

Synergetic Specialism: A Philosophy of the Meaning of Life

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Abstract

This paper is an exposition of my reflection on the meaning of life within the theoretical framework of synergetic specialism. Finding the meaning of being born, growing up, living and dying has remained a puzzle that has troubled the finest of minds in human history. Philosophers and other commentators have generated a litany of narratives on what it all means. Yet, the elusiveness of the meaning of life is as fresh as ever. Against this backdrop, I found myself plunged into a relentless and kaleidoscopic reflection aimed at gleaning what it may all mean. As far as my little mind and experience could aid me, I stumbled on the idea that "nothing exists for nothing; something exists for something" as we are speciated for synergetic living. In view of this, I christened my reflection "synergetic specialism". This paper therefore is an invitation to the world to share with me this little idea on the meaning of life. To lay bare the teachings of synergetic specialism, the paper presents a synopsis of notable ideas on the meaning of life. It also clarifies the conceptual framework of synergetic specialism. In addition, it articulates the basic teachings and tenets of synergetic specialism. Finally, it extrapolates the meaning of life within the purview of the teachings and tenets of synergetic specialism.

Key Words: Synergetic Specialism, Speciation, specie, Ajere-Ado, Synergy

Introduction

Philosophy is a dialectical journey; a lifelong journey of interlocking fundamental questions and answers about basic existential experiences... the fundamental goal of philosophy is to get us to answer the fundamental questions for ourselves; to make up our minds about ourselves, life, knowledge, art, religion and morality (Ibrahim, 17).

The above quotation expresses in a simple form the mission of philosophy in human life. This is the elevation of humankind to the fountain of critical and reflective thinking about human existential predicaments. One of such predicaments is the meaning of life, that is, why do we exist? Alternatively, what is the purpose of our life? Here, philosophy as the search for the meaning of life is a dialectical engagement of the self as it propels the self to dialogue with the self in order to figure out for oneself what life is all about. So, in my philosophical journey over the years, I have been thrown into a reflective despair over the contradictory experiences of being born and being buried. This despair is generated by the numerous naming and burial ceremonies I have witnessed. Any time, I am opportune to attend any of these occasions, I usually get lost in the reflection over "what it all means?" On the one hand, during naming ceremonies, I usually wonder what life has in stock for the new-born baby. What challenges and opportunities maybe the lot of the baby? What experiences will shape the child into adulthood? What role will those experiences prepare the child to play in life? Will the child be able or not to fulfil his/her role in life? At the end, what does it all amounts to? On the other hand, during a burial Ceremony, I usually get lost in the attempt to imaginatively glean the phases of life of the dead. This is usually propelled by the usual rendition of the notable events in the

life of the dead. It makes me to wonder, what experiences shaped his personality? What role did he/she played in the course of living? Did he/she fulfil his/her dreams or purpose in life? What is the implication of his/her demise in the life of others? These fundamental questions torment my mind unimpeded throughout such occasions. The existential predicaments that define the gap between these two extreme events of human life have become a spring board for reflection over what it all means? In the attempt to contribute to this discourse, this paper seeks to unravel the meaning of life within the theoretical framework of synergetic specialism. This is in response to the fact that we are often too busy "living" to ask ourselves "why am I living?", "what does it mean to live?", "why do I exist now; not before now nor after now?", "Is there a purpose for all these?" , "what could that purpose be? The meaningfulness of our life largely depends on our response to these questions. In order to situate the discourse of this paper in its proper perspective, an attempt is made here to briefly survey some notable approaches to the question of the meaning of life.

