

Jodie Scrimshaw
S3823172
FSE Chemistry/Chemical Engineering
j.w.scrimshaw@student.rug.nl
24/02/23

**Refutation of the necessity of objective ‘Positive Value’
to lead a meaningful life – Susan Wolf**
FI183FR – Analytic Existentialism

In this essay I will be analysing the text *The Meaning of Lives* by Susan Wolf. Wolf attempts to construct some fundamental principles of what entails a meaningful life. She does this by first eliminating what it means to lead a *meaningless* life and from there developing principles for what would constitute a *meaningful* life. The aim of this essay is to analyse the soundness of Wolf's arguments and to determine whether the conclusion she draws is valid. I will also point out any implicit assumptions that are being made.

First I will explain in detail how Wolf derives her principles of what constitutes a meaningful life. I will then arrange her arguments in a logically valid format and refute one of the premises. From there I will show that her conclusion that living a meaningful life entails engaging in projects of *objective* positive value is not guaranteed, focusing only on why the projects do not necessarily have to have objectively positive value, but logically must also have subjective positive value. I will also refute her idea that living a subjectively meaningful life is inherently egotistical, using Richard Taylor's example of Sisyphus from "The meaning of Life" as an example of what a subjective meaningful life entails. In doing so, I will show that her argumentation does not logically follow.

In the text "The Meanings of Lives", Susan Wolf writes about the principles of what constitutes a meaningful life, and how one can follow these principles to live a meaningful life. Wolf comes to the conclusion that to live a meaningful life, one must be actively engaged in projects of positive value (Wolf, 2007, p. 6). What is meant by the specific terminology used, such as 'projects', 'actively engaged', and 'positive value' will soon be explained. First, it is useful to go through the process of elimination she used to derive that conclusion. She states that to even begin answering what constitutes a *meaningful* life, maybe it is easier to start with what a *meaningless* life is, then we know what we should avoid. The first example she calls "the blob" (Wolf, 2007, p. 4). The blob is someone who goes through life passively, never truly engaging themselves with what they are doing. She gives an example of someone who passively sits at home everyday and watches TV. Wolf argues that this life is meaningless because they are not connecting with others, or engaging with anything in the world, they merely exist.

Therefore, the first condition for a meaningful life is to be *at least* engaged with the world, rather than sitting in isolation passively. An example of this that Wolf provides is the pig farmer. A pig farmer is very engaged with their farm and works a lot. They are engaged with the world and aren't living passively. Though, Wolf explains why this type of life can still be meaningless because the life of the pig farmer "who buys more land to grow more corn to

feed more pigs to buy more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs” (Wolf, 2007, p. 4) is useless, meaningless, repetitive cycle. Wolf classifies these types of meaningless lives as Useless. Although the pig farmer is engaged in an activity, the activity is pointless and empty. Therefore, Wolf concludes that it matters what kind of activity one is engaged in, and it is important in determining whether it will lead to a meaningful life. And in that sense, they must be *actively* engaged, which means specifically that the activities they are engaged in must truly engage the person at heart, not just physically.

Wolf goes on to say that the activity one is engaged in must be a “project” that has at least some “positive value”, because whether it has positive value or not determines whether a person will be actively engaged or not. Wolf acknowledges the intuitive limitations of the language she uses and emphasizes that what she means by “project” is to be understood as a very broad term. For Wolf, “projects” can be any activity or engagement a person has. Which can range from playing a sport, creating art, building friendships, organizing teams, relationships, etc. These all fall under the term “projects”. Wolf’s last example of a meaningless life is a life whose goals have become bankrupt (literally or figuratively). For example, a person who has been actively engaged in creating a cure for a disease, only to find out that another company was ahead of them and published the results already. All their efforts have now been for nothing, it was a meaningless endeavour. Wolf acknowledges that this final definition of meaningless is controversial, but argues that the fact that some argument is needed to prove it is not meaningless, is enough to work with in this context. Now, Wolf concludes her final definition of a meaningful life:

“A meaningful life is one that is actively and at least somewhat successfully engaged in a project (or projects) of positive value” (Wolf, 2007, p. 5).

