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## Is the Desire for a Meaningful Life a Selfless Desire?

Abstract:

Susan Wolf defines a meaningful life as one that is somewhat successfully engaged in a project (or projects) of positive value. She then 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 motivation to selflessly promote goodness outside the boundaries of our own lives. For the purposes of this paper, I grant Wolf's theory of meaning and accept that she may succeed in explaining why some people engage in projects that *happen* to be meaningful, so defined. Nevertheless, I argue that Wolf fails to explain why people desire meaningfulness for themselves. In other words, Wolf has told us one reason we may be motivated to produce positive value, but not why it matters to us that we *personally* succeed in this endeavour – 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 drive 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 better account for our personal desire for meaningfulness: the prospect of disappearing from the universe without a trace makes us anxious, so we pursue meaningful achievements in order to outlast our own deaths in some sense.

## Is the Desire for a Meaningful Life Selfish?

In this paper I will argue that the desire for a meaningful life is in fact *selfish*.<sup>1</sup> To carry out my discussion, I will grant Susan Wolf's account of what a meaningful life is, since it is Wolf's

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<sup>1</sup> Briefly, I understand a selfish desire as one which has the promotion of value for oneself or the improvement of one's own wellbeing as its *final* aim. I use the terms selfish and self-interested interchangeably. Additionally, I

views I will chiefly be interacting with. However, as I will reiterate later, much of what I say should hold true regardless of what theory of meaning one endorses.

In *The Variety of Values*, 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 excluding 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. Wolf’s account seems intuitively close to at least one plausible 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 here. 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 claims, that a meaningful life may not be preferable to a meaningless one *morally* speaking either. Despite this Wolf observes that people do want meaningful lives, and this is an empirical fact (p.97). Moreover, people also seem to think that this desire is commendable in some way. Both of these observations need explaining. If a meaningful life is not necessarily happier or morally better than a meaningless one, then why do we seek meaningful lives and praise others for doing the same?

For Wolf, the answer to this mystery 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 pleasure is the only thing that matters. If a person showed no

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intend ‘the desire for meaningfulness’ to be read as ‘the desire for meaningfulness in one’s life’, i.e. as equivalent to ‘the desire for a meaningful life’.

interest in doing anything other than making themselves happy, they would be living *as if* they were the most significant thing 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, 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 pursuits we 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 explains how a person might come to selflessly desire that some non-subjective value 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 personally responsible for having produced that value*. When I adopt some project because I want more meaningfulness in my life, I don’t just want that project to be successful, I want to be the active and engaged *cause* of its success.

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, her desires will be satisfied. This sort of attitude aligns with Wolf's account given Beth is acting out of selfless concern for others without allotting herself any 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 that he 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 certain 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* hope 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. The only way for him to obtain a meaningful life is in the possible future where *less* non-subjective value is produced, and so that is the future he desires.

To reiterate, it is true that some people are motivated by a selfless desire to promote non-subjective value, but these people, I submit, are not motivated by a desire for *meaningfulness* at all. Rather, they aim to do things altruistically for the benefit of others, and only as a by-product do they sometimes 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.

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 keep a promise or abide by some other ethical principle or obligation, 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 (p.5-6).

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). 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 or practices, then one will end up producing various kinds of non-subjective value, thereby gaining a meaningful life. The previous problem persists, however, in that 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. Nonetheless, we have already established that it is Andy who has the desire for meaningfulness and not Beth.

Is there something inconsistent about Andy's motivations? So described, he seems to both want a particular kind of non-subjective value to be produced (a cure for cancer), yet also wishes for this value to be weakened in certain circumstances. Why would he be motivated to secure this achievement if he didn't think it was worth achieving in general, and if he did think it was worth achieving, why would he ever desire for this achievement to be lessened or diminished? Another way of putting it: if he doesn't love the goal he aims to achieve, as he appears not to, then why is he aiming to achieve it?

In fact, there is nothing inconsistent 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 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 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 acted out of reasons of altruistic love, he would not care whether he or Beth ultimately cured cancer, but he does care. What Andy wants is to pursue some significant goal in order that his own life be made better in virtue of being more meaningful. He desires to produce some non-subjective value, but only as a stepping-stone toward his final aim, which is acquiring something for himself.

