

Ashar Farooq

Professor Miriam Schoenfield

Problems in Philosophy

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Meaningful and Meaningless

[2] What is Wolf's account of a meaningful life and why does she think we ought to pursue lives that are meaningful? Taking for granted Wolf's account about what a meaningful life is, is she right that we ought to pursue such lives, and is she right about the reason we ought to pursue such lives? Raise and address an objection to your answer.

There are many philosophical arguments regarding the purpose of life. Some say purpose is derived from being happy while others claim that the purpose of life is to simply create more life through reproduction. Notably, this issue of the purpose of life is different from the interpretation of life. Often, we associate both of these terms to be equivalent. In reality, they are not. Interpretation of life is more of a descriptive portrayal of life while the purpose of life is more goal-oriented. Nevertheless, both of these questions should *at least* be considered when dealing with the bigger question that Susan Wolf deals with in her essay "The Meanings of Lives:" What makes a meaningful life?

Markedly, this question is also different from the question regarding whether or not there is meaning in life. This question is remarkably controversial. For instance, it is still not clear what meaning in life means, thus it is extremely difficult to comment on whether meaning in life truly exists. However, one can and should give an account of what a meaningful life is. What exactly is "meaningfulness" according to Wolf? Assuming "full" is objectively the opposite or towards the other side of "less", then **meaningful** and **meaningless** lives are the opposite,

meaning a meaningless life is a life that is not meaningful. Therefore, Wolf details a few scenarios that represent meaningless lives, which will allow us to see which lives are meaningful.

One case that Wolf offers is the scenario of the Blob, a person who is very idle as he lives his entire life in front of a TV, watching sitcoms and consuming beer. This person is very resistant to change and his life can be labeled as one with “hazy passivity.” In other words, the Blob does not simply engage in the way things are with an active response. For example, the Blob simply does not have an opinion on anything and wants to do something comparable to a person locking themselves in a room and never coming out.

Some people object that the Blob has meaning in his life because he is able to do what he wants to do, even if that is just sitting in front of a TV his whole life. However, this is not true by a proof by contradiction. Suppose, for the sake of contradiction, that the Blob’s quite boring life is meaningful. Then, if people want to have meaning in their life, then why doesn’t everybody in the world become the Blob? Everybody can just sit in front of a TV, watching shows and drinking beer while having a meaningful life. Why would everyone want to do this? It is a general fact that people want to live a meaningful life. Human psychology and the Existential-Humanistic¹ perspective solidifies this idea as people want to know if their life has authentic meaning. This is also in conjunction with the idea that people feel a sense of satisfaction when they acquire something that they feel is worth it. For instance, consider a parent who sees their child graduating from college. Is there not a sense of authentic meaning to their lives after seeing their own child progress in the world? Therefore, if the Blob’s life is meaningful, why is it not that everybody is following the Blob’s example of leading a meaningful life? This exemplifies the impractical nature of the Blob’s lifestyle in a 21st century world.

¹ Bob Edelstein L.M.F.T., M.F.T., Oct 15, 2012, “The Need for Authentic Meaning” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/authentic-engagement/201210/the-need-authentic-meaning>

Another case that Wolf provides in order to display what a meaningful life is through a portrayal of a meaningless life is the case of the useless. Consider a person who is extremely wealthy. This person, having all the necessary needs and much more, can simply oscillate between his different desires to a point where he is trying out every single delight there is. However, this does not really bring him any joy as he does not have that authentic satisfaction that his life is worth it as he is simply switching between different amusements. This lack of a stable identity for a rich person who is supposed to have found some meaning into his life means that this rich person is effectively useless. In addition, he is idle, meaning that while he is moving around from amusement to amusement, he is not actively responding to what he wants internally. This person also does not seem to have a specific purpose, thus the person is essentially useless due to having no meaning and in this case, no purpose in his life. Another sub example of a useless person that has no meaning in his life is a rich company executive who works to make more and more profits. He works the whole day and only worries about his work, which often even makes him pessimistic. As a rich executive, he only focuses on wealth and has shaped his life around money. This person clearly does not have a meaningful life because he is missing out on the other more humane and valuable parts of life.

This scenario is comparable to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* because in both cases, two entities do not reasonably balance their sacrifice for others and for themselves. In other words, the rich executive accumulated excessive money that caused him great stress and thus he sacrificed too much for his family. Gregor in *The Metamorphosis* sacrificed too much for his family and yet was still unable to find fulfillment. Eventually, Gregor dies of starvation because he finds human food(and humanity) disgusting. Therefore, experiencing great stress and sacrificing too much for the sole purpose of perhaps accumulating wealth(as in the case of the

rich executive) or making family happy(as in the case of Gregor) is effectively useless, meaning this life is a meaningless life.

