses that in African philosophy man and the universe have their origin from God. Both man and the universe were created by God. For this reason, “man is not born free to do whatever he wants: in fact it is not desirable to be so, even if it were possible” (ibid). This is to say that an African is born with duties and obligations or responsibilities to his society and society in turn bestows rights and privileges on its members. The *Shonas* being part of African society hold the same view. They believe that every member of the society is useful. This is captured in their idioms like *Kuwanda kwakanaka, kwakarambwa nemuroyi* (the more we are the better, only a witch is against being many) and *Munhu munhu* (a person is a person, viz no one should look down upon others). In fact, everyone whether poor or rich, physically challenged or otherwise has a duty of service to make the world a better place to live. This philosophy of life by the *Shona* has also been captured though implicitly by scholars like John Mbiti. Mbiti (1969:145) describing the African traditional view of personhood notes that this can be summed up in the statement “I am because we are and since we are therefore I am”. This dictum confirms that personhood in the African context is defined by reference to other members of the same community, both the living and the ‘living dead’ (Mawere, 2005). Besides, human nature among traditional Africans is defined through virtue and empathy such as ‘love’ and not merely through biological constitution. The question on purpose of life on earth thus merits serious reflection. From that said, more research has to be done to help people understand the purpose of life in the universe. So far, little or sketchy research has been done on the issue especially by African scholars. Those who have attended to it like Mbiti (1961), Achebe (1990) and Okot p’ Bitek (2005), approached it variously (Nozick; 1981). And although we can infer from works of these African scholars that life on earth has a purpose, their researches do not point to a specific purpose. We can only infer but with the danger of each coming up with a different idea of what s/he thinks is the purpose of life. For this reason, some have thought of the purpose of their lives as to exclusively occupy themselves with procreation to guarantee their posterity. Covey is of this view. He argues “reproduction is everyone’s duty to the future” (2008). For others like Warren, “the purpose of life is varied” (Warren, 2002). Warren identifies five different purposes of life as follows:

1. You were planned for God's pleasure (worship)
2. You were formed for God's family(fellowship)
3. You were created to become like Christ(discipleship)
4. You were shaped for serving God(ministry)
5. You were made for a mission (mission) (ibid).

This religious view is problematic to the extent that it raises pertinent unanswered questions for those in the secular world nor does it create adequate room for 'atheists' to maneuver. For instance, can life be purposeful outside the cosmology of the Creator? Can life and purpose be configured outside the God-man relationship? In African traditional religion where is inconceivable and Christianity is discounted with Cynicism as a western concept, how does purposeful life reconstitute itself? It seems Warren (2002) abstraction crowns as a global/universal enterprise and servitude as the ultimate purpose of life that is worth pursuing for its own good. While the aforementioned questions constitute profound subjects worth pursuing, time and space limit me to pursue them. Suffice to assert that despite its mind boggling puzzles, Christianity shares with the African culture the view that humanism is central to human-coexistence. For example, in *Shona* culture, older people are called '*mukoma*' (brother) even if the referent is not related to former. This strikingly resembles the terminology of the early church in the New Testament where Christians call one another 'brothers' and 'sisters' That said, one is left wondering as to what exactly is the purpose of life on earth.

For Warren (ibid), personal fulfillment, satisfaction, and meaning can only be found in understanding and doing all what God created you on Earth to do. His argument however is confusing in so far as it does not pinpoint to a specific purpose of life. On a different note, others approach the question of purpose of life with fear and trembling. Others, with puzzle! For them, life on earth is 'a gambling', mysterious, full of sufferings, diseases, wars and other odds which seem so much against human life. Thinking about the purpose of life in the face of such odds is therefore a melodrama or rather a mindless business. The whole idea of life having any purpose, therefore, has to be cast into the 'dustbin of oblivion'. However, for Frankl (1978) and indeed so, human beings are engaged steadily in the search for the sole purpose of life. It seems true that, "if a person has found the meaning sought for, he is prepared to suffer, to offer sacrifices, even if need be, to give his life for the sake of it. Contrarily, if there is no meaning he is inclined to take his life, and prepared to do so even if all his needs, to all appearances, have been satisfied"(ibid:20). If I am to share view, I am convinced that people like Martin Luther King, Marcus Garvey, William Du bois, Gandhi and Nelson Mandela all pursued the virtue of human rights as their lifetime commitment for the liberty of all. In the context of the *Shona* people, a purposeful life denotes and is a function of leading and leaving behind a legacy of exemplary life. For instance, the *Shona* insist that *kufa kwehose inosiya imwe* (translated as when a senior woman dies, the second becomes the senior).