Basic Approaches to the Meaning of life

The first major approach, perhaps, the most common account of the meaning of life is the theistic account. This account is based on the idea of the relationship between man and God. According to theists, the world is a purposeful creation of a loving intelligent God who also created man to fulfil a divine purpose. Man, according to Udo Etuk is "the highest of God's earthly creatures...man is not merely a creature of time but has an eternal dimension." (174) In this sense, man was created by God for the purpose of living relationship with Him and to follow the path which He laid out for us. This means that the purpose of life is to know God and be perfectly united with Him. Thus, life on earth is only meaningful in so far as it is a preparation for the future union with God. For this reason, the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy as quoted by Lawhead says "the meaning of life consists in the love and service of God" (634) Thomas Aquinas, a theistic philosopher as quoted by Manuel Velasquez argues that everything has a purpose including human beings. In his words:

Now have on earth, the simplest elements exist for the sake of compound minerals; these latter exist for the sake of living bodies, among which plants exist for animals and animals for humans... Now humans naturally desire, as their ultimate purpose, to know the first cause of all things. But the first cause of all things is God. So, the ultimate purpose of human beings is to know God. (716)

The point Aquinas is making in the above is that human life has meaning because humans are part of a larger plan or order, designed by God. Within that plan all things in "the universe have a purpose and value. The purpose of human beings, in particular is to know God and be perfectly united with Him" (Velasquez,716). However, the theistic account of the meaning life as satisfactory as it appears raises some fundamental issues. First, it depends greatly on the belief that *had exists in belief that has proven problematic in term of the challenges inherent in the proofs for the existence of God. Secondly, it raises a moral question in the sense that it sees man as object or things. For instance, the purpose of knife is to cut, the purpose of cloth is to cover nudity; the purpose of house is shelter. To say that humans have a purpose is to see humans as tools or objects that are being used by

God. But it is morally wrong to use humans as tools or objects. Thus, humans should be treated as ends and never as means. Thirdly, the theists account seems to make an illogical jump. It claims that since God has a purpose for my life, any life has meaning. Nevertheless, the second part of this statement "my life has meaning" does not follow the first "God has a purpose for my life". For instance, suppose that your father, prior to your birth, had a purpose for you: he wanted you to be an Engineer. Clearly, the fact that your father had a purpose for you does not imply that your life must have a meaning. Consequently, it does not follow that since God has a purpose for human life then human life must have a meaning. Perhaps, a life with meaning is a life with value.

The second major approach to the question of the meaning of life is the metaphysical account. This involves seeking an all-encompassing perspective that transcends the human situations and in terms of which human life can be given a meaning. This approach is traceable to philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Hegel and Marx who in their philosophies seek to determine the ultimate purpose of human life in the rational nature of the cosmos or in the structure of human nature without referring to any divine purpose. The argument here is that the individual life has meaning only when it is related to something bigger or more important than the individual's life. But, instead of suggesting God as the "bigger" whole that gives life meaning, (like the theistic position) they however propose that there are other larger realities that can infuse the individual's life with meaning. For instance, in his work *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel attributed the meaning of human life to the progress of the consciousness of freedom as history develops. In his words:

The mutations which history presents have been long characterized in general, as an advance to something better, more perfect... This peculiarity in the world of mind as indicated in the case of man... a real capacity for change and that for the better an impulse of perfectibility... Universal history ... shows the development of the consciousness of Freedom on the part of spirit, and of the consequent realization of that freedom. This development implies a gradation - a series of increasingly adequate expressions or manifestations of Freedom (54-55).

In the above, Hegel claims that if the individual person becomes "a part of this progressive movement of history, his or her life will be meaningful. In fact, apart from this forward sweep of history, the individual cannot find meaning. All meaning for the individual lies in entering and participating in the spirit of the age, the particular way in which freedom is evolving during the individual's lifetime. The major problem with this approach is that personal meaning and value cannot be based on an all-encompassing phenomenon like history as it transcends the individual human situation. This is because such synoptic encapsulation of the meaning of life negates the individual's ingenuity and uniqueness as it glorifies the whole as more essential than its parts. Thus, the peculiarities of the life of the individual is not properly defined and accounted for. It fails to give the individual man a sense of meaning he can possibly deduce for living.

