

"MEANING IN LIFE AND WHEN IT MATTERS"

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Susan Wolf in her series of lectures under the general heading '*Meaning in Life and why it Matters*' aims at trying to distinguish and to analyze the various kinds of reasons and motives which propel human actions and give meaning to our lives. According to Wolf, human actions, broadly speaking, are usually either propelled and/ or justified solely by egoistical motives i.e. where 'self- interest' is paramount, or by a combination of self-interest and a "higher", in the interest of humanity or the universe' kind of motivation. This distinction is however not exhaustive and this is exactly where Wolf focuses her attention.

Wolf asserts that there are other equally important motives and reasons that define our actions and our choices and ultimately give meaning to our lives and define our lives' perceived quality. Furthermore, she views meaningfulness as a defining motivational category alongside happiness and morality and asserts that the acknowledgement of "meaningfulness in life" may actually shape our understanding of happiness, morality and self-interest. However, Wolf believes that one cannot understand "meaningfulness in life" as a conceptual and motivational category without making value judgments, which however cannot only be subjective, but which must have a certain type and level of objectivity. She develops a theoretical notion of "meaning in life" which she baptizes the "Fitting Fulfillment View".

In the first part of her lectures Wolf attempts to explore the definition and desirability of "meaningfulness in life", whereas in the second part she tries to explain "Why meaning in life matters". I have followed this breakdown and in Chapter 2 I have attempted to clarify her definition of "meaning in life". In Chapter 3 I have tried to reiterate her positions and conclusions as regards why "meaning in life matters". Following this, in Chapter 4 I have noted the main comments and remarks on her work that her contemporary thinkers, John Koethe, Robert Adams, Nomy Arpaly and Jonathan Haidt had to offer. At the end of each commentary by these four thinkers, I have made brief reference to Wolf's reply to each of them. Lastly, in Chapter 5 I have attempted to highlight why the concept of "meaning in life" has gained importance over time and how it is affected by changes in concepts pertaining to morality, pleasure and tradition. I also wonder at what point in time we should make an assessment of whether our lives are meaningful or not, and whether the duration of one's feelings of fulfillment co-define whether a life is meaningful or not.

Chapter 2 - Analysis and Definition of "Meaning in Life"

2.1. "Reasons of Love" and their importance

Wolf notes that humans are not only motivated by their quest for happiness, a sense of duty or morality. There are many other, oftentimes overlooked, impersonal reasons people act on. Some of the strongest motivators in life are for example love and passion. Collectively Wolf refers to these as "reasons of love", whether of another human being, an idea or an action. These "reasons of love" may in many cases not only explain, but also justify our actions. At the same time, we may also be propelled by certain values that we perceive or imagine and which "lie outside of ourselves". A theoretical greater good or value. This may often be expressed in terms of "loving an activity". And it is exactly this "love" which leads people to disregard and sometimes even to sacrifice their personal well-being for the "activity or person they love". Wolf mentions toiling for the sake of philosophy itself or for the sake of the aesthetics of a garden as examples in point.

However, loving intentions and actions undertaken based on these loving intentions, don't automatically lead to the conclusion that the ensuing acts are justified or just. It is rather pretentious to believe that we always know what is best for ourselves and others, just because our actions are motivated by love. Wolf notes that "*love can be misplaced or misguided*"¹. We might focus on a cause which is certainly not worthy of the intensity of our attention, or even worse, which is not worthy at all.

Wolf aspires to exploring the importance and justifiability of engaging in actions, objects or subjects which are worthy of love, despite the fact that this engagement may not enhance one's welfare, morality and happiness nor contribute to a greater cause. Building on this thought, Wolf believes that our proneness to being motivated by reasons of love is essential to our ability to lead meaningful lives, whereas she confesses to struggling with what this ultimately and practically boils down to. Wolf attempts to offer a theoretical definition of a meaningful life, which can at least be used as a tool to fuel and further discussion on this subject.

2.2. Wolf's definition of "meaning in life"

¹ Wolf S. (2010), "Meaning in life and why it matters", Princeton University Press, p. 6

Meaning in life is oftentimes a vague, but envied notion or illusion of a life which is characterized by a certain level of depth. An undefined antithesis to an empty, shallow and purposeless life. The importance and need for a meaningful life is deeply engrained in human nature. It is indicative that thoughts about meaning in life are not uncommon when in the face of extreme and/or life-threatening situations, where we, nearly automatically, review and reevaluate the totality of our lives. Wolf concludes that without there being any universal or specific definition of meaning in life, there is somehow a common kind of understanding and feeling about this abstract idea. Wolf aims at capturing this abstract idea and putting it into words.

Wolf proposes the following definition of meaning in human life i.e. "*meaning arises from loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way*"². Rather than picking at this definition word for word, Wolf tries to explain in broader terms the subjective and objective interlinked elements of her conception of meaning. The element of "love" involves subjective feelings, attitudes, commitments and emotions, whereas the element of "worthiness of love" entails a certain objective standard. Not all objects are worthy of love, neither is our choice of what is worthy of love sufficient to justify its worthiness.

Wolf eloquently and elegantly summarizes her bi-part conception as "*meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness*"³. The first necessary element for meaningfulness is a subjective attraction which entails a certain level of passion, excitement and engagement. This in itself is however not sufficient to justify meaningfulness in life, since the object of commitment or involvement may be petty or insignificant. Wolf thus states that a second element is a necessary condition for meaningfulness, namely, there must be some level of objective attractiveness or else an objective standard of worthiness of involvement. However, it is very important to stress the necessary active and positive tension and affirmation in the relationship between the subject and the object of attraction. Simply passively observing or tolerating an object or its value is by no means sufficient for a meaningful life.

Wolf calls on the Aristotelian endoxic method of using commonly accepted ideas as starting points for the justification of her choice of the afore stated definition of "meaningfulness in life". She sees her definition as the marriage between two common ideas about a life well lived. The first being that it doesn't matter what you pursue in life as long as it is something you love and are passionate

² *id.*, p. 8

³ *id.*, p. 9

about, and the second being that you need to get involved in something "larger than yourself", in the broader sense of the word, in order to live a truly satisfactory life.

Being passionate about something entails a subjective element and we usually use that in order to assess and label the quality of our own lives. When we are not content with our own lives we usually use subjective characterizations like empty, void, meaningless, useless and pointless. Whereas engaging in something independent and greater than oneself entails the objective element Wolf underlines. We usually characterize and evaluate our own life and the life of others as meaningful or not, depending on the level of objective worth, the value, we feel we can fairly allocate or not. To highlight her point, Wolf uses Sisyphus and his everlasting pointless struggle to roll a great boulder up the hill just to see it roll down again as an example of a meaningless life. Even if Sisyphus were passionately engaged in his activity, it was objectively pointless and therefore not sufficient to justify a meaningful life.