To this extend, exemplary leadership is the ultimate pinnacle of societal cohesion worth harnessing for collective good. As highlighted in the preceding paragraphs, the *Shona* people are one group that believes that life has a sole purpose. Unfortunately, besides evidence from proverbs, idioms, folklores, not much has been done in terms of *Shona* literature to support this enduring metaphysical view.

This paper directly reacts to the two views; the view that human life is purposeless and the view that the purpose of life is varied. It argues that some of the previous researches on the purpose of life like Mbiti, Achebe and Okot 'p Bitek were unconvincing or rather inadequate thereby contributing to literature on purpose of life. There is, therefore, need to re-examine their assumptions and contributions in order to salvage what is 'important' to the question of purpose of life, modify, develop, reconstitute or reconstruct and carry it into the future. In this whole attempt, the piece advances the argument that though no philosophically convincing answer to the question on purpose of life has been given so far, the *Shona's* world view whose basis is African metaphysics and logic can help shed light on that. In this endeavor, a possible purpose of life from the *Shona* view point is postulated and argued for thereby contributing towards the full understanding of the purpose of life.

## **The Geographical Location of the Shona People**

The term *Shona* refers to various linguistic dialect groups who occupy the greater part of Zimbabwe and central western part of Mozambique. In Zimbabwe, the linguistic dialect groups under the armpit of *Shona* the *Korekore* in the northern region and greater part of the Zambezi valley; the *Zezeru* in the central region; the *Manyika* in the eastern region; the *Ndau* in the south of the region occupied by the *Manyika* people; the *Karanga* in the southern region and lastly the *Kalanga* in the western part of Zimbabwe. In Mozambique, a number of dialect groups referred to as *Shona* but the armpit of the dialect *Ndau* include the *Dondo* in the districts of *Dondo* and *Beira* in *Sofala* province; the *Danda* in the districts of *Chibabava (Sofala)* and *Machaze (Manica province)*; the *Vauteve* in the district of *Chimoo* in *Manica* and the *Manyika* who occupy the largest part of *Manica* province. All these linguistic dialect groups share a common language generally referred to as *Shona*. Though in different geographical locations, they also share most of their cultural beliefs and philosophies of life.

## **Understanding the General Shona and African Philosophies**

Contentious debates between African and Western scholars concerning a case for existence of any philosophy among traditional African societies have been central in the recent past. In view of this, one can not talk of philosophy among the *Shona* people in particular without addressing the question of rationality among Africans in general. This is because the *Shonas* are Africans and their philosophy has its basis on the general African philosophy.