The third major approach to the meaning life is nihilism which is also known as the pessimist

approach. Nihilism literally means "nothing is ultimate." It is the claim that there are no ultimate values worth pursuing. (Lawhead, 634). This pessimist posture of nihilism emanates from its failure to find meaning in God or a transcendental purpose of life. The nihilists believe that there are no such ultimate values or purpose that give meaning to human life, and so concludes that, in the final analysis, life can have no meaning. A perfect example of this pessimistic view is encapsulated in the Shakespearean Macbeth's lamentation as quoted by Grunebaum that:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage. And then is heard no more; it is a tale. Told by an idiot; full of sound and fury signifying nothing. (392)

In a similar vein, the 19th century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1970) painted a horrid grim picture of the human condition as follows:

What a difference there is between our beginning and our end! We begin in the madness of carnal desire and the transport of voluptuousness; we end in the dissolution of all our parts and the musty stench of corpses. And the road from the one to the other... goes, in regard to our well-being and enjoyment of life, steadily downhill: happily dreaming childhood, exultant youth, toil-filled years of manhood, infirm and often wretched old age, the torment of the last illness and finally the throes of death (46).

In view of this horrid and perplexing picture of human life, Schopenhauer asks "does it not look as if existence was an error or the consequences of which gradually grow more and more manifest?" (46). He therefore concludes that the best we can hope for in existence is to see life as ultimately a process of disillusion; an experience that is empty and full of void. In this sense, human life lacks values and ends, and as such, it seemed meaningless. A major problem with nihilism is its extreme pessimism and radical scepticism. The nihilist belief that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated is a universal or extreme scepticism. Scepticism "is the doubt as to the very possibility of knowing anything at all for certain" (Omogeb,9). In line with the Augustinian refutation of universal scepticism, the nihilists' claim that there are no ultimate values or purpose to human life is self-contradictory. If the nihilist is certain of this claim, then, he is contradicting himself. It is self-contradictory for a person to claim that he knows that nobody can know anything or that he is sure that nobody can be sure of anything. If he is sure of this claim, then, his claim is false. Moreover, if the claim is true then, he is not sure of what he claims. Thus, the nihilist claims that there are no values or purpose for human life is unreasonable and therefore unsustainable. The inability of an individual to perceive an entity does not rule out the existence of that entity. The entity's existence is independent of the individual's perception of it. The fact that the nihilist fails to perceive the existence of the value and purpose of human life, in no way negates the meaningfulness of existence.

Synergetic Specialism: A Conceptual Analysis

The expression "synergetic specialism" is a derivative of two words: synergy and speciation.

Synergy is derived from the Greek *sunegia* and the latin *synergia* which means “working together” Literally, synergy means the interaction or co-operation of elements, substance or other agents to produce a combined effect that is more impactful than the sum of their separate effect. Thus, it is the combined power of a group of things when they are working together. The word speciation comes from the Latin *specie* meaning “a kind or form” and *ation* that means “action or process”, speciation therefore refers to a process of developing a kind or form from a group with distinct features. It is the process whereby a group of specie separates from other members of its kind and develops its own unique and special characteristics. This is the process by which populations evolve to become distinct and special species of their kinds for symbiotic existential benefits.

Synergetic specialism, in view of the insight above, is conceived here as a system of thought that articulates reality as a web of synergy of speciated entities for cross-functional necessity. By so doing, it upholds “individual uniqueness” and “collective necessity” as the defining principles of existence. That is, for something to be said to exist, it must be unique in itself and in need of other existing realities to fulfil the purpose for its inherent uniqueness. This thinking is inspired by two major experiences: mixed cropping method in African traditional farming system and mutualism in biological science. On the one hand, in mixed cropping method of farming, a piece of farmland is used to cultivate different collection of plants simultaneously in order to harvest mutual benefits of companion plants. According to Agboola:

Different crops that would not be harvested at the same time were grown on the same plot (e.g. yam/maize, cocoyam/okra, yam/melon and so on)... it increases yield through the interaction of supplementary crops (p.47).

