

## Wolf on the Meaning of Life

### 1. What is the “What is the Meaning of Life?” Question?

\* What does a life represent or symbolize?

Lives are not parts of languages or symbolic systems

\* “What is the purpose of human existence” “why are we here?” with the hope that the answer will inform what we should do with our lives

The standard secular response is: there is no purpose. If we weren’t designed by a God with some intention, the idea that we’re here for some reason is implausible. We’re just the output of some physical processes.

\* How can one find meaning *in* a life?

Wolf thinks “meaningfulness” is an intelligible feature to be sought after in a life.

### 2. What Makes for Meaning if Life?

A Hypothesis Wolf Rejects: Experiences that we find subjectively rewarding, emotionally satisfying, experiences that feels meaningful/have importance/meaning/significance to the subject.

Wolf rejects this view. She thinks we can judge other peoples’ lives as meaningful or not and that our judgments are not determined by whether we think those people had emotionally satisfying experiences.

The strategy: Consider candidates for meaningless lives, and see what these lives are missing:

*The Blob* - person spends day after day in front of a TV, watching sitcoms and drinking beer. Life lived in “hazy passivity”

*Useless*

- the idle rich hopping from one amusement to another
- The corporate executive working all the time, experiencing great stress for the sole purpose of accumulation of wealth
- The pig farmer who buys more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs to buy more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs

*Bankrupt*

- Devoting one’s life to create and build up a company to hand over to one’s children but the item the company manufactures is rendered obsolete by new technology shortly before retirement
- Scientist whose life work is rendered useless by the announcement of a breakthrough weeks before her research would have yielded the same result
- Devotion to a relationship that turns out to be a fraud

The contrast:

Active engagement (unlike Blob) in a project that has positive value (unlike Useless) and which is to some extent successful (unlike Bankrupt).

*“A meaningful life is one that is actively and at least somewhat successfully engaged in a project (or projects) of positive value” (5).*

### 3. Clarifications

*Projects* – the word is used in a broad sense to encompass not only goal-directed tasks but other sorts of ongoing activities and involvements as well.

*Active* – activity is not enough for active engagement. The alienated housewife’s life may be full of activity but her heart isn’t it. She’s just “going through the motions.”

*Positive value* – Wolf leaves this intentionally unspecific so that the account is ecumenical to a broad range of views of positive value. But she wants to rule out a view on which it suffices for positive value that the project *seem* to have positive value from the subject’s perspective. This would blur what she takes to be the important distinction between living a meaningful life and living a life that seems meaningful.

One role for this distinction: explaining the sorts of epiphanies one experiences when one suddenly recognizes that one’s life to date has not been meaningful. The yearning for meaningfulness will not be satisfied by “putting the scales back on”

*Lastly*: positive value  $\neq$  moral value (consider athletes and artists)

### 4. Should We Care About Having a Meaningful Life?

Fact: a lot of people want meaning in their lives.

But we don’t just think it’s fine for people to like meaning, in the way it’s for people to like country music. We think people *ought* to pursue lives that are meaningful.

But this is a bit mysterious.

*Question*: What is so good about living a meaningful life and who exactly is it good for?

- Not necessarily morally better – so not better for the world
- Not necessarily happier – Blob’s hazy passivity may feel better than the experience of a tortured artist. So it’s not *obviously* better for the subject.

So what kind of “ought” is used in the claim that one “ought” to care about meaning in one’s life, or live a meaningful life, or want a meaningful life?

Wolf thinks the ought involved is closest to the *prudential ought* – it is bad for the subject to have a life that’s not meaningful – even if she has no desires that meaningfulness would satisfy. If meaningfulness won’t make her unhappy, what about a lack of meaning is bad for subject?

*The Answer:* A subject whose life lacks meaning has a life that is not in accord with or responsive to certain important facts.

Wolf thinks recognition of our place in the universe, our insignificance, involves recognition of the “mereness” of our subjective point of view. In the face of such a recognition a life devoted to the subjects own fulfillment or survival seems simplistic or silly. To live such a life expresses a kind of commitment that one’s happiness is all that matters, but that seems very implausible.

Compare: Nagel argues that if you fail to see the pain of others as a reason, you are acting as if others pain is not real. Such a person is making an error.

Similarly, devoting oneself wholly to one’s own satisfaction is to act in a way that is not in accordance with the truth that one’s own satisfaction doesn’t matter all that much.

*Objection:* Our speckness warrants the conclusion that there is no meaning to life, and that each individual life is necessarily absurd. So seeking meaning in life is not the appropriate response to our cosmic insignificance.

*Response:* “Living in a way that is significantly focused on, engaged with, and concerned to promote or realize value whose source comes from outside of oneself, does seem to harmonize with [the fact of our insignificance and the of the mereness of our subjectivity], whereas living purely egocentrically does not. Living lives that attain or realize some nonsubjective value may not make us meaningful, much less important, to anyone other than ourselves, but will give us something to say, to think, in response to the recognition of perspectives that we ourselves imaginatively adopt that are indifferent to our existence and to our well-being” (14)

*Wolf’s Moral:* There can be meaningful lives even if there is no overall meaning to life.

*To Think About:* Does our own satisfaction matter *at least a bit*? If so, isn’t the question a matter of how much our own satisfaction compares to other, arguably, specky-projects? Why doesn’t devotion to non-self-oriented specky-projects express a commitment to these other specky-things being all that matters?

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