For scholars like (Ramose, 1999), the debate on whether there is African philosophy could hardly have been initiated by indigenous African people but by Western scholarship. This is because Western scholars tended to attribute rationality to Western indigenous societies and denied it among traditional African societies such as the *Shona* society. It has been convincingly and rightly argued that “reason is singled out as the most essential quality of humanity though it is surprisingly denied to other groups of people” (Winch, 1970:79) by Western scholars such as Hegel, Kant and David Hume. This has been seconded by Churchland (1984:73) who argues that “from the point of view of philosophy of mind, brain activity is a concrete manifestation of rationality among all human beings”. For African scholars like Ramose (1999, 44), “there is no ontological defect among indigenous African people by virtue of they may be excluded from membership of homo sapiens, and therefore reasoning”. This denotes that the *Shona* people as one among a plethora of African social groupings cannot be denied reasoning and therefore a philosophy of life. There is nothing substantial that differentiates Africans such as the *Shona* from people of the western world to the extent that the former can be excluded from the domain of rationality and from having a philosophy of life. In fact, rationality is a universal attribute of human beings. The denial of reason among traditional African societies by Western scholars thus is both logically flawed and unjustified. It is the motivation of this work to demonstrate how the *Shona* philosophy can contribute to a deeper understanding of the conception of purposeful life. The *Shona* metaphysical views are not only found among the *Shona* adults but are informally inculcated to the young through storytelling, idiom posing and answering, among other ways. As acknowledged by Gelfand (1979), and rightly so, a great deal of this informal instruction takes place at *dare* (men’s meeting place) where a grandfather or a village old man relates stories, tells proverbs, idioms, taboos and many other things boys should know as they grow up. In the same way, a village old woman or a grandmother talks to the girls around the fire place in the hut. She teaches them the communal social values and equips them with yardsticks to measure them. The *Shona* philosophy like African philosophy itself thus is a permanent feature of the *Shona* way of life that has existed through time.

## **Conceptual Analysis of Terms**

The question on the purpose of life is the most critical of all metaphysical questions. It is profound and merits serious reflection. Albert Camus (1981) in the *Myth of Sisyphus* makes this observation: “Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying). I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of all questions”. As Camus observes, the question of life is fundamental and urgent. If one ignores it, there will come a point in life when the question presents itself in one way or another.

However, it seems the intricacies surrounding the question of life can best be disentangled and cogently dealt with only after attention is paid to the concepts 'life' and 'purpose' separately. These concepts thus shall be discussed briefly before looking at the question on the purpose of life itself; otherwise, the entire task of this paper would tantamount to chasing the wind.

## **Life**

The concept 'life' is deeply controversial, for practical as well as philosophical reasons. Thus, it needs to be mentioned that the concept can be clearly understood if we first look at how it developed and came into use. Aristotle, in his book *de Anima*, argues that "plants and animals just like human beings possess a 'psyche' –a word which is sometimes misleadingly translated as 'soul' and sometimes much more appropriately as 'life principle'" (Aristotle in O'Connor, 1985:52). He correctly observes that "what has soul (psyche) differs from what has not in that the former displays life"(ibid). To this end, three levels of life were identified. These are nutritional/vegetative life (plant life with powers of reproduction), animal life (with powers of sensation including those of the lower level) and human life (with intellectual powers including those of the lower levels). Since human life is at the highest level, it follows that "there is more to life in man than in a dog, in a dog than in a worm, in a worm than in a plant, and in a plant than in a stone" (Pearsall, 1999:1065) hence, Aristotle's famous *scala naturae*- ladder of nature. From the understanding that life is characterized by the 'psyche' which thinks, reasons and wills, life has been technically construed as "the condition that distinguishes animate things from inanimate things including the capacity for growth, reproduction, functional activity and continual change preceding death"(ibid). However, it is important to assert that life shall be considered solely in the light of human beings and not animate 'things'.

## **Purpose**

It is arguably true that defining the term 'purpose' is not easy. But it is not impossible. Like any other philosophical concept, the term 'purpose' is frustratingly vague. Robert Nozick, for example, identifies purpose with meaning or intention. For him, "meaning can be understood as intention or purpose" (1981). Thus in application, purpose is a tangle of possibilities. It carries a wide range of connotations. Besides Nozick's understanding, purpose can also be understood as "lesson, intention, business, mission, plan, objective, definition, explanation, cause, reason" (Sinclair, 1997). For the purposes of this work, the concept shall be used to denote "reason for which something is made or done" (ibid), and in this case reason for human life on earth. To this effect, this paper makes an attempt to address the 'why' part, and not the 'how' part of life's existence.