Next, Wolf attempts to define what is meant by positive value, although, she emphasizes that she does not want to create a rigorous definition of it and states that an intuitive sense of positive value is enough for the purpose of her essay. The only criteria that she will argue for is that positive value must be something that is somewhat objective (and specifically rejects the idea that it can be subjective) and therefore to live a meaningful life one must be engaged in projects that are “objectively” good. And if one engages in project that are “objectively” good, then their lives are “objectively” meaningful. I want to be careful here with the use of the word “objective”, because, Wolf does not use this term in the strictest sense. What is meant by the term in this context is that something that is “objectively” good, is good

in the sense that it is not only good from the perspective of oneself. I do not think the meaning is to argue for a basis of some objective goodness in the world. Now, I will go through her reasoning for why positive value is objective, logically, step by step, and then prove that the conclusion she derives (that a meaningful life can be in any way objective) cannot be guaranteed. First I will arrange Wolf's arguments for positive value being objective in a logically valid format:

1. A meaningful life is one that is actively and at least somewhat successfully engaged in a project (or projects) of positive value
2. Positive value can be either objective or subjective
3. Supposition: Positive value is subjective
4. Subjective value is determined from the perspective of the one who lives it
5. If subjective value is determined from the perspective of the one who lives it, then there is no distinction between living a meaningful life and living a life that seems meaningful.
6. Living a life that only 'seems' meaningful, is not truly meaningful.
7. This contradicts our supposition that positive value can be subjective.

∴ Therefore, to live a meaningful life one must be engaged in projects of objective positive value.

The premise that I will be refuting is premise 5, and in doing so I will be refuting 6, which follows from it. From there I will argue that to live a meaningful life, it is enough to engage in projects of subjective value, in accordance with the views of Richard Taylor (Taylor, 2000).

I do not believe that the distinction between living a meaningful life and seemingly living a meaningful life is obvious. To highlight the distinction, Wolf gives an example of a person who suddenly has an epiphany. Basically, she imagines a scenario where someone has been going through the motions of their lives, under the impression that it had some meaning, but suddenly, they have a change of heart and realise that everything they've been doing up until now has been meaningless. Now, the person will restructure their lives to align more with their new values to derive *actual* meaning in their lives. To Wolf, this is evidence that there is a difference between *perceived* meaning and *actual* meaning and it is the *actual* meaning that we should strive for, because that is the only thing that can make our lives truly meaningful. In other words *perceived* meaning is subjective, and *actual* meaning is, in Wolf's view, externally determined, or objective (using the term in a non-strict sense). Therefore, there must be

objectively positive value in doing certain things because that is what gives lives *actual* meaning. She argues this is the case because “such an experience would be nearly unintelligible if a lack of meaning were to be understood as a lack of a certain kind of subjective impression” (Wolf, 2007, p. 7), in other words, if meaning were subjective, then how could it be possible of someone having this kind of epiphany? Now I would like to argue, why not?

I would first like to point out that the experience of having an epiphany generally does not happen in a vacuum. These kinds of epiphanies are usually understood to happen after extraordinary experiences, as in, there must have been something that caused the switch to happen. For example, say a person who originally was very concerned about status and their place in the world or focuses on their careers had a near-death experience, and now suddenly they ‘realise’ that everything they worked for before is actually meaningless and now they focus more on building connections with their family and friends and helping other people. Wolf would argue that this person has found *actual* meaning, and their projects of positive value (building connections with others) are objectively good, whereas before they were living under the illusion that their lives had meaning, where it actually hadn’t. I want to argue that this conclusion doesn’t follow. The change of heart in what they define as meaningful now can only be concluded from the fact that they now have different values or preferences. Generally, after such an event people re-align their values and that is reflected in what they deem meaningful. It does not logically follow that suddenly these people see the ‘true’ meaning or are suddenly enlightened to the objective meaningfulness. For example, maybe they realised they didn’t spend enough time with their family, maybe they realised their career doesn’t make them as happy as they thought. There is no logical argument that proves that this is due to their new preferences now having objectively positive value. In fact, one could imagine a scenario where the epiphany goes the *opposite* way. Someone who spends a lot of time with their friends and family and suddenly realises that they’re wasting their potential, they can do so much more and offer so much more to the world, and therefore they start focusing on building their career and lives in the pursuit of meaningfulness. These two scenarios show that there can’t be anything objective about where one derives their meaning from.