Wolf thus, attempts to identify a category of value, other than happiness and morality, which can justify meaningfulness in life. She distinguishes this from practical advice and questions about how one should live and what one should aspire to. She does however acknowledge the need for both a subjective element of desire and an objective element of worthiness of desirability. Wolf goes on to analyze these subjective and objective key distinctive elements, which a human life should contain in order to feel and be meaningful.

2.3. The subjective element: "The Fulfillment View"

Wolf starts by analyzing the common notion that we should find our passion in life and pursue it. She calls this the "Fulfillment View". The common justification for this notion is that pursuing our passion promotes our well-being and gives us a good feeling, which in turn could be associated with meaningfulness. However, Wolf makes a distinction between two potentially competing types of good feelings, i.e. feelings of fulfillment and simply pleasurable feelings. Wolf defines the feelings one has when passionately pursuing and actively engaging in an activity as "feelings of fulfillment". However, leading a fulfilling life may come at a price. It is not only no guarantee for happiness or joy, but to the contrary, it may be accompanied by pain, suffering, sacrifice, stress and disappointment. Having said this, the fact that many people are often willing to pay a hefty price for feelings of fulfillment, not only adds to the perceived value of these feelings, but also provides an argument in favor of the importance of fulfillment in life.

According to Wolf the "Fulfillment View" can be seen as a proposal for the things that make life meaningful. It is a hedonistic qualitative statement about how one can lead the best possible life. But this is also its weak spot according to Wolf. Given the diversity and the multitude of things for which people feel passionately and which grant them a sense of fulfillment, it seems insufficient to use only our subjective perception of quality of life as a criterion for a meaningful life. Ultimately, our feeling of fulfillment is not the only thing that counts. How, i.e. through which actions, we achieve a sense of fulfillment is important too.

In order to prove her point and to bypass the natural aversion we have to making negative judgments about other people and their choices in life, Wolf uses a thought experiment developed by Taylor⁴ in which the fictitious Sisyphus features loving to roll boulders up the mountain time and time again. In this thought experiment Sisyphus is no longer burdened by this task. To the contrary, he is totally fulfilled by and passionate about this, nevertheless futile, task. Given the task Sisyphus performs remains totally pointless, despite the fact he is now enjoying himself immensely, most of us would still think his life is empty and that something is missing. The question is what exactly is missing?

2.4. The objective element: "The Larger-than-Oneself View"

Wolf answers that question by turning to the common notion that one leads a meaningful life when one is engaged in something which is metaphorically "larger than oneself". She calls this the "Larger than Oneself View". Now defining the notion "larger than oneself" is quite tricky according to Wolf. It may be understood as a suggestion to get involved in a cause which is more important, i.e. of a higher value, than ourselves.

However, this definition is problematic when for example our cause involves value created for a single other person, whose value as such cannot be higher than our own value, i.e. when one cares for a single other individual. The same applies in the case where the cause we are involved in is not even targeted to benefitting other humans, i.e. when we are involved in an animal charity. According to Wolf these concerns could be mitigated if we would define the notion "larger than oneself" as involvement with something "other/ independent/ outside of oneself". In that case, both being dedicated to a single

⁴ Taylor R. (1970), "Good and Evil", New York: Macmillan, Chapter 18

needy compatriot and actively being engaged in an aquatic wildlife preservation project would fall under the definition "larger (i.e. other) than oneself".

2.5. The need for a bipartite approach to "Meaning in Life"

Now in order to come to a comprehensive definition of a meaningful life, Wolf states that neither the "Fulfillment View" nor the "Larger than Oneself View" in isolation suffice. Quite to the contrary, according to Wolf it is questionable whether these two views in themselves, applied separately, actually contribute to a person's life being good.

Wolf professes that the subjective element of the "Fulfillment View" has to be combined with the objective element of the "Larger than Oneself View" in order for a person to lead a meaningful life. These two elements must be conceived of in a related and united fashion in order to constitute and to justify the characterization of a life as "meaningful". She questions whether a life can be called meaningful, when an individual undertakes an action which he subjectively perceives as fulfilling, and which at the same time, accidentally, but never the less effectively, entails something of a "larger" value, if that individual himself really doesn't care about the "larger than himself" effect of his actions. Wolf states that most people wouldn't characterize such a life a meaningful, even if the "larger" value had been inadvertently or accidentally achieved.

However, even in the eventuality that someone contributes to something of a "larger value" in a less than accidental manner, this still would not significantly enhance their own lives if they didn't feel any emotional commitment themselves. The subjective element of being genuinely interested and vested in the sought after outcome is a necessary element in order for us humans to perceive of a life as meaningful. Wolf underlines that even if intellectually we understand that our contribution or actions are of a "larger value", if we are not emotionally aligned to this, we usually will feel that our life is lacking meaning.

Getting involved in something which is "larger than oneself" is expected to make us feel good, because for example recognition might ensue. However, this is not enough for us to perceive of our lives as meaningful. Hopefully, this involvement with something "larger than ourselves" will also generate feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment. According to Wolf, if both conditions are met (objective reward and subjective fulfillment) we may speak of a life which seems, if not is, meaningful.

2.6. The consequences of the "Sisyphus Fulfilled" thought experiment

As mentioned earlier, Wolf evokes a thought experiment by Richard Taylor, in which Sisyphus is suddenly transformed from being perpetually bored and eternally toiling at a futile task, into being blissfully fulfilled and content with his equally futile task. Taylor supported the view that Sisyphus was better off this way. Wolf disagrees. She states that, contrary to what Taylor thinks, most people would characterise Sisyphus' life as meaningless, despite the fact he himself now felt fulfilled.

Moreover, Wolf sees Sisyphus as worse off, rather than better off, after his transformation. From an hedonistic point of view his feelings are predominantly positive and this of course is a good thing, but it has a price card attached to it. Her reasoning is that in order for Sisyphus to find stone rolling fulfilling he must be delusional or dull, or suffer from a total lack of imagination of any other more worthwhile activity. Thus, Wolf concludes Sisyphus is worse off.

Taking this thought experiment a step further, Wolf states that in all likelihood Sisyphus is deluded and thus conceives of his objectively futile task as fulfilling. A certain element of cognition is necessary, according to Wolf, in order for us to perceive the subject or object of our commitment as objectively valuable or worthwhile.

Having said this, Wolf concludes that mere subjective fulfillment is defective in a certain way and less coveted than fulfillment which arises from a cause, which is objectively more valuable, larger or suitable. So the objective criterion of actively and positively engaging with something 'larger' should not be taken in isolation, but should be directly linked to the subjective feelings of the individual, and vice versa, in order for a life to seem or to be meaningful. As Wolf eloquently summarizes, "*meaning arises from loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way*".