## **Clashing Views on the purpose of Life**

The issue concerning the purpose of life has received different interpretations. It is therefore a contested terrain. Nozick (1981) affirms the same view. He argues that, the question of purpose our lives has, had been approached variously. Invariably, formulas have been conjured, yet they don't seem to adequately answer the question. Some of the formulas presented by Nozick (ibid) are:

- a) 'The purpose of life is to pursue the task of giving meaning to life.
- b) A meaningful life is a full and productive life.
- c) The meaning of life is getting off the wheel and getting annihilated.

In the face of such varied modes, it is perhaps unwise to attempt to reflect on the question on purpose of life before paying some attention to the view pertaining to the genesis of life itself from whence different modes and interpretations ensue. Three theories about the origins of human life namely evolution, creation and chance, thus, shall be discussed briefly and separately in an attempt to determine the purpose of life on earth.

## **The Historical-Scientific Theory of Evolution**

The question on the origin of humanity has always received different interpretations mainly from science, religion and history. Charles Darwin's historical-scientific theory of evolution (of species) based on natural selection is one such interpretation. Robinson (2005) notes that the earliest and most basic forms of life forms are the Archaea (most chemoautotrophic single-celled organisms which are very resistant and can thrive in harsh conditions), Bacteria (single-celled organisms with complex cell walls) and Eukaryotes (organisms made up of cells with nuclei, that is, their DNA is walled off in a separate compartment of the cell). The latter can be single celled organisms (such as Amoeba or Paramecium) or multi-celled organisms (such as oak trees or humans). From the Eukarya evolved three sorts of multi-celled organisms: Plants, Fungi and Animals. Animals were originally lacked true tissues or any symmetry like Sponges. Next, animals such as jellyfish had true tissues with radical symmetry. However, at some point, some animals (Bilateria) evolved bilateral symmetry. This sounds trivial, but it was a very significant breakthrough. Most importantly, it allowed segmentation of body sections, so that different segments of the body could specialize for different functions. This required the evolution of an entirely different type of genetic regulation because genes had to operate differently depending on which segment they might be in. From the basic bilaterian plan, two developmental groups of organisms evolved namely deuterostomes (echinoderms and chordates) and the protostomes (almost everything else). The chordates include the vertebrates, which includes us. Thus Robinson agrees with Darwin that human species evolved over time from jelly-like creatures to modern man (*homo sapien sapien*).

However, critical analysis of the theory of evolution reveals that none of the historians so far has revealed where the creature evolved to man, the prokaryote originated from. We are therefore left wondering when the question concerning the source of life (prokaryotes) from whence human life is believed to have ensued is raised. In the light of this, the historians' view of life remains highly questionable a historical event. The implication that can be drawn from the historical theory of evolution is that the purpose of life is never static. It is dynamic and always in constant change. And if this is the case, it will be absurd to make an attempt to understand the purpose of life which is always in 'constant flux'. Robinson confirms this line of thinking. He argues that "life was not planned but grew and evolved, hence its purpose may be useful but it has no overriding mission other than the fun of creating it" (ibid). This denotes that any pursuit towards the purpose of life from a historical perspective leads the project to nowhere far. The theory of evolution, therefore, cannot be accepted on philosophical grounds to provide a credible response to the question of purpose of life. And if this criticism holds as it appears, then we are abounding to doubt any historical argument on purpose of life.

## **Chance Theory**

Whilst historians generally allude to the theory of evolution for an answer to the genesis of humanity from thence their view on purpose of life ensues, existentialists and atomists generally believe that human life originated by chance. This denotes, life's existence was a matter of accident, nothing less nothing more. Democritus in his atomic theory, for instance, has this to say: "The universe initially was nothing but atoms moving randomly in an empty space. There came a time when the atoms, perhaps, due to increased pressure and heat in the universe, turned into a vortex sending atoms into a circular motion of tremendous speed thereby colliding, some merging to form compound –physical entities" (Stumpf, 1988:500) like mountains, stones and living creatures (human beings included). Thus Democritus argues that the bumping and fusion of the minute particles (atoms) of matter imbued with energy that operate according to natural and physical laws resulted in all entities in the universe, living and non-living, being formed.

