# What is the Meaning of Life?

While the question “How does one live a meaningful life?” has a long and distinguished history within the history of philosophy, it hasn’t received too much attention from contemporary philosophers, at least in part because many philosophers think that the research required to answer the question is more psychological (“What sorts of things make humans happy?”) than philosophical. The contemporary **Susan Wolf** philosopher is a notable exception, and much of her work over the past 30 years has explored various aspects of what it means for humans to lead truly fulfilling or human life. Her account suggests that the question of how to lead to a meaningful live really is a tricky one, and that philosophy can provide *some* help in figuring out what a satisfactory answer would look like (although, as we’ll see, philosophy can’t give really provide you with a recipe for living a meaningful life.)

In a series of articles and books*,* Wolf has noted that many philosophers (of a wide variety of backgrounds) have tended to think there are only two basic motivations/outlooks that can give people *reasons* to behave in one way rather than another:

* People are self-interested (or **egoistic**) when they try to maximize their own long-term self-interest. Nearly everyone agrees that humans do this frequently. According to a minority of philosophers, self-interest is the *only* thing that can motivate humans, and pretending to care about others is merely a form of self-deception. So, for example, Cathy decides to work for an extra two hours, because she wants to use the money to buy a new phone.
* People act **ethically** (or altruistically)when they take a “universal” point of view, according to which they are simply “one person among equals.” Many philosophical and religious theories emphasize the importance of adopting this point of view, and of giving up the egoist point of view. To modify the above example, perhaps Cathy decides to work for an extra two hours because a coworker is sick, and she would like to donate money toward his hospital bills.

Wolf agrees that people can behave both egoistically and ethically. However, she thinks that there is actually a *third* sort of motivation/reason, which might be called **reasons of love.** An example might be if Cathy stayed late at work to help a friend clean up, or to work on an artistic project for the business that she expected would make little money. While Cathy *might* enjoy these things, it would be strange to say did them for self-interest; after all, her goal is to help her friend, or help the business. However, her motives aren’t strictly “moral” either, since it’s not as if any traditional system of morality would say that these sorts of things are the best possible way for Cathy to spend her time. Instead, Cathy’s actions are done out of *love* for her friend, for the business or its customers, or perhaps for art.

Wolf argues that having *good* “reasons of love” in this sense is an important part of leading a meaningful life. This means that philosophers (as well as ordinary people) are missing something when they try to understand human behavior (including their own) in terms of self-interest vs. altruism dichotomy. Instead, people can (and should) act for reasons that don’t directly relate to *either* of these motivations: they simply “do wat they lover.” Of course, its worth remembering that not all reasons of love are good: perhaps Cathy has an abusive friend, or works for a business undeserving of her loyalty; perhaps she’s just terrible at art.

## The “Fitting Fulfillment” View

According to the conception of meaningfulness I wish to propose, meaning arises from loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way. What is perhaps most distinctive about this conception of meaning, or about the category of value I have in mind, is that it involves subjective and objective elements, inextricably linked. “Love” is at least partly subjective, involving attitudes and feelings. In insisting that the requisite object must be “worthy of love,” however, this conception of meaning invokes an objective standard: Not any object will do, nor is it guaranteed that the subject’s own assessment of worthiness is privileged. One might paraphrase this by saying that, according to my conception, meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness, and one is able to do something good or positive about it. (Wolf, “Meaning in Life”)

Wolf uses Aristotle’s **endoxic method** to articulate and defend her theory about what makes a life meaningful. In very general terms, the endoxic method says we should begin with peoples’ (and especially experts’) considered opinions on a subject, and then try to formulate a theory which helps explain and unite these various opinions. The basic idea: if your theory of a “meaningful life” disagrees violently with what everyone else thinks, this isn’t a good sign. The challenge in applying the endoxic method arises from the fact that people (even experts) often have conflicting opinions, and its impossible to simply say “everyone is right.” Instead, one will need to offer a *new* theory takes account of the insights of the old opinions, but improves and builds on them. Wolf begins by considering two common ideas about meaning in life, and noting the drawbacks of each:

The **fulfillment view** identifies a meaningful life with a certain sort of feeling*.* We tell people that they should “find their passion” or “do what they love.” This holds that meaningfulness is a purely subjective affair, with each person judging for him or herself what counts as meaningful. People often adopt this sort of view when assessing their own lives. Wolf notes that feeling fulfilled doesn’t necessarily mean feeling happy. For example, a person may feel fulfilled from dedicating their life to art, parenting, sports, or whatever, even though these activities require pain, anxiety and so on. Conversely, this person might reject the prospect of an easier, “happier” life, if this meant giving up this feeling of fulfillment.