2.7. Wolf's "Fitting Fulfillment View"

Wolf has already asserted that we derive a lot of pleasure on a subjective level from engaging in the things we love. However, a feeling of fulfillment and satisfaction in itself is not sufficient for a meaningful life. The object of the passionate involvement should have a certain level of objective worth in an independent kind of manner. Wolf baptizes this notion as "The Fitting Fulfillment View".

According to Wolf, we have an inherent need and concern that other people also perceive our lives as valuable and meaningful. We also have the urge and, to a certain extent, the capacity to view ourselves and our lives from a "third party point of view" in an attempt to achieve some level of objectivity. However, we also have an inherent need for self-esteem, i.e. to be able to respect and take pride in ourselves and our achievements. The combination of these needs entails that we want to be able to take pride in ourselves, not only when others observe us, but also when we observe ourselves from a bird's view. Thus, it is of importance for us humans to lead meaningful lives.

Also, we mortals have a high level of awareness of our mortality and our finite passage on earth. The idea that our life might end without leaving behind a trace of its existence is distressing to many of us. These upsetting thoughts might be ameliorated by actively, and to a certain degree successfully⁵, engaging in projects of independent worth and objective value, which might outlive our mortal beings and call on the appreciation of generations to come, thus helping us defeat "death and oblivion". Leading a meaningful life through "Fitting Fulfillment" might actually provide solace to those of us who fret about our cosmic temporality.

However, we humans are not only preoccupied with leading a meaningful life when we are in tune with our cosmic insignificance. We oftentimes have an inner, unexpressed urge to engage in something outside of ourselves, which has some kind of social significance in the sense that it can (in theory) be acknowledged by some part of a community. This urge for a degree of actual or even potential, future, recognition of our work or actions by at least part of society gives us a sense of "belonging" to a certain group of people.

Although Wolf stresses that the desire to lead a fulfilling and meaningful life through positive engagement with something of a larger value, is related to our sociability, it is not a sine qua non. Some humans may lead meaningful lives in obscurity or in isolation, whereas others may reap the laurels of public acknowledgement and still see their lives as lacking meaning.

Wolf acknowledges that her analysis may be thought to be limited to persons of a higher intellectual and socio-economical level, situated in a certain place and time, given that the struggle for the basics in life, if not for mere survival, is all consuming and leaves little space for the luxury of seeking for "meaning in life". Wolf acknowledges this, but nevertheless states that the fact that our

⁵ Wolf S. (2010), "Meaning in life and why it matters", Princeton University Press, p. 28
Wolf thus touches, but does not elaborate, on another criterion for a meaningful life, i.e. a certain level of success.

preoccupation with "meaning in life" can only reveal itself when certain basic conditions are met, does not diminish the importance of the question itself.

Needless to say that it doesn't really matter and it is not defining in itself whether or not we actively and consciously consider the meaningfulness of our lives. The fact that some of us do not consciously vocalize the independent worth of the projects we are actively involved in, does not mean that the independent value of our projects are indifferent to us. Equally, those who lead a meaningful life will in all likelihood be on the receiving end of various types of feedback regarding the value in their lives and not need to resort to deliberately contemplating about their lives as meaningful as such.

Wolf concludes that our inherent need for others to view our lives as significant and meaningful, for us to be able to see ourselves from a third man perspective and for us to want to feel part of a community that can relate to us, are pervasive and universal. These needs can most probably only be met by leading a meaningful life i.e. actively and positively engaging in something larger than ourselves. It is not only about the subjective feeling that life is meaningful, but about life being meaningful, appreciated and valued at least by certain others by some objective standard.

Chapter 3 - Why "Meaning in Life" matters?

3.1. Wolf's concerns regarding the objective element of her definition of "Meaning in Life".

In her first lecture "Meaning in Life" Wolf analysed what she calls the "Fitting Fulfillment View", whereby life is characterized as meaningful if one is actively and positively engaged in something objectively worthwhile. In her second lecture headed "Why it Matters?", Wolf acknowledges and attempts to answer the difficult questions which are mainly related to the objective element of her definition of a meaningful life. She concedes that if there cannot be a coherent discussion or conclusion regarding the "objective or independent value" of projects, her definition of "meaning in life" cannot hold. Lastly, Wolf enlightens us regarding her view about why it matters that we think of our lives in terms of meaningfulness, besides happiness and morality.

Wolf commences her analysis regarding the "objective" element of her Fitting Fulfillment View by making some intuitive observations. She states that useful activities are often seen as more meaningful than useless ones. Also, the harder and more challenging an activity is and the more it

stretches the limits of our capacities and helps us evolve and develop, the more respect and meaning it commands. Of course a multitude of very different activities meet Wolf's objectivity standard, including of course any activities which are morally pleasing.

It is exactly this plenitude and diversity of meaningful activities that prompted Wolf to define the objective element of her "Fitting Fulfillment View" in a general and minimally exclusive way, i.e. as an activity which has a value which is "independent of ourselves". Thus, Wolf initially excludes all activities which are merely subjectively pleasurable and/ or fulfilling. She does however concede that this exclusive definition might be a bit too farfetched, because it fails to grant at least some value to certain purely subjective activities, even if the time, effort and opportunity cost which is invested in them seems out of proportion.

3.1.1. The Perils of Elitism

Wolf's notion of the objective element as being "independent of oneself" also needs further investigation. Why should an activity which is insufficient to give value to our own lives, suffice if it gives value other lives? Who should be the judge of this? Which activities have value? These are questions to which there are no uniformly fashioned answers.

Any person presenting himself as an authority on the subject is in danger of being considered or becoming biased, narrow-minded and bogged down in his own spatiotemporal domain. The remedy for this is, according to Wolf, awareness of this fact and one's fallibility, and humility when passing judgments. Wolf suggests that our judgements best be branded as merely tentative and not as univocal authoritative statements.

There is no single group of specially educated or trained people who can judge which projects are of value and which are not. Anyone is entitled to ask and to attempt to answer this question. Our judgements can, should and are continuously shaped, improved and broadened by being exposed to different opinions, cultures, concepts and ideas. Wolf also briefly touches on the idea that the things we value change over time and this is an idea to which I shall return later on.

3.1.2. Is there such a thing as an "objective standard" for evaluating activities, which contribute to a meaningful life?

Wolf further questions whether we can even speak of an objective value in order to judge whether an activity is worthwhile or not. Wolf argues that in theory every egocentric activity could per definition be excluded from contributing to a "meaningful life" since it does not entail engagement with something that is "larger or outside of oneself". But does this statement hold? Why is the egocentric act of taking care of oneself less meaningful than taking care of a loved one? Wolf stresses that this ambiguity can be resolved if we realize that activities may be very valuable in a certain way, but not in a such a way that they contribute to life's meaningfulness from an external, impartial point of view.