The existentialist, Sartre, (1969) also alludes to the idea that human life existed from chance. For him, human existence is contingent. This is to say that human existence was not out of necessity but chance. Sartre taking atheism seriously further argues that "men's essential features were neither given nor fixed (by God) and do not necessarily follow from something else, for otherwise, man would not be free (to choose)" (ibid). For him, man is totally free for his life does not depend on anything else to exist, even a god. It should be noted, however, that Sartre's understanding of human existence is mistaken. This is because Sartre's existential theory considers human existence in one way, 'being in itself' as equal to 'things existence' (such as stones) yet human life unlike a stone is conscious of its own 'being' and 'Being in itself'. Besides, his atheism leaves us wondering as to where the contingent human life originated in order to exist contingently. His idea that life does not depend on anything else other than itself to exist and his obsession with freedom and atheism thus leaves everything 'misty'.



It implies that life has no purpose that can be inferred from it for nothing from chance can be reasonably determined. The theory, therefore, points no hope to resolve the problem on the purpose of life. Democritus' atomic theory cannot be excluded from Sartre's confusion. It also misses the point. He does not explain how the atoms themselves before collision and existing by chance came about. Thus the theory, just like the historians and Sartre's leaves a lot more desired. It has the implication that there is the possibility of human beings not existing at all if it is true that they existed accidentally. So, is the purpose of life. It could not have been a subject of talk either. Critical analysis of the chance theory, thus, suggests that no definite purpose can be accorded to life that emerged from accident. An important question arises at this juncture: Could it be true that human life is indeed purposeless as Sartre and Democritus would think? It is the conviction of this paper that no life exists without a purpose for no life can result from chance. As has been seen in the prior discussion, the two theories explicated above are purely scientific. They pay no regard to metaphysical thinking and religious beliefs. Yet, the issue of life and purpose is a metaphysical one which requires little or no science to explore it. For this reason, among others, the scholars ascribing to the chance theory cannot be expected at all to genuinely seek and salvage the truth about the purpose of life on earth.

Having put to rest arguments by historians, existentialists and atomists as futile in solving the question on purpose of life, let us now turn to biblical and African metaphysical theories of creation-theories which are the basis of the *Shonas'* view of purpose of life. It is the conviction of this paper that these theories offer a solid answer to the question of the purpose of life. The paper treats these theories together for the reason that they agree to each other in a number of ways.

### **The Biblical and African traditional theory of Creation**

Scholarship on the genesis of humanity has emerged. The biblical text of Genesis (1 verse 26) states that God created Man through his own image that he has dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth including his own life. The same conception is prevalent among the African Bantu people. In *Shona* cosmology, for example, *Musikavanhu* (Human creator) whom the Bible calls God created Mankind, earth and everything in it. God, thus, is clearly more powerful than *vadzimu* (ancestral spirits). It is clear from this stream of thought that the ancestors and God are the rallying point for traditional African Bantus in times of crisis and joy. This affirms that in both the Biblical and African Bantu perspectives, human beings were created as human beings by God's will, not by accident. Man was also "endowed with a divine spark that animates him with intelligence and a basic striving for goodness, perfection and understanding" (Davies, 1984) right from creation. This is to say that human beings have the capacity to seek and pursue the purpose of their life on earth. The Biblico-African theory, thus, have initiated what, fortunately, will be a growing trend of promoting the idea that human life was "efficiently" (Dean, 1951:70) caused and not accidentally caused.

This denotes that for *Shonas* and indeed other African traditional religions, nothing would come into existence without an efficient cause. This line of thinking can be better demonstrated through the following logic;

1. For a thing, B, to exist (where B is a human being) then A has existed before (where A is an efficient cause) to cause B.
2. B exists. Therefore A exists.