The point in the above is that each crop is inherently endowed with attributes that makes them to be mutually beneficial to one another. They provide each other with shelter, soil fertility and/or natural pest control. For instance, beans may grow up corn stalks as a trellis while fixing nitrogen in the soil for the corn. On the other hand, in biological science, the idea of mutualism highlights the fact of symbiotic relationship between two living things where both organisms benefit and no one is harmed. The relationship can be between two living things of same specie or two living things from two different species. Each participant in this mutuality is called a symbiont, that is, an organism living in a state of symbiosis. For instance, the symbiotic relationship between oxpeckers and zebras or rhinos illustrates mutualism. In this relationship, the oxpecker (a bird) lives on the zebra or rhinos, sustaining itself by eating all of the bugs and parasites on its host. The bird benefits by having a readily available source of food while the zebra or rhino benefits from having the bugs removed.

In the two cases above, it is clear that existence is a web of symbiotic relationships where uniquely speciated entities exist side by side for each other's benefits. This is made possible by the fact that each possesses certain qualities that is unique to it but needed by others to survive. This insight inspired the articulation of the central teaching of synergetic specialism which holds that “nothing

exists for nothing; something exists for something.” The meaningfulness of a thing is conceivable within the context of what it exists for. For something to be said to exist; presupposes its uniqueness and functional relevance in the web of existence, as existence is a condition for functionality while functionality is the hallmark of existence. Thus, to exist is to function and to function is to exist.

The Basic Teachings and Tenets of Synergetic Specialism

Synergetic specialism, as earlier conceived, is a system of thought that sees reality as a web of synergy among speciated entities in a cross-functional necessity. Reality is a collection of structured units of existence speciated with unique and peculiar endowments for a synergetic necessity. The existence of a unit is only conceivable if it serves as a synergetic unit in the web of existence. For this reason, synergetic specialism holds that “nothing exists for nothing; something exists for something.” We are speciated to uniquely contribute to the web of existence. It is in locating the something for which a thing exists that the meaningfulness of the existence of that thing is established. This explains why synergetic specialism as a system of thought articulates existence as a web of interaction of speciated and uniquely gifted entities or units of life for cross-functional necessity. It is however important to note here that the cross-functional necessity of entities is not a pre-established blueprint that antedates the existence of a unit of life. It is a situational imperative that its mode of uniqueness contextually prepares it to fit into in the scheme of things.

In synergic specialism, a unit of life is conceived as an *Ajere Ado*, a Yoruba expression meaning “netted urn”. This unit or entity exists with an inherent structure of energies that propels and enables it to facilitate synergy with other units of existence. In this sense, *Ajere Ado* is fundamentally a synergetic being as it is a self-insufficient being that requires the peculiar energies of other units of life to exist meaningfully. It sustains its existence on the necessary exchange of unique energies with others. The spotted openings in it make up enable it to utilize its unique and special energy to enrich and sustain other units of life and vice versa. In the web of existence, an *Ajere Ado* creates meaning out of its existence by activating and enriching other *Ajere Ado*'s inherent energies in a continuous process of mutual ventilation. This is the case as each *Ajere Ado* contains an exclusive amount of special energies “wit'ins” that activates the exclusive special energies of others, its “wit 'outs”. In this sense, the wit'ins of a unit constitutes the wit 'outs of other units and vice versa. It is therefore in the mutual ventilation of energies that their unique productivity becomes manifest. As such, the sustenance of the web of existence is dependent on this mutual ventilation of energies between and among the units of life.

In effect, to know an *Ajere Ado* is to be aware of its unique, peculiar, special and exclusive attributes within the context of its enrichment of other units of existence. Its being known is therefore determined by its synergetic necessity within the web of existence. This awareness of the unique peculiarities and attributes of a unit of life creates the platform for its rightful engagements in the

scheme of things. However, whenever its uncommon, unusual and special energy is exhausted; this signals its fulfilment of purpose in the web of existence. As such, it evaporates and ceases to exist. This is the case in as much as the uniqueness of its specie specially fits into the web of existence at a particular period of time in existence when it is required.