Wolf also notes that we can be mistaken about whether an activity has the level of value necessary for it to provide meaning in life. Also, we can conclude in retrospect that a certain activity gives meaning in life, or even experience a sudden awakening to such conclusion. Contrary to this, we can find meaning in activities which in the end didn't seem to have that potential. Even more so, we can foster the belief that our activities are insignificant and lack meaning, while others disagree with that idea and perceive them as very meaningful and precious. So things are not so black and white.

Wolf continues by stating that in order for her "Fitting Fulfillment View" to hold, we must somehow accept subject independent value judgments and make a clean cut from pure subjectivism as regards value claims. However, she concedes that there is also the problematic category of activities of value which fall between the two poles of subjectivism and objectivism.

Sometimes, a greater value is allocated to something if many people endorse it. But why would the opinion of a group weigh more heavily than one's own opinion? Or what makes us believe that a group cannot be mistaken? Wolf notes that working with hypothetical reactions of idealized humans might be more promising. What would hypothetically be valued by an ideally rational, understanding, mentally well-balanced and knowledgeable individual? But then again, why is the valuation of a hypothetical being more accurate than that of an actually existing human?

Wolf concludes that because until now philosophy hasn't come up with an adequate, complete and arguable account of the objectivity of values, we need to be tentative in our judgments regarding which particular activities and which categories of activities promote meaning in life. Wolf's personal inclination is to be generous about which activities can potentially contribute to a meaningful life. She assumes that what many people over a long time span have perceived as valuable, is such, but concedes

that this criterion is not sufficient in itself since many people have passionately done the weirdest things, which were ultimately worthwhile.

3.2. Why "Meaningfulness" Matters?

Wolf's realization that she cannot identify specific activities or lives as meaningful or not, doesn't undermine the significance of the philosophical question "why meaning in life matters". Just referring to "meaning in life" as something that is to be desired and targeted, brings us one step further to attaining it. Even if no systematic definition of the concept can be given, the mere mention of it might, although it seems unlikely, be a catalyst for change. However, having said this, contemplating the concept is not a necessary condition for leading a meaningful life, whereas people who lead vacant lives, will probably not remedy this through thinking about it.

Nevertheless, Wolf sees an intellectual preoccupation with what is, and moreover, what is not meaningful as important for furthering our knowledge of ourselves and our values. The realization that there are worthwhile activities which do not further happiness or morality, may modify our understanding of these concepts. It doesn't do justice to the versatile nature of our actions to try to squeeze them into either the self-interest or the morality categories of motivation. This may even lead to the distortion of our choices and activities. Wolf tries to further explore the relation between meaning in life and self-interest and morality.

3.2.1. Meaning in life and Self-Interest

Already in her first lecture Wolf clearly stated that meaningfulness is one of many important components of leading a good life. The latter is in one's self-interest. However, a subjectively happy life does not coincide with, and is not sufficient for a life to be called "meaningful". Thus, the best life, which is in our self-interest, is not one in which we subjectively have the qualitatively most superior experience. An objective element of value needs to be added to the experience in order to make a life meaningful. This entails a non-egoistical mindset, which promotes openness and responsiveness to values which lie outside of us.

Wolf also points to the acknowledgement of a certain indeterminacy and difficulty in the application of the concept of self-interest, since many things which contribute to a meaningful life are far from pleasant and joyful. It is not always obvious that on a strictly personal level our lives are better when they are "meaningful", than if they were easier and more pleasant. Also, self-interest is oftentimes irrelevant from a practical standpoint, given the fact that we are oftentimes motivated by what Wolf calls "reasons of love", which usually provide meaning in our lives.

3.2.2. Meaning in Life and Morality

The way we perceive the concept of "meaning in life" also affects the way we understand both the content and the role of morality in our lives. Oftentimes, actions which are meaning-enhancing are graded with a higher morality mark than those merely motivated by self-interest or self-pleasure. But from a moral point of view it is equally acceptable for us to pursue the opportunities and the values which lead to both a meaningful life and a happy one.

Wolf evokes the work of Bernard Williams, who brings to light the "relevance of meaning for morality"⁶ and the potential conflict of these two notions. In doing so Williams disagrees with both utilitarian and Kantian moralists. He deems it equally absurd for the utilitarian to expect, in case of conflict, for a person to give up the cause which makes him get up in the morning and for which he is willing to die in a ditch, in favor of whichever decision the utilitarian scale dictates, as it is to defer to "impartial Kantian morality"⁷.

Wolf acknowledges the critique of William's conclusions by stating that morality should indeed take into account the sacrifices made by an individual and weigh them against the interests of others which morality wants to protect. However, in a standoff between a single person's *raison d'être* and surpassing the limits of what morality permits, morality and the interests of the majority must prevail.

Nevertheless, Wolf notes that this critique misses the special connection that Williams tries to make between "meaning" and "having a reason to live". The reasons which give meaning in our lives, give us a reason to live, even if for our own sakes we are not particularly interested in living. Moreover, the reasons which give meaning to our lives are causes for which we are even willing to die. In light of

⁶ Wolf S. (2010), "Meaning in life and why it matters", Princeton University Press, p. 55

⁷ *id.*, 55

this, it isn't that straight forward for moralists to demand that someone sacrifices "one's own interest" in the name of morality in general, because the cause which is to be sacrificed might not only be one's own, but also that of another!

Furthermore, Wolf questions why morality should automatically trump the things which constitute one's reason to live. People usually want to be moral out of solidarity, kindness, self-interest and a need to justify their actions to others. But would these reasons suffice if our "*raison d'être*" was obliterated. William's idea should however not be construed as a free pass for people to do anything they want in the name of their "*raison d' être*", but rather as a starting point for a discussion about the place of morality in our lives.

Wolf also questions whether the external standpoint from which we judge whether our life is meaningful, coincides with that from which we make moral judgments. Morality from the perspective of our position within the community is chiefly concerned with our respectfulness of others in return for an equal measure in respect, whereas from the perspective of our place in the cosmos, morality is probably only one consideration among many. Moral values may conflict with religion or even with other moral dictates. That is why Williams comments that morality is not guaranteed to win in case of a standoff with an activity or project for which one is willing to die⁸.

This last comment by Williams has certain implications. It has a vacillating and tempering effect on our judgments of people who face conflicts between morals and the projects which give meaning to their lives. Also, given that a project must objectively be worthwhile in order for it to be meaningful, if it doesn't live up to that objective standard, it cannot reasonably be seen as conflicting with (objective) moral values. Moreover, not every conflict between morality and a project which gives meaning in life needs to be insurmountable and making a choice either way might actually be an enhancing experience.

The possibility of conflict between morality and meaning in life cannot be avoided. However, in most cases meaning and morality will converge. Usually, "being moral" in itself is not considered as an activity which gives "meaning in life", but being involved in specific morally pleasing and laudable projects is. And usually we are motivated to immerse ourselves in projects which are "larger than ourselves" through reasons of love, not in order to adhere to morals. The more love motivates, the smaller the role of duty and morality will be.