One may, however, ask: Is this argument cogent? To this question, this paper answers with a resounding 'Yes'. It is arguably true that we often naturally talk as if our real selves are distinct from our bodies as when we agree that we can be the same human beings over a number of years despite mereological changes in our bodily constitution. "The talk about the distinction between mind and body and our access to many thoughts such as imagination and thinking without displaying the fact by any bodily behavior also demonstrates that there is some greater 'Being'" (Davies, 1984) who exist by himself and created everything on earth - physical and otherwise. This is one reason the *Shona* people believe the efficient cause of life on earth is *Musikavanhu* and believes existed necessarily by Himself and through Himself. For the *Shona*, *Musikavanhu* created life on earth by will and for a specific purpose. This enduring metaphysical thinking can be demonstrated by the logic that:

1. No creator can create without a purpose; even a potter moulds a pot with a purpose in mind.
2. God created life on earth. Therefore, God created life for a purpose.

The purpose of a clay pot can be sought from the potter who moulds the pot. For example, if s/he made the pot to serve as a water vessel, for cooking or otherwise. On the other hand, it is unfortunate that no one so far, has had the opportunity to ask God the reason for Him creating life on earth. In this light it is therefore absurd to argue that human life exists for no purpose. The fact that all fair minded people have conscience suggests that there is a Creator. A genuine question arises here. What is the purpose of life on earth? This is the very question the ensuing paragraphs of this work would grapple with. To this end the paper was committed only to prove that life was created for a purpose.

## **The Shona People's View of Purpose of Life**

In the traditional *Shona* culture like in other African traditional cultures, the idea about the purpose of life is very old. However, due to lack of tradition of writing in Africa, its main historical and philosophical thrust for us today comes from one of Plato's dialogues, *The Republic*. In the dialogue, Socrates has this to say "unexamined life is not worthy living" (Stumpf, 1988). This suggests that life has a purpose.

Socrates carefully spelt out that life like philosophy itself is a ‘serious business’, perhaps the most serious of all human endeavors. As such, life can not be life without ‘business’ or purpose, otherwise it will be unworthy living. This stresses the need for each person to think seriously about the purpose of his or her own life. For Socrates, it seems the whole purpose of life is to happily pass to another ‘world’- an eternal spiritual world that is characterized with perpetual happiness. Socrates demonstrated this purpose when instead of conceding to escape death of his body (seek asylum in Thessaly), he chose to be persecuted. However, Socrates himself did not say much or pronounce the purpose of life except emphasizing on critical examination of one’s life. Also, he did not explain where examination of one’s life should start for one to lead a life worth living. Thus, although his theory initiated positive scholarship on metaphysical issues of life, our minds are left wondering when we want to know the purpose of life on earth. It is therefore the contention of this work that his theory needs reconstruction or reconstitution or both.

As espoused by African scholars like Achinua Achebe (1990), “Africa is not only a geographical expression; it is also a metaphysical landscape –it is in fact a view of the world and of the whole cosmos perceived from a particular position”. This denotes that Africa has people capable of thinking and with a philosophy of life. Achebe goes further to argue that being an African is more than just “a matter of passports or of individual volition” (ibid) but of sensibility. This is to say for Achebe and convincingly so, being an African means one has a duty to play in society. Okot p’ Bitek picks up this argument and stresses that in African philosophy man and the universe have their origin from God. For this reason, “man is not born free to do whatever he wants: in fact it is not even desirable to be so, even if it were possible” (2005). This denotes that an African is born with duties and responsibilities to make society a good place to live and society in turn bestows rights and privileges on its members. The *Shonas* being part of African society hold the same view.

