IS THE DESIRE FOR A MEANINGFUL LIFE A SELFLESS DESIRE?

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Abstract: Susan Wolf defines a meaningful life as one that is somewhat successfully engaged in promoting positive value. I grant this claim; however, I disagree with Wolf's theory about why we desire meaningfulness, so understood. She suggests that the human desire for meaningfulness is derived from an awareness of ourselves as equally insignificant in the universe and a resulting anti-solipsistic concern for promoting goodness outside the boundaries of our own lives. I accept that this may succeed in explaining why people want to engage in projects that *happen* to be meaningful. Nevertheless, I argue that Wolf fails to explain why people have a desire for meaningfulness itself. In other words, she has told us one reason we may be motivated to promote positive value, but not why we *personally* want to be the people who promote it—why we think it is a good thing that meaningful acts be done, but not why we want them to be *our* meaningful acts. In detailing my response, I follow Wolf in relating our desire for meaningfulness to a kind of love-based motivation. However, I argue that it has more in common with a selfish form of love than the altruistic kind of love proposed by Wolf. Finally, I suggest an alternative explanation which I believe can more fully account for our desire for meaningfulness: the prospect of disappearing from the universe without a trace makes us anxious, so we pursue meaningful achievements in an attempt to make our own physical deaths less final.

Key words: meaning in life; meaningfulness; altruism; love; selfishness

Is the desire for meaningfulness a selfless desire?

In *The Variety of Values*, Susan Wolf defines a meaningful life as one that is “actively and at least somewhat successfully engaged in a project (or projects) of positive value” (2014, p. 94). Here she emphasises that she wishes to leave the concept of ‘positive value’ relatively unspecified, but that it should be understood as distinct from mere subjective value. In other words, for an activity or life to be meaningful, it can’t just appeal to the person living it, it has to produce some kind of goodness or beneficial consequences beyond that, either for other people or perhaps for the universe at large. For the purposes of this paper, I am going to grant the account of meaning provided here. At the very least, I accept the claim that successful engagement in valuable projects seems to be quite strongly tied to one intuitive understanding of meaningfulness. When thinking about the most meaningful lives, those of great positive impact such as Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln, and Florence Nightingale, are often those which come to mind. Moreover, when reflecting on especially

meaningless forms of life, we typically think of lives with no effect on the world, either through abject failure, triviality of aims, or simple lack of effort.

Nevertheless, Wolf identifies something puzzling about this account of meaningfulness. If meaningfulness is obtained through engagement with projects of non-subjective value, then it appears as though a meaningful life might not be a very happy one (p. 97). A person could spend their life toiling ceaselessly to do some good, and thereby gain a meaningful existence, without experiencing much pleasure at all. Furthermore, since Wolf understands non-subjective value quite broadly, she grants that it can be generated not just through the achievements of those fighting for justice or peace, but also for those who accomplish great sporting achievements or contribute to art. This means, Wolf observes, that a meaningful life may not be better than a meaningless one *morally* speaking either. Despite this, people do want meaningful lives, Wolf claims, and this is an empirical fact (p. 97). On top of this, people also seem to think that this desire is laudable in some way. As Wolf puts it,

We think people positively ought to care that their lives be meaningful. It is disturbing, or at least regrettable, to find someone who doesn't care about this. ... We not only want to live meaningful lives, we want to want this—we approve of this desire, and think it is better for others if they have this desire, too (2014, pp. 97-98).

I agree with this observation and that it poses two questions worth answering: if a meaningful life is not necessarily happier or morally better than a meaningless one, then why do we desire that our lives be meaningful and why do we encourage and approve of this desire in others?

For Wolf, the answer to these questions can be found if we reflect on our place in the universe, specifically, the fact that we are *insignificant* in the grand scheme of things (p. 99). To live one's life in pursuit of only *subjective* value—i.e. personal satisfaction—demonstrates that one believes one's own happiness is the only thing that matters. If a person showed no interest in doing anything other than making themselves happy, they would be evidencing and/or affirming the assertion that they are, in fact, of primary significance amongst everything else in reality. Yet, the universe is unimaginably large compared to us, and we do not occupy any privileged position. More importantly, our own subjective perspective is merely one of billions, each of whom has “equal status with one's own” (p. 99). Thus, when we reflect on our true lack of significance, we can see that the former self-interested position is “solipsistic or silly” (p. 100), since it implicitly denies the truth that other people and perspectives exist and count for just as much as our own. Indeed, seeing this, one should develop a desire to promote goodness *outside* the boundaries of one's own life. For instance, one can recognise that others feel pain too, and the painfulness of that pain gives one reason to help them avoid it just as it gives one reason to avoid it oneself. In short, we would be motivated to pursue and generate *non-subjective* value which, if we are at least somewhat successful, would result in precisely the sort of life Wolf identified as meaningful (p. 102).