⁸ *id.*, p.58

Chapter 4 - Comments on Wolf's lectures titled "Meaning in Life and Why it Matters" and her response.

4.1. Should the objective worth of an artistic project be measured by its success?

Comments by John Koethe⁹ and response by Susan Wolf.

John Koethe, on the whole, is sympathetic to Wolf's definition of the concept of a meaningful life as one in which a person is actively and positively engaged in a project of objective worth. Koethe does however note that coming to the conclusion that a project is objectively worthwhile is quite controversial and arbitrary, since the criteria by which this is judged are obscure and contestable. More so when referring to artistic or aesthetic projects.

As a poet and philosopher, Koethe applies Wolf's idea of "objective worth" to aesthetic projects and comments that it is not clear whether Wolf professes that "objective worth" should be measured in terms of the "kind" of project we value or in terms of how "successful" a project is. An artist oftentimes makes an aesthetic leap of faith into the unknown and is 'expected' to push boundaries, to be ambitious and to challenge the artistic status quo. This entails a certain amount of recklessness, which is paired with a high risk of "failure". This is moreover the case since "success" and "failure" of artistic projects are often elusive, highly subjective and hard to define.

Koethe applies Bernard Williams' example of Gauguin, who left his wife and five children in Denmark without any financial means to speak of in order to pursue his passion for painting in Paris. Due to his remarkable talent he is probably generally "excused" for his choices (although probably not by his family). But would that have been the case if he made the same choices, but was unsuccessful at painting? Probably not. This example shows that the meaningfulness of one's life may largely depend on the successful outcome of the choices made.

But not all cases are as clear-cut as the previous example. Sometimes the artist himself has a hard time distinguishing between the reality or the delusion that his or her work are aesthetically serious and successful and consequently whether his or her life is meaningful or not. Koethe stresses that this possibility of delusions or mistakes as to the value of an artist's work is inherent to the nature

⁹ *id.*, p. 67-74 & 104-109

of art. The crucial question however is not whether something is art, but whether it is significant art, which, as stated above, is hard to answer since there are no obvious criteria for success in art.

Although Koethe says that he isn't perturbed by the inherent possibility that aesthetic endeavors can be the products of delusion or mistake, he doesn't reject the possibility that art has an objective value based on, all be it not very satisfactory, criteria, like the opinion of a suitably constituted community or a clearly recognizable competence.

In her response to Koethe's comments, Wolf agrees that she too finds the success or not of projects of importance when judging whether a life is meaningful. However, the tricky part is defining the degree of success which is needed. This depends on the details of each case and the potential of a project. Wolf also notes that most people instinctively characterize their lives as meaningless when the projects to which they have committed their heart and soul fail. This is a natural reaction, but others might not share such a harsh opinion. In any case, the eventuality of failure and thus a negative self-assessment, would in all likelihood not deter people who are driven to pursuing their worthwhile passion.

4.2. Does the subjective element of meaningfulness need to encompass a feeling of fulfillment?

Comments by Robert Adams¹⁰ and partial response by Susan Wolf.

4.2.1. Is the success of a project necessary in order for it to be meaningful?

Robert Adams characterizes Wolf's view of "meaning in life" as a good basis for furthering thought about this underlit issue. Adams wants to explore why "reasons of love" as subjective motivational forces for human activity do not suffice and need to be complemented by a "feeling of fulfillment" in order to call a life "meaningful".

Succeeding in a project one loves is a rather obvious way to achieve a feeling of fulfillment. However, Adams believes that engaging in a project which doesn't have a successful outcome can provide for a meaningful life, even if the principal doesn't feel that way himself. Others might disagree with him and nevertheless perceive his life as meaningful. Who is to say?

¹⁰ *id.*, p. 75-84 & 109-115

Wolf states that if we do not have a positive and rewarding feeling when we accomplish the object of our engagement, it is questionable whether we experience "meaningfulness". If this, according to Adams, means that we have to judge our life to be meaningful, also in retrospect, he disagrees. Experiencing meaningfulness in retrospect doesn't change the "meaningfulness" we felt at the time events actually took place.

Having said this, Adams questions whether the subjective element of feeling good, either at the time of action and/ or in retrospect, needs to be an element of "meaningful life". One might experience a variety of emotions, not necessarily all pleasant, while passionately pursuing a worthwhile object. Adams concludes that one can have a positive and fulfilling life without the joy of the fruition of one's hopes and projects.

In her response to Adams' comments, Wolf admits that he is right about the inadequacy of her characterization of fulfillment. Wolf explains that she uses "fulfillment" as a catch-all term in order to highlight the subjective and qualitative character which is needed for a meaningful life and to contrast it with the objective element of worthiness she introduces. She concedes that there is no single kind of experience which everybody who has a meaningful life experiences, neither do experiences and feelings remain the same over time.

Wolf, in her response to Adams, also notes that if one stops at the idea that meaning is derived from acting out of love, one runs the risk of overlooking many instances where people genuinely feel and act out of love and despite that, feel their lives are meaningless. Wolf concludes that it might be wiser to refrain from settling on a specific word to acknowledge that there is spectrum of experiences, including love and fulfillment, which reflect the intentional and positive commitment a person feels towards an object in order to have a meaningful life.

In her response to Adams, Wolf notes that she agrees with his comment that life doesn't need to also be meaningful in retrospect. It suffices that the principal experienced it as such at the time. Moreover, the meaning we find in living, is the most desirable kind. Also, realizing by looking back in time that we were involved in a project that was meaningful, can positively impact the narrative of our lives.

4.2.2. The use of the word "meaning" in everyday language.

Adams continues by making another point, namely that Wolf has abstained from looking into the other uses of the word "meaning" in language. In everyday language "meaning" is related both to intentionality, i.e. when one means to do something, one intends to do something, and to the specific context within which something is said. Adams believes that when Wolf refers to the cognitive component of fulfillment this entails the concept of intentionality geared towards something which is objectively good.

Also, in everyday language, "meaning" can be related to what a person's words and life mean to others. What a person's life means to himself is of course subjective, whereas what that person's life means to others is intersubjective, rather than solely objective. A person's deeds, for example, might convey meaning for and to others. It is a matter of communication.

But the meaning of an utterance also largely depends on the rational structure within which it appears. Adams believes that the same holds for the meaning in our lives, which needs a certain level of structural and rational coherence and stability over time. Adams makes a point that, for a meaningful life we do not only need a certain level of "coherent purposes of our own to act on". We also need a coherent social context, because we do not create meaning in our lives in isolation from our surroundings.

4.2.3. Can "meaning in life" be seen as separate and unrelated to morality?

The last point Adams makes is pointing out the difficulty of viewing Wolf's objective element of "meaning in life" as separate and unrelated to morality. Adams stresses how interlinked these two concepts are. Adams questions whether it makes a difference if someone is motivated by impartial moral considerations, or by some partial motive like patriotism or love of country, which are not necessarily purely objective goods of the kind Wolf requires for a meaningful life. He states that ultimately life is judged as meaningful based on a generally positive life-narrative, even though it might contain darker spots.