As can be inferred from the prior discussion, most African scholars believe that human life exists on earth for a purpose. The purpose however is unclear with these scholars. This is where the *Shona* people’s philosophy of life differs from that of other Africans. For the *Shona* people the purpose of life on earth is one. It is ‘to love’ in order to make the world a better place to live. In an endeavor to reinforce this enduring truism that love is the most cherished virtue and purpose among the *Shona* people, this paper establishes the meaning of love and its sphere of application before it stresses its role and importance, and determine how it affects all other human activities in the society. The word love has a plethora of interpretations. It can refer to a variety of different feelings, states and attitudes ranging from generic pleasure to intense interpersonal attraction. This diversity of uses and meanings combined with the complexity of the feelings involved, makes love unusually difficult to consistently define, even compared to other emotional states. Love referred to in this paper is that which the Greeks refer to as *Agape* (*ἀγάπη*). *Agape* generally refers to “pure ideal type of love rather than the physical attraction suggested by *eros*” (Edwards, 1990) which is passionate love with sensual desire and longing.

This denotes that *Agape* is unconditional affection to do and promote goodness for oneself and others, even to strangers. This love goes beyond casual friendship and family bonds. The *Shona* people believe that love, like St Augustine's natural law or law of God is a natural gift written in heart of everyone. It is the most important virtuous quality every person is born with and so anyone that wills to love can do so. Regarding virtue ethics, this is rooted in classical thought, particularly the writings of Aristotle. I interpret virtue (*arête*) as a habit or quality of the soul that allows the bearer to succeed at his or her purpose of performing good acts (Aristotle *trans* Irwin, 1985). Virtue ethics can therefore be understood as a set of principles that guides the soul in decision making and in distinguish the good from the bad. However, in the Western traditional philosophy, virtue ethics appears dead in the face of its predominant rivals; deontological and consequentialist ethics. In African traditional philosophy as well, virtue ethics seems unrecognized though captured in proverbs and other philosophical sayings. Yet, love which is the fundamental constituent of virtue ethics is a necessary dimension in dealing with the metaphysical question of the purpose of life.

The *Shona* consider *Agape* as the basis of all good relations in society, and therefore as the purpose of everyone's life. In fact for the *Shonas*, all other duties of man on earth such as reproducing, sharing, promoting peace, respecting others (including the ancestors and God), among others have their roots in love. Had it not been love which is the basis of all relationships, it was impossible to promote peace, respect others. In fact, meaningful life on earth would have been impossible. The *Shona* have shown the indispensable need for love in their popular sayings, proverbs and idiomatic expressions such as: *Chikuru rudo* (What is principally important is love), *Ida wokwako sokuda kwaunozviita iwe* (Love your neighbor as you love yourself) (Deuteronomy 20:1985). *Rudo harusaruri* (love is indiscriminate); and *Rudo ibofu* (love is blind). All these proverbs explain that *agape* is fundamental and unconditional. In the *Shona* culture, it is this kind of love that is encouraged in family and inter-family relationships, in matrimony and casual friendships. The cultural rite of *roora* (bride wealth) among the *Shona* people symbolizes the bringing together of the two families in harmony, peace and most importantly love.

The *Shona* people also have idioms that stress the fundamental role of love in promoting human dignity and esteem. The idiom, *Munhu munhu* (a person is a person) is a case in point. This idiom emphasizes love as the basis of respect for human dignity in spite of his social, political or economic status. It stresses that all people are equal and as such deserve equal treatment. One should therefore not ill treat or look down upon other people on whatever grounds. The *Shona* proverb *Seka urema wafa* (scorn at handicaps or naturally disadvantaged/less fortunate after your own death) also proves the same point. It shows how the *Shonas* discourage discrimination. The proverb means that one should love everyone and discourage discrimination against those who are less fortunate as well as those who are not intellectually gifted.

