

brokensandals.net -> {Philosophy, Reviews} -> Meaning in Life and Why it Matters

Posted on 2019-06-07.

The [Kansas City Philosophy Club](#) recently held a series of meetups discussing Susan Wolf's book *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*. It's short, to the point, and thought-provoking.

Outline of this review:

- Defining meaning
 - Wolf's definition
 - Endoxic argument
- Points of contention
 - Does meaning come in degrees?
 - Can you be forced into meaninglessness?
 - Is objective value real?
 - Is acting on the basis of love as rational as acting on the basis of morality?
- Conclusion

Defining meaning

Are our lives meaningless? I think most people would see this as an important question, but it's also a vague question. We don't all mean the same thing by it. I'm not sure the person asking it usually even has a clear notion of what *they* mean by it.

Wolf's definition

Wolf's conception of meaning in life is as follows:

[M]eaning arises from loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way.¹

Or, put differently:

[M]eaning in life consists in and arises from actively engaging in projects of worth.²

She seems to essentially lay out three criteria that need to be met for something (a project, activity, etc.) to be meaningful:

1. It must have **objective** value.
2. You must have positive **subjective** feelings about it.
3. Your subjective feelings must be **related** to the objective value.

Raising a child that you love, or expressing yourself by creating a beautiful work of art, can meet all three criteria and be meaningful in her view.

By contrast, solving Sudoku puzzles isn't meaningful in her view, because it lacks objective value. Doing a job you hate that helps people you don't care about isn't either,

because while it may have objective value, she thinks positive subjective engagement is necessary too.

The third criterion is there to rule out cases where what you're doing only coincidentally has objective value. An example of this given in the book is a person smoking pot, whose "secondary marijuana smoke is alleviating the pain of the AIDS victim next door."³ The alleviation of the neighbor's pain is valuable, but that's presumably not what motivates the smoker, so Wolf still wouldn't consider the smoking to be a meaningful activity.

Endoxic argument

What reasons could we have for thinking this is a good definition? Wolf uses a form of argument called the *endoxic method*, which means looking at widely-held intuitions and developing a theory that explains and reconciles them.

Specifically, she points out that two commonly held ideas of meaning are:

1. Meaning has to do with *fulfillment*. People often think something is meaningful if it feels fulfilling, or meaningless when it doesn't.
2. Meaning has to do with participating in something *larger than oneself*. People often think self-centered activities are meaningless, but activities directed towards the good of others or some higher ideal are meaningful.

In the second idea, as she notes, people probably really have in mind just something that has value *independent* of oneself, not necessarily something literally or metaphorically larger. Otherwise, it would be difficult "to explain why caring for an infant (presumably smaller than oneself!) can be meaningful while being a groupie for a rock band might not."⁴

Her conception of meaning is a way of combining these two ideas; its plausibility derives from their plausibility.

Points of contention

Does meaning come in degrees?

Our group had a bit of disagreement over whether meaning should be thought of as binary - something you either have, or don't have - or as a matter of degree. Wolf takes the latter view⁵. I think that's the better way to conceive of it, and I see more than one axis along which this sort of meaningfulness could be measured.

One axis is the degree of value in the activity/project/object. Saving a person's life is presumably more valuable, so in a sense more meaningful, than saving them from a short but unpleasant illness, even though that is valuable too.

Another axis is the intensity of your subjective feelings. Perhaps you like working as a nurse, but are deeply passionate about teaching music. If we focus on the subjective aspect, this might lead us to describe the latter as more meaningful for you.

Finally, we might decide that something can be meaningful even if it only meets one of Wolf's criteria, and that it is simply *more* meaningful if it meets two, or all three, of her criteria. So solving Sudoku puzzles would be somewhat meaningful if you really enjoy it; and dying for a good cause would be somewhat meaningful even if you were unwilling

and didn't personally believe in the cause; but doing something that's both fulfilling *and* valuable would be *more* meaningful. This was a popular viewpoint in the discussion group, and I think it's the most promising way to use Wolf's ideas. On this view, there's nothing uniquely valuable about meeting all three of Wolf's criteria at once; rather, it's just that meeting each criterion is a good thing in itself, and so of course meeting all three would be even better.

Can you be forced into meaninglessness?

Wolf is clear that she doesn't think everyone can live a meaningful life:

Many people, through no fault of their own, simply lack the opportunity for meaning: their physical, economic, or political circumstances deprive them of the freedom or the leisure to explore and pursue activities they would love. Others may have temperaments that make it difficult to love anything in the right sort of way.⁶

This bothered some people in our discussion group. I think a major reason it makes us uncomfortable is that declaring someone's life "meaningless" sounds extremely judgmental. We don't want to imply that a person is in some way inferior due to factors outside of their control.

And indeed, if someone sees their own life as meaningful, it would generally be supremely arrogant to tell them they're wrong. But I also think we would be downplaying the severity of injustice in the world if we declared that no circumstance which befalls a person could possibly make meaning unachievable for them. When a person is enslaved, or is conscripted to die in a futile war, they are being deprived of enormously valuable options that others have. Such a person might find a source meaning in their life anyway; but if they were to say that they cannot, that the theft of all hope of meaning is just another of society's crimes against them, I would be in no position to argue. So I agree with Wolf on this.