4.3. The role and importance of objective worth in Wolf's definition of "Meaning in Life"¹¹.

Comments by Nomy Arpaly and response by Susan Wolf.

Nomy Arpaly challenges Wolf's idea that in order for a life to be meaningful it doesn't suffice that a person is actively pursuing something he loves, it is also necessary that the object of that love is objectively worthwhile. Wolf uses caring for a goldfish as an example. Even if this activity completely fulfills a person, according to Wolf he still leads a meaningless life, since caring for a goldfish is not an objectively worthwhile task. Arpaly uses the same example and retorts that the person Wolf is describing is a fiction of the latter's imagination. According to Arpaly, no normal person feels that way.

That is not to say that there aren't any people whatsoever who feel that way. Arpaly concedes that some people are terribly deluded about facts and incapable of remembering or even experiencing basic feelings of fulfillment. Also, there are cases, like mentally retarded children, who gain a lot, both personally and socially, from caring for a goldfish, which brings meaning to their lives. Thus Arpaly comes to the conclusion that one doesn't have to rely on the objective value of goldfish-caring in order to explain why this activity can't be meaningful for a normal adult, but can be meaningful for a retarded child. Intuition and empirical evidence are enough to know what is meaningful to a person, we don't need to appeal to objective criteria.

Arpaly also questions Wolf's presumption that "meaning" functions as a value and a motive in itself, just as self-interest and morality do. Arpaly believes that love or a passion for something are motivators, not the achievement of "meaning in life" in itself. That is a "thought too many" according to her. "Meaning in life" just encompasses the legitimacy of a plethora of values, it is not a value in itself as such. Arpaly closes her comments by posing a variety of questions regarding the hierarchy of values, whether they should be judged "within reason" and what the implications thereof are and what happens when values compete or conflict with each other. Arpaly is provoking a sequel to Wolf's lectures.

In her response to Arpaly's comments, Wolf agrees with Arpaly's statement that we act out of love for something, not for the sake of "meaning in life" in itself. She notes that reasons of love are not a species of a "meaningful life" and that our choice to do something out of love would in all likelihood not be

¹¹ *id.*, p. 85-91 & 115-123

affected by the idea that this action wouldn't necessarily make our life more meaningful. There will be other, unrelated to "meaning in life", independently valuable reasons why we pursue what we love.

Wolf also questions why Arpaly's emphasis on being "normal" is of importance and why it should be preferable. Wolf concedes that Arpaly's "simple fulfillment view" is in a way broader than her "fitting fulfillment view", which pleads for the need of an objectively worthwhile cause. In Arpaly's view fulfillment is mainly about the actual fulfillment of one's psychological needs and one's human potential, versus the mere feeling of fulfillment. So Arpaly is referring to a kind of objective condition, but not to any objective values.

Wolf however questions why it is so desirable to comply with human nature, which is very difficult to define in the first place. If fulfillment of our human nature corresponds to meaningfulness, what happens when our nature is not good? Also, why can't we derive meaning in life by transcending our nature, even if that is not in our self-interest? Shouldn't a person's life also be admirable in some way by himself and others in order to be seen as meaningful?

4.4. Is "objective worth" really a necessary ingredient for a meaningful life¹²?

Comments by Jonathan Haidt and response by Susan Wolf.

4.4.1. Vital engagement and the necessity of the element of "objective value"

Jonathan Haidt attempts to facilitate solving the riddle of "objective value" in Wolf's definition of "meaning in life" by elaborating on the concepts of "vital engagement" and of "hive psychology" taken together. By vital engagement Haidt refers to an experience of "flow", i.e. the psychological state of total absorption, engulfment, a very deep interest in a challenging activity to which one's abilities are suited, paired with "meaning" in the sense of a subjective significance. This concept of vital engagement pretty much coincides with Wolf's qualitative notions of "*active engagement in a positive way*".

However, according to Wolf the here above subjective element needs to be complemented with "objective value" in order to achieve meaning in life. Haidt alerts to the difficulties this poses. Although Wolf acknowledges the danger that the values which will be considered worthwhile will be those typical of the American *bourgeoisie*, Haidt fears that, in fact, they are even more constrained and elitist than

¹² *id.*, p. 92-101 & 119-127

that. He wonders if a theory of objective value is really necessary to counter the fear of meaning-relativism, i.e. the danger that something trivial will be deemed as fulfilling and meaningful. Haidt counters that the concept of vital engagement provides the solution to circumventing the need for the thorny concept of "objective value".

Wolf in response to Haidt's fears, counters that there is no sole authority which can "decree" what is an objectively worthwhile cause and what is not. The question is open to all to answer and the more opinions, the more likely progress towards an answer will be. Furthermore, Wolf's insistence on the "objective value" criterion, actually forces us to question whether our activities are worthwhile, and to face the risk that they might not live up to that standard. This test is beneficial and constructive, according to Wolf. A positive outcome will be very rewarding, a mixed outcome might lead to a modification of our actions and a negative action might lead to abortion of our project or to the realization that the pleasure derived there from is sufficient to justify our actions. In a multifaceted life, it is not necessary for every activity to contribute to a meaningful life. Some activities are just for pleasure and/ or might provide the opportunity for the deployment of objectively valuable activities. Wolf concludes that she doesn't value meaningfulness more than the other elements of a good life.

4.4.2. Hive psychology and how it can define meaning in life.

Haidt suggests that "hive psychology" is a second insight which helps solving the problem of "objective value". He suggests that we should depart from the Newtonian individualism which has prevailed over the past few decades in the developed world and start seeing people for what they are, i.e. ultra-social members of a group functioning as such. Haidt compares humans with ultra-social insects like bees, which operate in such unity that their hives essentially forms a super-organism. Each bee can be seen a cell within a larger body.

Humans love, need and blossom in groups. An expression of this can be found in the universally prevalent collective dance culture in which people enjoy synchronous movement within large groups. This brings about the pleasant feeling that the individual is part of a larger organism. Contrary to what Wolf believes, the crucial factor isn't getting involved in something outside of oneself. Haidt emphasizes that "*a good hive must be larger than one's self*". Given the fact that individuals can't create hives from

scratch for themselves, we must find meaning in life through vital engagement in the co-creation of common aspirations and projects.

Chapter 5 - "Meaning in Life" and how it changes over time.

5.1. Time as a factor which affects our conception of "meaning in life"

As I have already analyzed, Wolf has attempted to define and to provoke thought and discussion about what a "meaningful life" is and what it means. She distinguishes it from a happy or morally compliant life and has tried to transcend any link to religion as a guarantee or justification of a meaningful life¹³. For Wolf a meaningful life arises "*when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness*". So for her a meaningful life must not only subjectively *feel* worthwhile, but it must also objectively *be* worthwhile.

