

Objective Meaning in Life (Wolf)

1. What is Meaning?: What is being asked by the question, What is the meaning of life? Susan Wolf notes that “meaning” is used in many ways.

- As definition: ‘Candor’ **means** ‘truthful, honest’.
- As indication: These footprints **mean** that someone has been here recently.

But, when we’re asking what the meaning of life is, we’re not asking what the definition of life is, or what the presence of life is indicative of. So, what are we asking??? The question, she says,

“seems to be a search to find a purpose or a point to human existence. It is a request to find out why we are here (that is, why we exist at all), with the hope that an answer to this question will also tell us something about what we should be doing with our lives.”

Wolf seems to agree with the previous philosophers that, if God exists, then there might be a purpose to our existence—some grand *reason* for why we’re here. But there is no “meaning of life” without such a god. There are CAUSES that explain our existence, but not REASONS, or PURPOSE.

[Note: Wolf also agrees with philosophers that there can at least be **subjective** meaning within lives. There are certainly pursuits that FEEL rewarding, or are important TO US. But, she is going to argue for *more* than mere subjective meaning in life.]

2. Meaninglessness: Like Taylor, Wolf finds it easier to understand what is meaningful by first examining what is meaningless. She considers this case:

The Blob The Blob is an individual who does nothing but sit on the couch, drinking beer, and watching sitcoms.

PASSIVITY: Wolf writes, this picture, where The Blob’s “life is lived in hazy passivity, a life lived at a not unpleasant level of consciousness, but unconnected to anyone or anything, going nowhere, achieving nothing - is, I submit, as strong an image of a meaningless life as there can be.” This feature of PASSIVENESS, failing to act at all, or interact with the world, seems to contribute to the meaninglessness of The Blob’s life.

USELESS: Wolf says that the passiveness of The Blob is not necessary for meaninglessness though. She can imagine a meaningless life where the individual is quite active, but engages in meaningless activities (for instance, someone who does

nothing but work 80 hours a week, slaving away merely for personal wealth). Or consider Sisyphus, who is constantly active. Such a life might seem “pointless, useless, or empty.” Being USELESS seems to contribute to meaninglessness.

BANKRUPTCY: But, one could even engage in activity that WOULD be meaningful if it ever amounted to anything and still live a life devoid of meaning. E.g., imagine someone who slaves away for their entire life, and spends their entire savings to cure cancer—only to find that someone else discovers a cure two weeks sooner. It was all for nothing. This sort of BANKRUPTCY seems to contribute to meaninglessness too.

Conclusion: To live a meaningful life, one must avoid all three of these features. That is, one must live a life that is:

- (1) ACTIVE: One must DO things, and interact with the world, and with others.
- (2) USEFUL: It is not enough to do things that are of no use. Rather, one must engage in activities that contribute some positive value to the world.
- (3) SUCCESSFUL: One must not only TRY to do things that are useful, or contribute positively, to the world. One must at least to some extent succeed in doing so. In other words, at the end of one’s life, one must not be able to say, “It was all for nothing. I tried, but I never ended up doing any good.”

Proposal: Wolf writes, “**a meaningful life is one that is actively and at least somewhat successfully engaged in a project (or projects) of positive value.**”

Note1: The term “project” need not invoke something like finding the cure to cancer. A “project” might be something as simple as being a loving friend or partner to someone.

Note2: To be suitably “engaged” in a project is to, so to speak, “have your heart in it.” It is to perform an activity happily, and with pride. (unlike her miserable housewife case)

3. Objective Meaning in Life: Wolf argues that the “positive value” that she speaks of cannot be MERE subjective value. For, there does seem to be a distinction between the following two things:

- A life that SEEMS meaningful to the one who lives it.
- A life that actually IS meaningful.

But, if merely engaging in activities that SEEM meaningful TO YOU legitimately gave your life meaning, then the distinction above would disappear—a life that SEEMED meaningful would BE meaningful. This will not do. For, perhaps The Blob really enjoys

what he does every day. But, surely this would not make it the case that we could then truly say of him that he lived a meaningful life? [*What do you think?*]

Imagine that The Blob woke up one day and cried, "Oh no! I see now that I have been living a meaningless life!" This realization would be *unintelligible* if meaning were determined solely subjectively!

Worse still, imagine that his doctor said, "Fear not. I have a simple way to make your life meaningful again. I will give you a pill that will make you satisfied with sitting on the couch, and you will once again think that what you are doing has value." On the subjective view, meaning in The Blob's life would be restored! But surely that is absurd! Surely the difference between living a meaningless and a meaningful life cannot be affected merely by taking a pill that alters one's beliefs about their life??

Conclusion: In order to be meaningful, one's life must not only SEEM to be meaningful, it must REALLY be meaningful; and THAT, Wolf argues, requires that it involve successfully pursuing some projects that are OBJECTIVELY good, or valuable.

Note that objective goodness does not necessarily involve MORAL goodness. True, if one is a moral pillar in life (e.g., Ghandi), then one's life will be full of meaning. But, surely others such as famous composers and Olympic champions have also achieved lives with some meaning too (even though musical and athletic projects are not ones that involve morally virtuous acts). Living a morally good life is not even a guarantee that one's life will be meaningful! (She considers a discontented housewife, who is a morally good person, but takes no pleasure or pride in any of her life activities. Even The Blob is surely not a BAD person, morally, though his life is nevertheless meaningless.)