I believe this story might very well explain why people develop a desire to engage in the sorts of pro-social activities we would commonly call meaningful. Seeing the equal significance of others in the grand scheme of things, we begin to care about the quality of others' lives as well as the quality of our own. Thus, when we think about how to spend

our time, we see reason to help others and not just help ourselves. Nevertheless, I don't believe Wolf's account can explain our desire to obtain a meaningful life *itself*. It might explain why we desire for some non-subjective value to be produced in the world, but that is *not* the desire for a meaningful life; the desire for a meaningful life is specifically that *I be the one to produce that value*. When I devote myself to some project because it is a meaningful vocation, I don't just want that project to be successful, *I* want to be the person who succeeds.

Consider two scientists, Andy and Beth, who have both proposed research programmes with the aim of discovering a cure for cancer. Unfortunately, there is only one source of funding available and either scientist needs the whole pot in order to complete their research. Assume that either one would be successful in their aims if they received the funding, but that the other scientist would end up with no resources and, ultimately, a life empty of any significant achievement. According to Wolf's own account, it would transpire that the successful scientist would obtain a meaningful life, given they would be involved in producing a huge amount of non-subjective value for the world, whilst the unsuccessful scientist would be left with a rather meaningless existence.

Next, if we stipulate that Beth has purely altruistic motivations, and only wished to alleviate suffering, it follows that she would not care whether she or Andy secured the funding; so long as *somebody* cures cancer, she will have gotten what she wanted. This sort of attitude aligns with Wolf's account given Beth is acting out of selfless concern for others without allotting herself any privileged position or unjustified significance. Yet, as we have stipulated it, Beth is *indifferent* as to whether she secures the funding or not. Hence, she is indifferent to whether the great positive value will be produced by her or Andy, and ultimately, whether she or Andy will end up with the stock of meaningfulness on offer. Despite possessing the precise motivations generated by Wolf's anti-solipsistic outlook, therefore, Beth *does not* possess the desire for a meaningful life.

Let's further stipulate that Andy *is* motivated by a desire for a meaningful life, however that is constituted; it seems undeniable that Andy *would* have a strong preference to receive the funding himself. After all, if Beth were to obtain the money, then she would end up with the meaningful life and not him. A desire for meaningfulness is thus evidently distinct from the purely altruistic desires described by Wolf. Moreover, the desire for meaningfulness can even *conflict* with those purely altruistic desires in some cases. For instance, if we assume that Beth is a much better scientist than Andy, and that her cure for cancer would be more effective and less costly, anyone with purely altruistic desires (including Beth) would prefer that she got the funding rather than Andy. Yet Andy would presumably *still* prefer that he got the funding. Again, assuming he is motivated only by a desire for a meaningful life, it does not matter that his cure would be less effective than Beth's, since the possible future where she gets the funding and he does not would mean he ends up with a meaningless existence. The only way for him to obtain a meaningful life is in the possible future with *less* non-subjective value, and so that is the future he desires.

To reiterate, it is true that some people are motivated by a pure desire to promote non-subjective value and for the wrongs of the world to be put right, but these people, I submit, are not motivated by a desire for *meaningfulness* at all. Rather, they do things unselfishly and solely for the benefit of others, and only as a by-product do they end up with

meaningful lives. On the contrary, people who choose projects *because* they are meaningful, or specifically desire meaningful lives, are ultimately interested in getting something *for themselves*. Thus, the desire for a meaningful life *itself* is not accounted for by Wolf's theory. While she can explain why a person might want there to be more non-subjective value in the world, and hence why a person would be motivated to try and produce this value, she can't explain why it *matters* to us that we be the ones to produce it and not someone else. Reflections about our common insignificance give us an explanation as to why some people pursue the sorts of altruistic activities which, as an after-effect, render their lives meaningful. But they do not account for the specific desire to have a meaningful life, which is a patently self-interested desire and so *cannot* be grounded purely in a concern for the equal importance of others.

This truth of my claim can be seen even clearer when we consider another example of a meaningful life which Wolf herself gives: that of the Olympic athlete (p. 97). Wolf argues that such athletes, when they are successful, do achieve quite meaningful lives. Accepting this as true, it must be because there is some sort of non-subjective value produced when a person wins a gold medal or breaks a world record. But the crucial thing to note is that when such an athlete is motivated specifically by a desire for a meaningful life, they don't just want the world record to be broken by *anyone*, they want it to be broken by *them*. In fact, if they did not personally break it, they'd probably prefer in many cases, that it not be broken at all. Again, it simply cannot be that the desire for a meaningful life is an unselfish one, motivated by the thought that one is equally as significant or insignificant as anyone else; if it was, it would make no difference to the athlete whether *they* broke the record or someone else did, so long as the record-breaking value was produced, but this clearly *does* matter to them and a great deal.