I believe that Wolf didn't take the element of time and how it affects our conception of "meaning in life" into sufficient consideration in her lectures. She does briefly mention that in some instances people might find meaning in hindsight and that people oftentimes are not involved in just one project at a time, but rather lead multifaceted lives. Other than that however, Wolf pays little attention to whether and how time has any effect on living a meaningful life and judging whether a life is meaningful. I would like to present some thoughts on the matter.

5.2. "Meaning in Life": A timely and timeless issue

5.2.1. Personal pleasure seeking vs. philosophical reflection on the "meaning in life"

Wolf is a bold thinker of our time who attempted to analyze and articulate the nature of "meaning in life" in a neutral and to the extent possible objective manner. Her analysis is on the one hand very much in line with the contemporary, post- enlightenment notion of man as an independent, unique and autonomous individual, who is fully responsible for the choices he makes and for whom personal

¹³ May T. (11.9.2011), "The Meaningfulness of Lives", The Stone, http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/11/the-meaningfulness-of-lives/?_r=00

pleasure features paramount, whereas "meaningfulness" is seen as a matter of personal preference and opinion. On the other hand, in her analysis she speaks of responsibility and commitment to something larger than oneself, which gives meaning in life.

It is not so much the fact that the notion of man as an egocentric and autonomous being, who is free to make choices and to define what meaningfulness in life means to him personally, is in disjunction with Wolf's notion of man's responsibility to something larger than himself, but our contemporary preoccupation, if not obsession, with personal pleasure seeking doesn't leave much room for philosophical and/ or logical reflection¹⁴. The fact that these two notions are, or seem to be at odds, doesn't however in any way diminish the importance of Wolf's endeavor to analyze the meaning and importance of a meaningful life. It just highlights how time dependant these judgments are, even on a theoretical level.

5.2.2. "Basic human needs" and "meaning in life" discussions.

In any case, before we attempt to look at Wolf's concept of "meaning in life", we should first ask ourselves whether this issue was always of importance or whether it is more a contemporary concern. Is the question regarding "meaning in life" time and culture dependant or not? Also, do certain basic conditions have to be met or not before most people start considering issues like the meaningfulness of their lives?

One indication that "meaning in life" might not have featured so prominently in human consciousness in the past, is possibly the fact that there is relatively limited literature on the subject¹⁵. One of the reasons for this might be that when in the past humans were struggling for mere survival, "meaning in life" would likely have been synonymous to "making it through another day". Philosophical debates about "meaning in life" might in those circumstances have seemed out of place.

The discussion about "meaning in life" can only really commence once primary human needs have been met¹⁶. A person living in northern Europe might for example have the luxury to aspire to and

¹⁴ Note N., (2009), "Reflecting on the meaning of life", *Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, 2-13

¹⁵ Metz T. (2002), "Recent Work on the Meaning of Life", *Survey Article*, p. 781-782, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/18222336.pdf> ,

Delaere P.J.J. (2015), "Niet alles, maar iets", *Filosofie en Praktijk*, 36 (4), 90-94.

¹⁶ Frankl V.E. (1992), "Man's search for meaning", *Beacon Press*, 4th edition, p. 44.

to discuss the theoretical and practical aspects of a meaningful life, but it is questionable whether a person living in city under siege like Mosul will feel the same urge. The latter will be more concerned with the pursuit of happiness, rather than meaning, through the satisfaction of his basic needs and wants¹⁷. Given an amelioration of circumstances over time, the urge for meaning in life might surface and after having overcome extreme hardship, might emerge even stronger.

5.2.3. Tradition and "meaning in life"

Another reason why "meaning in life" might not have featured so prominently in human consciousness may have to do with the need for acting collectively and the predominant sense of belonging to smaller and greater groups as part of a mechanism of actual and social survival and acceptance. As Haidt noted, humans are ultra-social creatures and acting collectively is not only efficient, but also pleasurable. "Meaning in life" in the past was thus in all likelihood not so much perceived as an individual quest and accomplishment, but as a group achievement and aspiration.

Also the importance and the role of traditions, whether religious or not, have gradually decreased. Traditions encompass the group wisdom of past generations, guide us through life and buttress our behavior¹⁸. When their structure and significance is threatened by the upsurge in individualism, we are more susceptible to the existential vacuum which is currently a dominant phenomenon. By distancing ourselves from our instincts in favor of rationality and from our traditions in favor of our individuality, we increased the risk of losing sight of what to do and what to aspire to. When this happens on a large scale it facilitates the appearance of phenomena like conformism and even totalitarianism¹⁹.

Wolf, doesn't really comment on Haidt's hive theory and how this affects the concept of "meaning in life", neither does she touch on the prevailing tendency to deviate from tradition as a factor which might influence not only the timing, but also the content of the discussion about "meaning in life". I believe that these two factors do however affect the contemporary pre-occupation with leading a meaningful life and these changes have encouraged the discussion surrounding this issue.

¹⁷ Baumeister R. (1991), "Meanings of Life", The Guilford Press, New York, p. 3

¹⁸ Baumeister R. (1991), "Meanings of Life", The Guilford Press, New York, p. 92

¹⁹ *id.*, p. 111

5.2.4. Individualism vs. "what life demands from us" as guidelines to "meaning in life".

Thus, we could note that the concept of "meaning in life" was not always equally important. The major shift in importance took place after the Enlightenment and our, to a large extent, liberation from the clutches of religion and tradition. We emphasize "the individual", his needs and wants as an autonomous, thinking, questioning, challenging rational being. We 'enlightened' beings relish our uniqueness and in many ways want to stick out from the masses. Our goals are individual ones, rather than in line with collective ones and we are encouraged to seek to fulfill our dreams. The emphasis which has been given to "meaning in life" is just one expression of our 'enlightened' being. Leading a "meaningful life" is suddenly perceived as very important, maybe even more so than leading a moral or a pleasant life, and anyone who feels he has not accomplished this is "right" to feel miserable or unsuccessful. This is a very limiting and debilitating notion, and it is questionable whether it promotes either individual or group well-being.

Having said this, it is important to note that not all of us, irrespective of the circumstances of our lives, will feel compelled or are obliged to find a project or cause which entralls us to such an extent that it provides us with meaning in our lives²⁰, whether consciously or subconsciously. To believe the contrary could be seen as a very narrow-minded and rigid way of thinking.

What is however much more interesting and insightful, is the idea of turning the tables around and asking not what we want out of life and what we have to achieve in order to lead a meaningful life, but what life demands from us on a day to day, hour by hour basis²¹! Every one of us who answers this question for himself might automatically find himself on his unique path to meaningfulness. General and vague statements about what constitutes a meaningful life are theoretically interesting, but of limited practical value, for each of us has to shape his own destiny and live with the consequences of our concrete actions and reactions.

