

Susan Wolf, *The Meanings of Lives*

Summary

- Wolf starts from a different point than Nagel. She begins by asking ‘*What do we mean by the meaning of life?*’
 - Ordinary sense of ‘meaning’ don’t make sense. If we ask what a word means, we want to know what it represents, what it *stands for*. But life doesn’t represent anything. If we say that ‘those dots mean measles’, then we are saying that those dots are evidence for measles. But it doesn’t seem that people are asking about what life gives evidence for when they ask about the meaning of life.
 - If we take the question ‘What is the meaning of life?’ to be asking ‘What is the purpose behind our existence?’, then Wolf thinks that this question is (too) easily answered. If God (or some other creator) exists, then perhaps God had some reason for creating us; however, if God doesn’t exist, then there is simply no reason that we exist.
 - * Note that Nagel thinks that our lives would lack meaning or purpose even if God exists and has some reason for creating us. See section III of *The Absurd*.
 - Wolf thinks, however, that even though the question of the meaning of *life* is easily answered — there is a distinct question of whether or not individual *lives* are meaningful.
- Wolf wants to give an account of what it is that makes an individual life meaningful.
- She begins by shooting down an alternate account. She doesn’t think that a life is meaningful iff it satisfies a subjective criteria like making the person happy.¹
 - Paradigm cases of meaningful lives — Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Einstein, for example — are not particularly happy lives.
 - Additionally, paradigm cases of meaningless lives — *The Blob*, for example — are actually filled with a good amount of subjective happiness and contentedness.
- Wolf’s account: a meaningful life is one that is *actively* and at least somewhat *successfully engaged* in a project (or projects) of *positive value*.
 - She asks us to consider the cases of people whose lives are useless due to a lack of activity: *The Blob* and the idle rich. From these, she asks us to conclude, with her, that a meaningful life must be one of *active engagement*.

¹ *iff* is shorthand for *if and only if*.

- She next asks us to consider cases in which a life, though actively engaged, is wasted on a project without any positive value: the corporate executive and the pig farmer. From these, she asks us to conclude, with her, that a meaningful life is one whose projects are of some positive value.
- Finally, she presents cases in which the project around which somebody has organized their life is revealed to be bankrupt — the scientist whose break-through is scooped, for instance. She thinks that this, too, renders a life meaningless. So she requires that the projects be *successful*.
- ‘Projects’ should be taken broadly to include any kind of ongoing activity or involvement.
 - So, too, should the projects engage the person — they should see them as constituting part of what their life is about.
- The projects must *actually have* positive value. It is not enough that the individual believes that their projects have positive value.
 - Else, we could not make sense of *awakenings* in which somebody comes to realize that their life to date has been without meaning, since their projects lack any positive value. Since, then, what the person would supposedly realize would be that their life hasn’t *seemed* meaningful — but surely, *that’s* not what people are realizing in such awakenings.
- The positive value need not be *moral* value.
- Having given an account of what people want when they want meaning in their lives, Wolf next considers whether or not meaning is something that we *ought* to want in our lives.
 - Reasons for doubt: meaningful lives are not necessarily moral lives, nor do they necessarily make the lives of others better — nor do they necessarily make the person whose life is meaningful better off.
- Wolf’s answer: we should want our lives to be actively engaged with projects of positive objective value — as opposed to projects which are merely subjectively valuable — because to do otherwise is to fail to recognize that one is but a small speck in a vast, value-filled universe. It is to fail to recognize that many things besides one’s own life have objective value.
 - That you are just a speck in a vast, value-filled universe provides you with a *reason* (an *objective* reason) to value something besides yourself.
 - * To be devoted merely to your own happiness is to fail to recognize that things besides yourself have value. It is to act ‘as if’ you are the only valuable thing in existence.
 - * To lead a meaningful life, on the other hand, is to acknowledge that you are just a speck in a vast, value-filled universe. It is to live a life that accords with the facts.