In line with the foregoing, synergetic specialism sees the universe as a structure of networks with points of intersection acting as contributory channel within which the unique endowments of speciated units becomes useful. Thus, without the units the universe becomes unstructured, inactive and meaningless. In the same vein, without the universe, the speciated unit(s) becomes inconceivable, unproductive and irrelevant as its existence and meaningfulness is only conceivable within the context of its synergetic engagements in the web of existence. From the foregoing, it is evident that the basic teachings and tenets of synergetic specialism are:

1. Nothing exists for nothing, something exists for something.
2. Reality is a web of speciated units with cross-functional necessity
3. Every unit of existence is a specially netted and uniquely endowed being
4. The fulfilment of a unit is in its synergetic engagements with other units
5. Existence is a web of interaction and exchange of energies
6. Existence is not by chance; but out of necessity of a kind

Synergetic Specialism and the Meaning of Life

Synergetic specialism sees life as an experience of being uniquely functional in the web of existence. Being alive is being in a synergetic relationship with others. In this sense life is simply an experience of synergetic engagements between and among living entities. This is because an individual is a special breed of human kind with a sense belonging necessitated by the synergetic condition of life. This is affirmed by the fact that man detests loneliness, as he is fundamentally a social being whose existence subsists in a synergetic imperative. He is a bundle of energies that is activated only in a social context. This shows that man is an active being who constantly ventilates energy towards the fulfilment of life. This essentially makes man a productive being whose inherent special energies ventilate others for cross-functional productivity. As a special breed of being, man is endowed with inner energies (potentialities) which is seen here as “wit' ins” with which he locates his “wit' outs” (possibilities), that is, the inherent peculiar energies of others. Thus, the actuality of the meaningfulness of life entails the synergy of the potentialities and possibilities within the web of existence. In this way, the social condition of existence facilitates the necessary attraction between the wit' in and wit' out energies for synergetic purpose. In this sense, human existence is a continuous process of give and take as the fulfilment of living lies in this synergetic exchange. For this reason, to live is not to live alone; to live is to be in a web of synergetic interactions. This explains why synergetic specialism sees life as “living in full engagements”. Here, solitary existence is inconceivable as it is a negation of the social imperative of life. It is self-denial of the possibility of actualizing inherent potentialities that ultimately constitutes a consequent self-disaffirmation in the

web of existence. The social imperative of human life underscores the self-insufficiency of man. The enrichment of our life entails a synergetic ventilation of unique energies or special endowments inherent in each of us for collective benefit. In this sense, the ultimate essence of human existence lies not in just staying alive for some sort of teleological or metaphysical end, but subsists in finding the patterns of connections that necessitate the ventilation of our special energies in activating the inherent and special energies of others that in return affirms our existence.

The web of existence is composed of intersecting points that provide the needed platform for synergetic engagements between and among human beings. This ensures the usefulness of the uniqueness of individual(s) in the ventilation of inherent special energies to manifestation for collective benefits. The meaning of a man's life therefore subsists in locating the synergetic points where his wit' ins connects his wit' outs. To do this is to figure out the nature of one's exclusive internal energies or special endowments as well as where and how they fit into the scheme of solving existential challenges. To figure this out necessarily involves moving through the experimental and explorative phase of life to locate the pattern that guarantees one's productivity. This phase of life is characterized by excitements and uncertainties which propels and sustains the will to succeed in living a meaningful life. However, if you can locate your wit' ins you can activate your wit' outs. This is the hallmark of synergetic existence which defines human life. The failure to do this does not in any way frustrates the workings of the web of existence; it only vitiates the place of that individual in the experience of living. This is because nature seamlessly makes up for the gap with the engagement of contextually relevant energies from other individuals. This means that "each person is of infinitesimal magnitude in the totality of the universe, but each is unique to itself" (Grunebaum 395). In effect, what our life mean depends on what we do with our unique endowments in life. Failure to ascertain our unique endowments and locate the points of relevance in life brings about frustration and a sense of emptiness in man; this ultimately leads to the feeling of meaninglessness and self-defeatism.