The Imperative: Wolf says that, not only have we now identified the features that make a life meaningful, but we also feel some strong sense that one SHOULD STRIVE after a life full of meaning. For instance, if The Blob expresses that he has no desire to change, we feel some intense sense of regret for him. It is BAD that his life is so meaningless. He ought to want more. Even if The Blob enjoys what he is doing, and his life is "good" in one sense (he enjoys it), it is bad in another sense (it is meaningless). (*Presumably, she would say the same about the Grass Counter, or the Happy Sisyphus.*)

But, why should this be the case? For note: Meaningful lives, on Wolf's view, are not necessarily HAPPY ones! (Consider a tortured artist, or someone who struggles miserably for justice throughout their life.) Nor do they necessarily make OTHERS happy! (Consider the Olympic athlete, who may add no more happiness to the world than The Blob.) So, why pursue a life that is meaningful? Who is it *good for*?

It's not even the worry that someone will "wake up" to the meaningless of their lives and be made miserable by their mistake that grounds our intuition. For, in many ways, if The Blob NEVER realizes how meaningless his life is, this is even MORE tragic!

One might wonder: If The Blob (or the Grass Counter) is HAPPY doing what they are doing, why should they want to live more meaningfully? We might ask, "As long as you are engaged by your activities, and they make you happy, why should one care that one's activities be objectively worthwhile?"

The answer, she says, is that to live solely for one's own happiness is "solipsistic"—or, in other words, *selfish*, or *egocentric*. One who lives one's life indifferent to the bigger picture—namely, that there are other beings in the world; beings who feel joy or suffering just as real—lives as if those beings aren't real, and that their joy or suffering isn't real either. As such, such a person lives a life that is in contradiction with a very real fact about the universe (the fact that you are not the center of it). She writes,

"to live such a life [as The Blob] expresses the view that one's happiness is all that matters, at least to oneself. But why should this be the only thing that matters, when there is so much else worth caring about?"

Wolf encourages us to recognize that we are just specks in a vast universe, and that living solely for one's self fails to respect this fact. We might be tempted to think, with Craig, Tolstoy, Taylor, and Nagel, that without God, life simply cannot be meaningful in the way that Wolf describes. For, the very fact that we ARE specks seems to make living meaningfully impossible. How on Earth could living even in an OUTWARDLY-directed way imbue one's life with meaning, when all of the things that one directs one's self toward are just little specks too!? If God existed—a being of infinite value—and looked down at our lives and said "It is good", then maybe THAT would make our lives meaningful. But, without God, such meaning seems impossible.

Answer: Because, the very fact that some projects are more valuable than others—some worthwhile and some not—gives us reason to pursue them, whether or not some being of infinite value approves of them. She writes,

"if you appreciate the reality of others, then you realize that their pains are just as painful as yours. If the painfulness of your pain is a reason to take steps to avoid it, then, the painfulness of their pain should provide reasons, too. ... If [that] is right, we have reason to care about the pain of others that is grounded, not in our own psychologies (and more specifically, not in any of our own desires), but in a fact about the world."

"People are sometimes tempted to think that if God doesn't exist, then nothing matters. They are tempted to think that if we will all die, and eventually all traces of our existence will fade from all consciousness, there is no point to doing anything; nothing makes any difference. ... But the reasoning is ridiculous. If one activity is worthwhile and another is a waste, then one has reason to prefer the former, even if there is no God to look down on us and approve. More generally, we seem to have reason to engage ourselves with projects of value whether God exists and gives life a purpose or not. ... If one turns one's attention to other parts of the universe – even to other specks like oneself – in a way that appreciates and engages with the values or valuable objects that come from outside oneself, then one corrects one's practical stance."

There may be no ULTIMATE meaning as to why we're here. To that conclusion, Wolf says, "Get Over It". But, our lives can still be absolutely filled with meaning. We are not the center of the universe. Look around you! There is a whole world full of other people of value; and projects legitimately worth pursuing.

"If one lived one's life, prior to the recognition of our smallness, as if one was the center of the universe, the appropriate response to that recognition is simply to stop living that way. If one turns one's attention to other parts of the universe – even to other specks like oneself – in a way that appreciates and engages with the values or valuable objects that come from outside oneself, then one corrects one's practical stance. If, in addition, one is partly successful in producing, preserving, or promoting value – if one does some good, or realizes value, then one has something to say, or to think in response to the worry that one's life has no point."

[In light of Wolf's claims, we might insist that Tolstoy's analogy was way off base. We are not ALONE on the cliffside, clinging to our branches! There are others all around us, clinging to their branches too. Reaching out to comfort them is not a meaningless act. It is chock full of meaning.]

[If Wolf is correct then, contrary to Craig, we might suggest that the conclusion that life is meaningless, or that no action is immoral unless there is a God—THAT is absurd (e.g., see this clip from the film, [Adaptation](#), where the nihilistic protagonist is rebuked).]