

Subjective and Objective: a Susan Wolf Reconstruction

In this paper, I offer a reconstruction of Susan Wolf's essay *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*. In her writing, Wolf proposes a hybrid view which establishes the meaningfulness of life as being both subjective and objective (Wolf 10-11). Through her analysis, she concludes that life is meaningful when one has positive interactions with objects which are worthy of such positive interactions (Wolf 8).

Wolf begins by outlining two popular views on the meaning of life which leads to her hybrid theory of subjectivity and objectivity (Wolf 10). The first view proposes a strictly subjective view on the meaningfulness of life, illustrating that regardless of the impact one has through her projects, if she enjoys the projects she is involved in, her life has meaning (Wolf 10-11). The second view proposes a solely objective view, dictating that regardless of the personal satisfaction one gains from their projects, one's life is meaningful if she participates in projects larger than herself (Wolf 10-11). In Wolf's writing, she explains that when thinking about whether life is meaningful, when one looks inward at one's own life, she is more likely to think about whether she is subjectively satisfied with her projects (Wolf 11). However, when looking outwardly at others' lives, she is more likely to think about the objective impact of another's projects and accomplishments (Wolf 11). Through this line of thinking, neither of the popular views fully concludes whether life has meaning, leading Wolf to create a theory which bridges the inefficiencies of the two (Wolf 12).

Wolf's theory states that meaning stems from having positive interactions with objects that are worthy of such positivity (Wolf 8). To regard an interaction as positive, Wolf posits, requires some degree of subjectivity, while deeming some objects as worthy of positive interactions and some as unworthy implements a standard with some degree of objectivity (Wolf

9). In her hybrid view, how one chooses to go about loving an object is purely subjective, but whether an object deserves to be loved is objective (Wolf 9). Therefore, a person who is enthralled by a worthless project may have a subjectively meaningful life but not an objectively meaningful one (Wolf 9).

While Wolf's proposal on how to look at the meaningfulness of life bridges the inadequacies of both a strictly subjective and objective view, her proposal creates an ambiguous case where a life may not be classified as meaningful or meaningless. Wolf describes meaningfulness as needing to account for both the subjective and objective sides (Wolf 8-9). However, in the case where the subjective side does not hold but the objective side does, Wolf's view is inconclusive on whether that life has meaning. Take, for example, someone who manages to find the solution to world hunger yet derives no positive satisfaction from it. Subjectively, that person has deemed the interaction they had with their project not positive, or meaningless. However, objectively, their contribution made a positive impact on the world; their project was objectively meaningful. Through Wolf's view, the life is not classified as meaningful or meaningless. However, I believe that this person's life should be classified as meaningful, despite the person's own subjective belief, simply because of the impact that person has on society. In cases such as these, we should steer away from valuing subjectivity and objectivity in the same regard and look at the overall impact of the action.