This is because the less fortunate still have the potential for breakthroughs in life just as much as the affluent can also have their lowest ebbs in a twinkle of an eye. Even for those who are intellectually gifted, there is room that they can give birth to children who are dull or mentally deranged. It therefore remains imperative that everyone should be equally loved and treated with dignity

It is curious to note that the word *Rudo* (love) is used as a female name in the *Shona* society. And in the *Shona* culture, a name is always associated with a specific significance. The name *Rudo* therefore stresses the *Shonas'* religious and metaphysical world view that love is the basis of all human relationships. It is a common belief amongst the *Shona* that without love, life would have been chaos and comes to a halt. The name *Rudo* thus reminds people to always respect and promote love. Following from this understanding, the *Shona* people consider love as an absolute obligation: an obligation that cannot be overridden by an equal or stronger obligation, and not a *prima facie* obligation. It therefore logically follows that, for the *Shona* and indeed so, love is the sole purpose of human existence on earth. This understanding can be further explained by the following syllogism:

1. Love is the basis of all good relations on earth.
2. All other human duties on earth have their roots in love. Therefore love is the purpose of life on earth.

Besides, love is considered by the *Shona* as the basis of good behavior towards one another, even to strangers. The proverb; *Mombe yomupfuuri haipedzi bundo* (the passer-by's beast does not finish all the pastures), testifies love to strangers. This proverb means that one should welcome and feed strangers and visitors well. We should not be mean or poorly feed them because their staying is temporary.

Last but not least, the *Shona* consider love as the backbone of their communal way of life. They involve themselves in *Mushandirapamwe* (living and working together) in the fields and other spheres of life. This is because the *Shona* people believe that *Gunwe rimwe haritswanyi inda* (one finger cannot crush a louse). Even on a member's death, mourning is done collectively by the whole community. Everyone contributes in monetary form or otherwise. This philosophy of life by the *Shona* has also been captured though implicitly by scholars like Mbiti. Mbiti (1969:145) describing the African traditional view of personhood notes that this can be summed up in the statement "I am because we are and since we are therefore I am". One obvious interpretation to be drawn from this dictum is that personhood in the African context is defined by reference to other members of the same community/society upon which an individual is regarded as a constitutive part, and without whose it is deprived of its essence. However, one may wonder why some human beings do not love if love is a natural gift and the sole purpose of life. It is the contention of this paper that the virtuous quality of love though natural is nurtured by free will.

One's soul should undergo a sought of 'self moral training' besides moral education one can receive in the society s/he is part or at school to enhance his/her capacity of being good to everyone and everything. This line of thinking is supported by Rousseau in his *Emile* (1894) when he argues that "plants are improved by cultivation and man by education". Thus, those who would not undertake 'self moral training' or 'moral education' can hardly realize the purpose of their lives on earth. As a result they can hardly do good things. If they do, they do so out of coincidence not free will or volition. This is because it is s/he "who knows the good who can know that what he is doing is good or bad" (Jowett, *trans*, Plato's Republic; 1953). It is s/he who knows that love is the purpose of love that can love and strive to love.

## Conclusion

It has been argued in this paper that empiricism, rationalism or natural sciences alone do not encompass all facets of knowledge. The scientists and rationalists have indeed failed to convincingly address the question on the purpose of life. They look merely in the physical realm for all the answers to our problems. It is argued in this paper that the existential and the so called 'mystical ways of knowing' like the *Shona* metaphysical view of life also constitute sources of human knowledge. In fact the question on the purpose of life on earth should be understood as metaphysical. It requires little or no science to explore it. There is need, therefore, to unapologetically launch the theory of BiblicoAfricanism-African metaphysics and its sister theory-biblical metaphysics; workable theories about humanity that allow us to develop better interpretations, fuller conceptions and more effective articulations on the purpose of life on earth. This connotes that to denounce the question on purpose of life or examining it on the basis of science is a misconception, a gross misunderstanding of the metaphysical standing that surrounds human life. Natural scientists must bear in mind that human beings are human beings not merely because of their physical or biological bodies but that which underlies the body. And, the purpose of life should be sought considering both the physical body and that which underlies the body.

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