Wolf gives a similar account elsewhere when she relates the motivation for meaningfulness to motives of love. To start, she discusses a few kinds of practical reasoning we can engage in (2010, p. 2). The first is reasoning based on self-interest and the second is reasoning based on impartial morality. When I buy myself a concert ticket to make myself happy, I'm acting on the first kind of reasoning. When I instead donate that money to a charity to help alleviate the suffering of strangers, I'm acting on the second. Yet, Wolf also identifies a third kind of reasoning based on reasons of love. We act out of reasons of love, she explains, when we do something that is not for our own sake, nor required of us by morality, but which is for the sake of something else—the thing we love (p. 4). For instance, I am not morally obligated to spend days shopping for a birthday present for my friend, nor do I enjoy it, but I do so anyway out of love for my friend because I wish to promote *their* wellbeing. Similarly, when I spend stressful months working on some philosophy paper, I am not motivated by concerns for my own happiness, nor do I believe it is my duty. Rather, I do so because I love philosophy, and want to promote the value unique to that practice.¹

Here, Wolf suggests that acting out of reasons of love is primarily what generates meaningfulness for us. Being motivated by love for other things—i.e. desiring to promote value outside one's own life—is “at the core of our ability to live meaningful lives” (p. 7).

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¹ This is one of Wolf's own examples (2010, pp. 5-6).

We can see how well this aligns with Wolf's other account outlined earlier; if one recognises one's insignificance in the world, then one may develop a concern for the wellbeing of other entities besides oneself, and if one acts on this concern or *love* for such individuals, practices, or ideals, then one will naturally end up producing various kinds of non-subjective value and gaining a meaningful life.

Like her earlier account, however, reasons of love cannot explain our desire for meaningfulness *itself*. In the scientist example, for instance, someone motivated by reasons of love (either for the patients or for the abstract project of 'curing disease') would be indifferent to who got the funding provided the cure was as effective as possible, as Beth is. A person who wanted the funding for themselves regardless of their skills, like Andy, would evidently *not* be acting out of this kind of love. Yet, we have already established that it is Andy who has the desire for meaningfulness and not Beth. Similarly, the meaning-motivated Olympic athlete cannot be motivated purely out of love for their sport, because then they would be equally satisfied whenever a record is broken, not just when *they* break a record.

Is there something inconsistent about the motivations of Andy and the athlete? So described, they seem to both want a particular kind of non-subjective value to be produced (a cure for cancer or a broken record), yet also wish for this value to be weakened or even lost altogether in certain circumstances. Why would they be motivated to secure these achievements if they didn't think they were worth achieving in general, and if they do think they are worth achieving, why would they ever desire for this achievement to be lessened or missed? Another way of putting it: if they don't love the goals they aim to achieve, then why are they aiming to achieve them, especially given the struggle may not be particularly pleasant nor (particularly in the athlete's case) morally required of them?

In fact, there is nothing inconsistent or puzzling going on here. To help, we can distinguish two different kinds of love. The first kind, where a person serves some individual or ideal for the sake of that entity, can be termed 'altruistic love'. This is what Wolf refers to as love. Yet, there is a second kind of love we might call 'selfish love', where a person acts to serve some individual or ideal but in a way that is ultimately motivated by a self-interested concern for their own life or wellbeing. A good case for differentiating these kinds of love is the following: Chris is in love with someone but knows they would be better off with a rival love-interest. As such, he willingly removes himself from the situation so that his beloved can be happier, even though that means he will be alone. Drew finds himself in an identical situation but works as hard as he can to support his beloved and demonstrate his value as a partner in the hope that, despite being the weaker option, he will be chosen over his love-rival.

Chris appears to be acting out of altruistic love, the kind of love Wolf identified, since he makes his decisions on the basis of what would be best for the object of his affection. Drew, on the other hand, acts out of selfish love. He serves the interests of his beloved, but only in so far as that will improve his own life; he wants his to make his beloved happy, ultimately, because making them happy will instrumentally allow him to acquire something he wants and thereby make his own life better off. Now, two things should be noted. First of all, despite Wolf's claims, it is apparent that the motivation to have a meaningful life has more in common with selfish love than altruistic love. As I have repeated, if Andy or the athlete acted out of reasons of altruistic love, they would not care whether they or someone else secured

the relevant achievements, but they do. What they want is to pursue some significant goal in order that their own lives be made better in virtue of being more meaningful. They desire to produce some non-subjective value, but only as a stepping-stone toward their final goal, which is acquiring something for themselves.