5.3. Is meaning in a person's life static and durable?

5.3.1. When should we judge a life is "meaningful"?

²⁰ May T. (2015), "The Significant Life, Human Meaning in a Silent Universe", The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 137

²¹ Roy Baumeister R. (1991), "Meanings of Life", The Guilford Press, New York, p. 85

Wolf creates the impression that we all should seek and accomplish something in our lives which is objectively worthwhile and which makes us feel meaningful. Indeed, some of us will gear our energy towards a single, life-long project which remains unaltered over time. But, we may also spread our energy over a multitude of projects, which we might pursue simultaneously, or over a variety of projects succeeding each other over time, depending on the life stage of their principal. The number and variety of combinations is extensive. Wolf summarily concedes in her response to Arpaly's and Haidt's comments, that most peoples' lives are indeed multifaceted and they derive a sense of meaning in life from a *pot-pourri* of activities, roles and accomplishments.

Human life is not a snapshot in time. It is a continuum²². A series of more or less intertwined stories, which together, constitute the narrative of each of our lives. This doesn't mean that we continuously or consciously perceive or live our lives like story tales, but that we could, and sometimes do think about our life in terms of a nexus of stories. In any case, we perceive that the motives, reasons and actions which shape the story of our life is situated in time. We live and act in the present, but our actions are affected both by our past and our expectations and hopes for the future.

So our life and our life's story have a clear temporal dimension and are by no means static²³. Our life changes every moment we live and with every thought we have. So why would the endeavors, projects and aspirations which give meaning to our lives stay the same over time? And why should we feel the same about the things which do or don't give meaning to our lives over time?

Building on that, it seems inevitable that the timing of the evaluation of our lives as meaningful or not, is therefore of great significance, since it can seriously prejudice the outcome of the verdict. Should we make this evaluation at the end of our life? Aristotle would concur. Should we ourselves be the ones to make that evaluation? Many of us will not have the benefit of being mentally and physically healthy enough to do so, or to do so in a fair and objective manner. Or should that evaluation be made about our lives by others posthumously? So when is the right time for us and for society to judge whether our lives were meaningful or not? At the end of each project, whether successful or not? At an arbitrarily set date, i.e. the end of each decade? Every day? What is the right time to make this judgment for oneself and for others? Wolf doesn't touch on this problematic.

²² May T. (2015), "The Significant Life, Human Meaning in a Silent Universe", The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 61

²³ May T. (11.9.2011), "The Meaningfulness of Lives", The Stone, http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/11/the-meaningfulness-of-lives/?_r=0

I don't think that there is a right or wrong answer to this question and that might be the reason Wolf avoids even posing it. I do question whether one can define "meaning in life" without giving a time frame within which this judgment should take place. A life can be seen both as meaningless and meaningful depending on the time of judgment. So is there ultimately a correct answer to whether a life is meaningful or not and thus can one give such a definition or judgment?

5.3.2. Does the duration of the feeling of leading a meaningful life matter?

If we move beyond the question regarding which is the correct moment in time to judge whether our lives are meaningful or not, and just assume for a moment that we have accomplished a worthwhile project which fulfills us and justifies us as having achieved "meaning in life", the next question is whether that feeling of leading a meaningful life is a lasting or a fleeting sensation. Does the duration of the subjective feeling of "meaningfulness" in any way indicate whether a life is indeed meaningful or not? Does the same apply to the objective worthiness of the project accomplished?

The difference between leading a happy and pleasant life versus a meaningful one is the duration of the positive remnants one experiences. When one experiences happiness it is a transient emotion which, like most emotions, doesn't last long and which fades away²⁴. It is situated in the present and bears little or no connection to the past and the future. Meaning, however, is enduring and links the past and the future to the present. It is something one looks back on or looks forward to with longing and anticipation and with a sense of purpose and accomplishment, respectively. Moreover, even negative events can lead to very gratifying and meaningful experiences which endure over time. So I do believe that the duration of the subjective feeling is a factor indicative, but not conclusive, of meaningfulness.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

In her lectures Wolf concerns herself with understanding and defining meaningfulness in life as another motivational category besides happiness, self-interest and morality. Wolf acknowledges that a definition of "meaning in life" entails the use of both subjective and objective value judgments. She eloquently

²⁴ Smith E.E. (9.1.2013), "There is more to life than being happy", Atlantic article, <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/01/theres-more-to-life-than-being-happy/266805/>

states that "*meaning arises from loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way*". Thus, in her definition she includes the subjective feeling of "*loving*" and the objective element of "*objects worthy of love*" and combines these with an active and positive engagement by the subject. Wolf christens this notion as her "Fitting Fulfillment View".

In her second lecture Wolf explores why "meaning in life" actually matters and in doing so acknowledges the perils of elitism and the tension between "meaning in life" and morality and self-interest. Following this, four contemporary thinkers, namely John Koethe, Robert Adam, Nomy Arpaly and Jonathan Haidt have volunteered their comments and responses on Wolf's "Fitting Fulfillment View" and have challenged the accuracy and/or necessity of both the subjective, but mainly of the objective element of her View. For example, Robert Adams questions whether the actual success of a project is necessary in order to achieve "meaning in life" or whether mere feelings of success are sufficient. Haidt, on the other hand, highlights the importance of "hive psychology" and the feeling of fulfillment which comes from attaining collective goals.

In any case, and irrespective of any critique and comments one could offer on Wolf's "Fitting Fulfillment View", it is important to note that she touches on a subject that had for a long time been more or less neglected by philosophy. This discussion was not on the forefront of philosophical debates for many years, because it is a concern which usually comes up only after human basic needs have been satisfied. It is only when the Enlightened, self-centered, rational individual broke loose from the bonds of religion and tradition that the discussion about "meaning in life" and why it matters was able to flourish.

This discussion has however progressed to such an extent, that in the western world it is in a way considered "unacceptable" or "sad" not to have a "meaningful life". This is sadly a very narrow minded and debilitating way of assessing our lives and the lives of others and it doesn't promote individual or collective well-being. Not everybody feels the urge or is obliged to follow the current "meaningfulness" hype. Maybe a more interesting and useful question is not what we expect from life, but what life expects from us at all times. Maybe there is more meaning to be found in how we act and react to life's circumstances and challenges, rather than what our accomplishments are in terms of project realization.

Also, the time at which a life is judged to be meaningful or not will have an immediate and defining effect on the outcome of the "meaningfulness verdict". Wolf says nothing about this issue, in all

likelihood, because there is no right or wrong answer. However it is questionable whether one can give even a theoretical definition of meaning in life without taking into account the timing of this judgment. Having said this, it should be noted that not only our projects and aspirations change over time, our feelings about them do also. The duration of our feelings may also be an indication of the meaningfulness of our achievements. If our feelings are strong and enduring, it is a strong indication that the source of those feelings is an objectively worthwhile cause.

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