The last case that Wolf offers to characterize a useless life as meaningless is the case of the pig farmer. This pig farmer keeps repeating the same action over and over again: buying more land, growing more corn, and feeding more pigs. These actions are the farmer's entire life, meaning he solely focuses on growing his farm. However, this is very useless because there is no impact driven by the farmer's actions. In other words, the farmer feels no purpose in his daily actions, which provides no sense of authentic meaning to the farmer. There is also the idea that the farmer's life has not yielded any significant work, thus it has no meaning.

This scenario is comparable to *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Albert Camus. Sisyphus has been condemned to face the punishment of rolling a boulder to the top of a mountain forever as the boulder will come crashing down once it gets to the top. The premise of this myth is to exhibit the frightful punishment that Sisyphus has received. He must continue to roll the boulder up even though his physical labor is useless and hopeless as he can never get the boulder up the mountain. Both the pig farmer and Sisyphus's lives are meaningless.

Another category of a meaningless life is a life which has been robbed. For instance, consider a scientist who has worked his entire life researching how to cure cancer and he is preparing to announce it to the world when someone else announces they have cured cancer and presents the same finding first. In this case, is there any objective meaning to the work that the scientist did before someone else announced the same exact findings? In addition, consider a lover devoted to another lover. This devotion can turn into a bankrupt situation if the relationship turns out to be not authentic.

Let's imagine an example of the patent process. In essence, the goal of an inventive person is to think and develop a product and get it patented as soon as possible in order to protect his intellectual property. If some product is not patented, then it is possible for some person to steal that idea and eventually scale the product to new heights. In this case, all the hard work and effort of the inventive person is essentially eliminated. Therefore, the life of this person is quite meaningless.

Overall, Wolf's account of a meaningful life is everything that is not meaningless. In other words, a meaningful life is one that is energetically, actively, and successfully engaged in a goal, task, activity, or event (without loss of generality) of positive value, which can be broadly described as something that is unlike the Blob's life and the other prior examples of meaningless lives.

In the context of meaningful lives, the important concern to raise now is whether or not we should care about having a meaningful life. What exactly is the appeal behind a meaningful life? The simple answer is that the appeal behind a meaningful life is all the cases of the meaningless lives mentioned earlier. People ought to pursue meaningful lives because they want to live a good life that does not resemble the lives of the Blob, the pig farmer, etc.

Some people claim that a meaningful life should be sought after because it provides an avenue for happiness. This is certainly true to an extent. After all, traveling with friends and not being like Blob makes a person happier. However, there are circumstances when Blob's life might actually seem like a more appealing option. For instance, imagine a tortured artist or performer who has to deal with a horrible circumstance that seems worse than Blob simply exhibiting hazy passivity. Some people may feel that their lives are too shallow even though they have a happy life, thus happiness is not a great reason for pursuing a meaningful life.

In fact, Wolf stresses that a person should not solely be dedicated to one's happiness. After all, this person is not the only person of inherent value in the universe. This self-awareness is very significant for pursuing a meaningful life. If a person is able to acknowledge his rightful place in the universe, then he is able to internalize the natural fact that value is not limited to him.

This argument for why we ought to pursue lives that are meaningful is valid because it helps a person realize their relationship with the outer world, thus allowing him to produce effective results. For example, consider the example of a rich CEO of a large and successful technology company. If this CEO did not understand his role within the company and the universe, he would simply act very arrogant and with excessive authority. This would lead to more resistance within the company until the company eventually goes into chaos. Some people may object to this authoritarian criticism, citing that the "end justifies the means." In other words, they claim that evil is justified as long as the end outcome is achieved. However, this does not fit in this context of people, who want to be treated justly. If the CEO was able to understand that he is a "tiny speck in a vast universe," then he would realize that the other employees and staff at the company are also people of value. Thus, he would work to make sure that they are treated well and are in an environment that promotes their well-being and productivity. This is by far the better approach at handling meaning in lives. The CEO is pursuing a meaningful life by energetically, actively, and successfully engaging in an activity of positive value while maintaining a sustainable view of himself within the system of the world.

Wolf is correct that we ought to pursue such meaningful lives. Her reasoning of other things having value is also correct. Oftentimes, we forget that this is a world of differences. Therefore, it is very important to realize our place in the greater sense. Consider "The Allegory of the Cave" by Plato. It is very important that we realize that not pursuing meaningful lives is

the same as being locked up inside a cave and thinking that the shadows on the wall are the real objects. We should pursue meaningful lives by shaking off our ignorance and realizing that one has a relationship with the outside.

The question of the meaning of life will certainly include further debates. However, we are making progress with discussing different elements of meaningful and meaningless lives, hoping to find a clearer and more specific definition of the meaning of life problem and the potential answers.