It is however important to note here that existence is a continuum of synergetic engagements in which the individual's life is nothing but a unit of life at a particular period of its necessity. This explains why we exist at a particular period not before and not after; for the meaningfulness of our existence is spatio-temporal dimensional. This is because our peculiar energies are formed and structured as evolutionary responses to the prevailing conditions of the time of our existence. In this sense, we are bundles of energies in the service of humanity as we are blessed to bless others. To bless others is to utilize our peculiar energies to activate the peculiar energies of others and by so doing we create meaning out of our own life. Life is therefore a continuum of synergetic engagements of energies. For this reason, we do not just exist; we exist out of the need for our kind at a particular period in existence. We are therefore speciated in response to the prevailing conditions and demands of our time and environment. That is, our being alive at a particular period of existence

is not by chance but out of the necessity of a being of our uniqueness and speciation. Therefore, if one wonders why one is in the world at this period in world history, not earlier nor sometime in the future, it is simply because your endowments are for this time and age. We are specially evolved for this special moment in the history of the world. In fact, you are a special gift to humanity at this period of existence.

So, contrary to the theistic, metaphysical and nihilist account of the meaning of life synergetic specialism sees life not in a divine purpose, neither in a transcendence metaphysical end nor in nothingness rather in a synergetic engagement of endowments. It sees life as an experience of ventilation of inherent special energies in each unit of existence for collective benefit. It locates the meaning of life within the context of the engagements of our wit' ins (inner energies) with our wit' outs, that is, the energies we lack which are located in other beings; peculiar to them but required by us to ventilate ours in cross-functional benefits. In this sense, life is a synergetic web of interactions that is sustained in a process of give and take of wit' ins and wit' outs. Thus, man is a social being and his life a social necessity.

In view of the foregoing, it is important to state here that synergetic specialism in practical terms sees the basic requirements of human life: knowledge, power and wealth as the dynamics of human existence. They are part of the energies that individual(s) possess to ventilate in order to activate the endowments of others. This means that the resources at our disposal at any moment in time are not for us to keep but to be utilized in the synergetic engagements of endowments for cross-functional benefits. In effect, we possess knowledge in order to share with others and guide others, power to protect others and wealth to provide for as well as support others. This means that what we have in terms of material and immaterial energies are basically the requirements needed to actualize our synergetic engagements with others. These existential requirements are not evenly possessed as some may have knowledge while others may possess power or wealth. In some cases, some persons may have two out of the three but, in most cases, one does not possess the three at the same time. This shows that in our life as humans we are endowed with varying degrees of existential energies with which we are prepared to meaningfully engage others for a harmonious synergy in the web of existence. Failure to comprehend life from its synergetic precondition makes it a living hell. Thus, life is simple but we unnecessarily make it complicated when we see it as a self-centred experience. Thus, the meaning of life is simply the synergetic worth derivable from our various accomplishments, relationships, creativity, ingenuity and generosity. We live for others to live; life is an experience of being in a synergetic relationship with others. In a nutshell, life is really simple but our unfortunate egocentric approach to it makes it complicated and frustrating.

Conclusion

This paper sets out to explore the meaning of life within the purview of the articulation of a new

philosophical framework titled synergetic specialism. This objective was pursued with the perusal of the major approaches to the meaning of life with each found to be incapable of providing a practical and pragmatic explanation to the mystery of existence. In view of this, the paper conceptually outlines and articulates the basic teachings and tenets of synergetic specialism as a philosophy of the meaning of life. The coinage and explication of the term “synergetic specialism” as conceptualized and employed in this paper delineates its theoretical and practical applicability as a philosophical framework within which the basic challenges of life can be meaningfully explored. On the meaning of life, the paper submits that life is a web of synergetic engagements between and among living entities. It is an experience of being in interconnected relationships for the well-being of all. It therefore sees the purpose of life as the ventilation of energies for cross-functional benefits. In this sense, it projects the idea that to live is not to live alone but to live in synergetic interaction with others. The paper encapsulates its position in the dictum that “nothing exists for nothing; something exists for something”. The something for which something exists subsists in its synergetic engagements with other existing things.

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