Is objective value real?

Many people find the idea of objective value to be ridiculous or simply incoherent. This was the biggest sticking point in our discussion group.

When I say "objective value" I mean the idea that statements like "being happy is good" can be true or false in the same sense that statements like "I am currently sitting on a bench" can be true or false. It's not hard to see why this is a contentious claim: if someone else thinks "being happy is bad," what is there to make me "right" and them "wrong"? As David Hume pointed out centuries ago, there's a [seemingly unbridgeable gap](#) between statements *describing* the world, and statements about how the world *should be* (which is really what a value judgment is - to say "being happy is good" implies "we should want happiness").

Wolf tries not to wade into that controversy in this book. She is vague about what she means by objective value, and insists that it doesn't necessarily require a "pure, subject-independent metaphysical property"⁷ of the sort I just described. Instead, she mostly appeals to our intuitive belief that there is *some* sort of standard of judging value that is independent of individuals. Most of us do act as if we believe that certain value judgments, such as "slavery is wrong," have validity beyond our own subjective preferences. I think Wolf wants her readers to conclude from such beliefs that they do in

fact believe in some form of objective values, but leave the fundamental underpinnings of such values as a question for another day. (She admits that she herself has “no positive account of nonsubjective value with which [she is] satisfied”⁸.)

That approach makes sense for this book; the existence and nature of objective value is a topic worthy of a book all to itself. But skeptics of objective value will have difficulty taking parts of her theory seriously.

I’m *not* a skeptic of objective value, and I think Wolf is correct to emphasize it. When someone worries that their life is meaningless, they don’t generally just mean that they’re unhappy or unfulfilled. Sometimes they feel unhappy or unfulfilled precisely *because* they’ve come to believe that their life is meaningless, because they’ve come to believe that nothing they’re doing really *matters* in an absolute sense. If objective value isn’t real, their worry is well-founded: their life simply cannot have the kind of meaning they desire.

Is acting on the basis of love as rational as acting on the basis of morality?

You might expect the goal of a book like this to be to help more people lead meaningful lives, but Wolf doesn’t seem very hopeful about that. On her conception, you can have a meaningful life without being aware of it, or be stuck in a meaningless life against your will. She doesn’t expect mere reflection on the concept of meaning to make the difference for most people.⁹

Rather, Wolf hopes that we will start taking meaning into account when we judge the actions of ourselves and others:

...I remarked that [meaning] is not (equivalent to) happiness, and it is not (equivalent to) morality. Recognizing that meaning is something desirable in life, something we want both for ourselves and for others, means recognizing that there is more to life than either of these categories, even taken together, suggests. This means, among other things, that it need not be irrational to choose to spend one’s time doing something that neither maximizes one’s own good nor is morally best.¹⁰

This way of looking at morality - in which morality is merely one perspective from which you could make decisions, on equal footing with other perspectives - is unsatisfying to me. When I ask whether it’s moral to do a certain thing, I’m asking whether, in some absolute sense, it’s OK to do that thing. If it would be rational for me to disregard the answer, it’s not clear why I’d ask the question, or even whether the question really means anything. (I might still ask questions like “is this action kind” or “am I treating others as I’d wish to be treated”, as I may be internally motivated to take those considerations into account regardless of whether it’s rational to do so. But “is this action moral” is a less concrete question, where the considerations involved in answering it are a matter of debate and inquiry. I’m not sure what the motivation to engage in that inquiry would be unless it is directed at discovering some sort of binding standard.)

Anyway, Wolf says that “[w]hat gives meaning to our lives gives us reasons to live”¹¹ and that:

...it is hard to see how reasons for staying within the moral order could override one’s reasons for doing something without which one would lose interest in the world, and so presumably in the moral order of the world, altogether.¹²

It's clearly true, on a practical level, that we frequently prioritize people and ideals we are attached to over behaving morally. Just as we frequently prioritize our own self-gratification over behaving morally. But sometimes we do what we think is right even when it means giving up our own hopes. The firm belief that an action is right is precisely the kind of reason that can override all others.

In some sense I do agree with Wolf that it would be unreasonable to always expect people to choose morality over the things they love. But only in the same sense that it would be unreasonable to expect people to stick to a diet perfectly, or to never make a mistake on a math test. These are inevitable failures rooted in our limited willpower and rationality, not signs that our idea of rationality needs revision.

(This is not to say that morality necessarily requires one to be impartial, of course; in some moral theories, your relationships are highly salient facts in determining what you are allowed or required to do.)

Conclusion

Wolf's concept of "meaning" won't capture what everyone has in mind by the word, but I think it's the concept that I would want to use when responding to someone who doubts that life has any point. Why live? Well, because there are things genuinely worth doing, and because it's possible to feel fulfilled doing them.

But her [main argument](#) is unconvincing to me, and the book hasn't changed my worldview or given me anything actionable.

If you find meaning in screaming into the digital abyss, email your comments on this post to jacobaw@gmail.com.

-
1. p. 8
 2. p. 26
 3. p. 21
 4. p. 63
 5. see pages 108-109
 6. p. 49, footnote 6
 7. p. 131
 8. p. 45
 9. see pages 48-49
 10. p. 49
 11. p. 56
 12. p. 57