Now that I have refuted premise 5, what follows is the fall of premise 6, which states that living a life that only ‘seems’ meaningful, is not truly meaningful. Since I have shown there is no distinction between the two, then a life that only ‘seems’ meaningful does not mean it is not truly meaningful, or *actually* meaningful (to use the terminology brought in earlier). Because the premises have been refuted, the conclusion, that to live a meaningful life one must be engaged in projects of objective positive value, cannot be guaranteed. What Wolf was

specifically denying was the fact that projects of positive value can be subjective. I have shown now that her argumentation wasn't successful in proving that to be the case, and therefore, projects of positive value *can* be subjective. Then we are just left with the first premise with no indication of whether positive value is either objective or subjective.

The idea that meaningfulness is subjective is completely in line with what Richard Taylor argues in *The Meaning of Life* (Taylor, 2000), and it isn't as brazen as Wolf would have one believe, which she goes on to describe in detail later in the text (Wolf, 2007, p. 10). To demonstrate this, Taylor begins by describing the condemned life of Sisyphus. Sisyphus is a Greek god that has been condemned to rolling a boulder up a hill, which then simply rolls back down, and then subsequently he rolls it back up again – *ad infinitum*. Taylor points out that this activity is completely pointless (analogous to the blob) and therefore Sisyphus' life is completely devoid of meaning. Which Wolf would agree with. Then, he argues, what if Sisyphus is injected with a serum that will make him have this intense drive to *want* to push the boulder up the hill? In other words, all Sisyphus wants to do in life now is to continuously push up the boulder. This is what brings him fulfillment. Now, Taylor argues, Sisyphus' life suddenly has meaning. We should note that the only thing that changed is his subjective perspective. This thought experiment further highlights the lack of need for objectivity in living a meaningful life, and what actually determines what living a meaningful life is, is solely dependent on what the values and preferences are of the person living it. Would Wolf agree that Sisyphus' new life has meaning? On one aspect yes, as one of the criteria for her definition of a meaningful life entails that the person living it must be *actively engaged*, which Sisyphus definitely is. But because rolling a stone does not have any external meaning (outside of Sisyphus that is), then Sisyphus' life can still be deemed meaningless, according to Wolf.

In an attempt to discredit the idea the positive value can be subjective; Wolf argues that subjective meaning is completely egotistical. She first poses the question "As long as you are engaged by your activities, and they make you happy, why should one care that one's activities be objectively worthwhile?" (Wolf, 2007, p. 10), and answers it by assuming that engaging in activities that are only subjectively worthwhile, is equal to devoting oneself to be engaged in activities that are entirely self-absorbed. Again, it is not obvious why this conclusion follows. What Wolf is implying here, based off of her previous argumentation, is that if a person has an epiphany and re-aligns their values, which is reflected in what they deem meaningful, then the life they were living prior, was completely self-absorbed and self-serving. Because prior to the epiphany, their perception of meaningfulness was subjective, post epiphany, their perception of meaningfulness is objective. To believe that all who have had an epiphany regarding what

they deem meaningful in life have lived egocentric lives, is absurd. Therefore, I argue that living according to subjective positive value, is not necessarily egotistical, and Wolf's arguments for the case is far too harsh.

In this essay, I have analysed Wolf's arguments for why positive value is objective, not subjective. I refuted this claim by denying that there is a distinction between living a life that is meaningful versus living a life that only seems meaningful. Wolf argued that on the basis of people undergoing an epiphany and 'waking up' to realising their lives have been meaningless, they must now see the *actual* meaningfulness, the objective meaningfulness. I argued that the epiphany can only resemble the re-alignment of values that people hold, and the change in what they deem meaningful reflects those re-alignments. I argued that it doesn't logically follow that what they deem meaningful post-epiphany has any connection to whether it is objective or not. Following that, Wolf also argues that living a subjectively meaningful life is completely egotistical because it means that one is completely devoted to oneself. I argued that this also does not logically follow. For if this is true, then based on Wolf's previous reasoning, where people pre-epiphany who are living subjectively meaningful lives, must therefore be completely egotistical. This conclusion is absurd and therefore I reject the idea that subjectively meaningful lives are necessarily self-serving and egotistical. I also showed that Richard Taylors example of Sisyphus perfectly describes the scenario of subjectively meaningful life and that it highlights the lack of need for meaning to be objective.

References

Taylor, R. (2000). The Meaning of Life.

Wolf, S. (2007). The Meanings of Lives.