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 was acting out of altruistic love, then there would be something incoherent in his preferences (e.g. that Beth *not* get the funding). Yet, given he is acting out of selfish love, it is perfectly comprehensible that his preferences are as they are. Since curing cancer is not his final goal, but only an instrumental one on the road to making his own life better, why should he desire for *other* people to secure the achievement, especially when that would make it impossible for him to do the same? Provided we understand his motivations properly, it is clear there is nothing problematic about Andy wanting to connect his life with an achievement of value and to continue wanting this even if it would result in that value being partially diminished. Just as Drew wants to make his beloved happy, but only so that they will be *his*, Andy wants to cure cancer but only so that that achievement will be *his*.

In short, the desire for a meaningful life is a selfish desire. There are other unselfish motives a person might have to do meaningful things, but they would only inspire one to live

meaningfully to the extent doing so would serve some other purpose. Hence, they would *not* produce a desire for meaningfulness in itself. Beth's altruism is a good example of this. Alternatively, one could be motivated by what Kant (1785) called the good will. Someone with a good will is driven to do what is morally right not for their own sake, nor for the sake of another, but simply because it *is* right. As such, the good will is distinct from altruism since the commitment to comply with the demands of morality is distinguishable from the goal of improving the wellbeing of others (at least according to some moral theories). For example, Kant argued that we have an imperfect moral duty to develop our talents. If Beth agreed and possessed a good will, then she might be driven to engage with her meaningful project as before, though her motivation would be moral rather than selfish *or* altruistic. Yet, once again, she would not have the desire for meaningfulness in itself, only to exercise her skills as a scientist; while she might end up with a meaningful life, it would merely be a foreseeable by-product of her choice to obey her moral obligations. Real individuals may have more complex and multifaceted motivations than I have granted Andy and Beth, and so may pursue meaningful projects on the basis of a variety of selfish, altruistic, and moral reasons. Nevertheless, it remains true that *only* selfish motives can lead to the desire for meaningfulness in its own right.

A puzzle remains. Above, it was easy to make sense of Drew's selfish love desires because it is clear how being chosen by his beloved would improve his own life, but it is perhaps less clear why having a meaningful life would make Andy better off. In other words, we are still in need of an account of why people like Andy desire meaningfulness in itself. Wolf explained how people might acquire the selfless desire to do good, and hence why they might live meaningful lives in order to promote this end. She also indicated why we might encourage the desire to live meaningfully in others, 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 why a life of successful engagement in valuable projects is in itself worth seeking.

One reasonable suggestion is simply that individuals with meaningful lives would be fitting objects of pride and admiration.<sup>2</sup> This would make our motivation for meaningfulness relatively clear. 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

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



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 at the start. 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 believe the more relevant motivating factor is our *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, p.104-5). Ultimately, Wolf calls this line of reasoning ridiculous, and she may be correct. Nevertheless, many people *do* feel great anxiety at the prospect of a future universe that no longer includes them or any evidence that they had ever existed at all. Rather than demotivating, however, I believe such thoughts can 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.<sup>3</sup> 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, and hence why we desire a meaningful life

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

in itself. If it is not *our* value out there, or *our* achievements, it cannot provide us any solace in the face of our personal mortality and temporal insignificance.

To summarise, granting Wolf's theory of meaningfulness, she is perhaps correct that our desire for a meaningful life is (in part) a desire to have something to say in response to observations of our insignificance in the universe. Nevertheless, it cannot be motivated by the anti-solipsistic 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 better understood as being motivated by the troubling thought that we won't be around forever, and the faint hope that we might be able to do something about that. More generally, we have seen that the desire for a meaningful life is self-interested, rather than selfless. Many people living meaningful lives may have a range of different motivations, but only selfish motives, such as the desire for self-esteem or to transcend death, can produce a desire for meaningfulness *itself*. Moreover, this conclusion appears to be widely generalisable even if we reject Wolf's theory of what meaningfulness is; for instance, whether we believe meaningfulness is successful and active engagement with valuable projects, or alternatively fulfilment, purposefulness, mattering, coherence, or a mixture of these things, the desire for a meaningful life will remain self-interested since, in each case, the desire is for *my* life to have a certain sought-after property.

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