*The Problem:* Wolf argues that meaningfulness can’t *just* be a matter of feeling a certain way. To illustrate this, she considers Sisyphus, who was forced to spend eternity rolling a stone up a hill. This often taken to be the paradigm of meaningless life. However, if the fulfillment view was right, this could all be fixed by having the gods change Sisyphus’s brain so that he found rock-rolling fulfilling. Wolf thinks that this doesn’t work: even if Sisyphus did enjoy rock-rolling, it would still be a meaningless activity. She thinks the same thing holds for ordinary humans, as well: the mere fact that some people might find tending goldfish, smoking pot, or copying Tolstoy to be fulfilling doesn’t mean these activities magically become meaningful.

The **larger-than-oneself view** holds that a meaningful life requires getting involved with causes or purposes that have independent, objective value whether this be politics, art, having children, or whatever. According to this view, there are objective criteria for leading a meaningful life, and its possible for us to be mistaken about them. We often adopt this theory when judging of others: for example, we might say that the life of a dedicated nurse is (objectively) more meaningful than a life spent playing video games.

*Problem:* If taken by itself, this view would seem to imply that a person could have a meaningful life even if they had no idea it was meaningful life. So, for example, maybe I spend all my time working a really boring office job, but (unbeknownst to me), my incessant complaining about my boring job will inspire my niece to become a scientist who cures cancer long after I’m dead. This theory would say that my life is meaningful, even though I hate it/find it utterly unfulfilling, which seems wrong. It might be different if I knew/hoped that my boring job, and my complaining about it, might have this effect, but this just points out that part of having a meaningful life really does involve certain attitudes and emotions.

## The “Bipartite” or “Fitting Fulfillment” view

Wolf’s own **fitting fulfillment view** is a combination of the two above views: a person’s life is meaningful life when it is dedicated to objectively worthwhile goals AND the person finds pursuing these goals to be worthwhile. This isn’t an “all or nothing” view, and lives can be more or less worthwhile. Similarly, meaningfulness isn’t a contest: while Wolf thinks that people do/should want to lead meaningful lives, they also want to do other things, such as be happy (egoism), or do what they think is morally right (ethics). This view also helps explain some common human experiences:

* Many people want their lives to *matter*, and feel anxiety and alienation when they feel their lives don’t. For example, very few people would be happy with being told “Everything you do is completely pointless, doesn’t help anyone or anything, and will be forgotten as soon as you die.” Similarly, no one *wants* their major life projects to end in failure: their children abandon them, their art ignored, their jobs terminated, and so on. The fitting fulfillment view says that this sort of feeling is a natural one, since people want to know that the things they find (subjective) fulfillment actually (objectively) matter.
* People want to be part of communities that recognize their value of the causes and purposes that they have dedicated their lives to. Part of the reason we find pursuing (objectively) valuable goals is that we think that other people will appreciate this, and we (subjectively) value this fact. Again, the mix of subjective and objective components fits with the fitting fulfillment view.
* In raising and educating children, parents and teachers often strive to expose them to a wide variety of (objectively) valuable causes and activities, with the hope that the child will someday come to find a few of these activities to be (subjectively) worthwhile. This suggests that many people already have something like the Fitting Fulfillment view in mind when they consider what counts as a “good” life for children.

## Possible Criticisms of Wolf

While Wolf’s view is intended to capture (and improve upon) common sense ideas about the meaning of life, one might question whether it does so successfully:

* **Are reasons of love really different from egoistic or altruistic actions?** Wolf argues that there are certain examples (art, raising children) that fall outside the selfish/altruist dichotomy. However, there are plenty of other philosophers (from a wide variety of traditions) who have argued that these actions simply *combine* aspects of egoism and altruism—e.g., you are morally obligated to take care of your children, but this also fulfills your own (egoistic) desires.
* **Is there really an “objective” measure of meaningfulness?** Other critics have worried that Wolf’s idea that there is objective meaning to life causes problems, especially since it seems to suggest that the lives led by certain sorts of people (especially highly intelligent and educated ones) will, at least on average, be more meaningful than those of others, *even if these people all find their lives equally fulfilling.*
* **Does subjective attitude even matter?** On the other hand, some critics have argued that Wolf’s *subjective* criteria causes problems, since it fails to account for the possibility that some people might *think* that their lives are meaningless, but nevertheless be wrong about this. For example, there were individuals within Germany who tried (and failed) to stop Hitler, and were killed for it. At the time they died, at least some of them must have thought “my life is a failure.” However, its plausible to think history has shown them wrong—their efforts might have helped weaken the Nazis, and they showed the rest of the world (after the war) that not all Germans agreed with what was happening (which might have led to better peace terms for Germany).

## Review Question: Fitting Fulfillment

What is Wolf’s “fitting fulfillment” view of the meaning of life, and how does it differ from a purely subjective view and a purely objective view? Give a few examples of lives that would count as meaningful and meaningless according to this view, and explain why in as much detail as you can. When giving examples, you might use famous people from history, characters from movies or books, or examples of your own devising.