Second, we can see that there is nothing inconsistent about the motivations of selfish love, nor the desire for a meaningful life, as I have characterised it. If Andy and the athlete were acting out of altruistic love, then there would be something incoherent in their preferences (e.g. that Beth *not* get the funding, and that other athletes *not* succeed in breaking records). Yet, given they are acting out of selfish love, it is perfectly comprehensible that their preferences should be as they are: given curing cancer/breaking records is not their final goal, but only an instrumental one on the road to making their own lives better, why should they desire for other people to secure those achievements, especially when that makes it impossible for them to do so? Provided we understand their motivations properly, it is clear there is nothing inconsistent about wanting to connect one's own life with something of value and to continue wanting this even if it would result in the value of that object being diminished. Just as Drew wants to make his beloved happy, but only so that they will be *his*, Andy and the athlete want to cure cancer/break records, but only so that those achievements will be *theirs*.

We can make sense of Drew's selfish love desires because it is clear how being chosen by his beloved would improve his own life. Nevertheless, to make sense of Andy's selfish desire for meaningfulness, we still need some explanation as to why having a meaningful life (i.e. being successfully engaged in positively valuable achievements) makes one better off or why it is something we desire. In other words, we are still in need of an account of why people want *meaningfulness* itself. Wolf's story showed us one way people might acquire the motivation to do good, and hence end up with a meaningful life as a by-product. It also shows us why we might praise the desire to have a meaningful life itself, since that will often (but evidently *not always*, as in Andy's case) result in a larger amount of non-subjective value being produced in the world. Yet, we still lack an understanding of what is supposedly so choice worthy about a life of successful engagement in valuable projects.

One reasonable suggestion is simply that individuals with meaningful lives would be fitting objects of pride and admiration.² Our motivations for meaningfulness would not be very mysterious then. Arguably, pride is an important element of self-esteem and self-esteem is an important element of personal wellbeing. Therefore, since a meaningful life means a life of presumably pride-worthy achievements, it would make perfect sense that meaningfulness is something we typically desire. In fact, Wolf herself discusses just this idea (2010, p. 28). Nonetheless, there is perhaps an additional deeper explanation connected to this one, which can be grounded in the same bleak reflections on our insignificance introduced by Wolf further above. Specifically, like Wolf, one might agree that our desire for meaningfulness comes from this humbling awareness of our place in reality. However, where Wolf points to the fact that, as humans, our personal perspectives are all equally unimportant in an indifferent universe, I think the more relevant motivating factor is our

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² Antti Kauppinen, for example, *defines* meaningfulness as precisely this state of being (2012, p. 353).

temporal insignificance, more precisely, the fact that we only exist for a very short time before disappearing forever.

Dwelling on one's mortality is perhaps more commonly thought to produce feelings of futility rather than a motivation to live meaningfully, as Wolf herself notes: "People are sometimes 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" (2014, pp. 104-5). Ultimately, Wolf calls this line of reasoning ridiculous, and she may be correct. Nevertheless, even if she is, that doesn't stop it being true that many people *do* feel this way. Reasonably or not, there seems to be something scary about the thought of a future universe that no longer includes any piece of us whatsoever and no evidence that we had ever existed at all. However, rather than demotivating, I believe such thoughts actually *fuel* our desire to have meaningful lives. To explain: we're aware that our death will inevitably remove us from reality entirely and forever, but we want to avoid that prospect or at least mitigate it, and one way we try to mitigate it, I believe, is by leaving metaphorical pieces of ourselves behind in the world, pieces that will remain (for a while at least) even after we're gone. Death destroys our physical form, but when we do things like raising children, creating works of art, or producing other significant achievements, we can see ourselves *escaping* our physical bodies in a sense. We plant traces of our existence in those things that we have made or influenced on this planet and, crucially, these things can potentially outlast our physical lifespan.

If accurate, this would account for our desire for meaningful lives: despite the fact that meaningful endeavours are not always morally required (or even morally better) and don't always bring us pleasure, a person who has done meaningful things with their time will be able to survive their death, in some sense, in the people and creations they leave behind.³ A person who has lived meaninglessly, on the other hand, will have touched nothing beyond the boundaries of their own life, and so risks being destroyed by death in a way that is far more complete. Unlike Wolf's account, this story explains why we want to be *personally* responsible for some of the value that is put out into the world. If it is not *our* value out there, or *our* meaningful achievements, it cannot provide us any solace in the face of our personal mortality and temporal insignificance.

To conclude, Wolf is perhaps correct that our desire for meaningfulness is (in large part) a desire to have something to say in response to these pessimistic observations about our insignificance in the universe. Nevertheless it cannot be motivated by the humbling thought that we are not the sole possessor of all value—all this produces is the selfless desire for non-subjective goodness to come about, not that one personally be the cause of that goodness—rather it is motivated by the quieter and more troubling thought that we won't be around forever, and the faint hope that we might be able to do something about that.

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³ Some cast this attitude as deluded (e.g. Becker, 1973), others disagree (e.g. Thomas, forthcoming).

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