

Optimism without God

Optimism about the meaning of life without God

Introduction

Recall Tolstoy's question:

... My question - that which at the age of fifty brought me to the verge of suicide - was the simplest of questions, lying in the soul of every man from the foolish child to the wisest elder: it was a question without an answer to which one cannot live, as I had found by experience. It was: "What will come of what I am doing today or shall do tomorrow? What will come of my whole life?" (Tolstoy, p.14)¹

Differently expressed, the question is: "Why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything?" It can also be expressed thus: "Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy? (Tolstoy, p.14)

Life has meaning only if it has significant value or purpose over time, where this value makes life choice worthy. There are two different ways of understanding this value:

- **Internal Value:** the value or purpose that comes when people see their goals or purposes as inherently valuable or worthwhile.
- **External Value:** Meaning or purpose that comes from outside of ourselves in relationship to something that we may or may not be aware of.

When we ask about the meaning of life, we are asking about internal value. We are asking why we should feel that there is something in our lives that makes them worthwhile. Is there any project or goal that could shape our psychology

¹Tolstoy, Leo, 'A Confession', 1882

so dramatically that we are motivated to get up in the morning, keep going, and find all the trials and tribulations of life worthwhile? Pessimists, recall, claim no. Their argument: 1. Life is choice worthy only if it has internal value. 2. Life has internal value only if life has external value. 3. Life has no external value. 4. Life has no internal value (from 1–3). 5. Life is not choice worthy (from 1 & 4). This argument is valid; the conclusion follows from the premises. Is it sound, i.e., are the premises true? The most important Premises are 2 and 3, which we saw Tolstoy arguing for via a fable. We can summarize his argument for Premise 2 as follows: ## Optimism Optimists claim that Tolstoy's arguments for Premises 2 and 3 fail. There are two versions of Optimism. The first version, which we discussed last week, accepts Premises 1 and 2, but rejects Premise 3. They find external value in religion. The second type of Optimist accepts Premise 3, that life has no external value, but denies that internal value depends on there being external value, i.e., they deny Premise 2. The first type of Optimism is associated with Theism, the second with Atheism. I discussed Theism in Note 2. I discuss Atheism in this handout.

Atheism

Our second optimistic approach to the meaning of life rejects the need for external value altogether. These optimists ask us to consider the lives of people who clearly lead meaningful lives. If we can identify why we think those lives valuable, we might be able to decide how, we ourselves, can live meaningful lives without external value.

Who has lived a meaningful life? M.L.K, Gandhi, Einstein, Leonardo Di Vinci are clear candidates. Can we see anything similar to their lives? Here are two candidates:

- **Candidate 1:** A person's life is meaningful if and only if their life makes them happy.

Candidate 1 is an obvious suggestion. Maybe you can live a meaningful life by just living a happy life. The difficulty with Candidate 1 is that there are many obvious cases of people who lived meaningful, but unhappy lives. Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Einstein, for example were not happy, but they lived meaningful lives. Additionally, obvious cases of meaningless lives are filled with a good amount of subjective happiness and contentedness. So happiness doesn't make a life meaningful. As an example, watch this vide about the experience machine: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJ1dsNauhGE>

Susan Wolf has offered the following alternative account:

- **Candidate 2:** A meaningful life is one that is a) actively and at least somewhat b) successfully engaged in a project (or projects) of c) positive

value.² Wolf's account has three distinct conditions. She argues for each by contrasting meaningful and meaningless lives. Her example of a meaningless life is 'The Blob:' a person who spends every moment in front of a television set, drinking beer and watching situation comedies. Compare the Blob to the life of Iran Deckard in Phillip Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, or the soma consuming citizens of Aldous Huxley's, *A Brave New World*, or the television watchers of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, or the citizens of The Capitol in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*. These are all examples of people who live lives that are subjectively pleasant, but are meaningless.

Active vs. non-Active Life

Our first condition says that a meaningful life must be one that is actively engaged. Consider the cases of people whose lives are useless due to a lack of activity: the Blob sitting on the sofa day in, day out, drinking beer and watching terrible television. That life is meaningless precisely because of the lack of activity.

Wolf asks us to conclude with her that a meaningful life must be one actively engaged in some project, where these projects are any kind of ongoing activity or involvement. The projects engage the person, they see them as constituting part of what their life is about and they pursue them with zest.

Success vs. non-Success

Consider cases in which the project around which somebody has organized their life is revealed to be bankrupt, e.g., the inventor who devotes their life to creating an automated car only to be beaten to the punch by Google. Or the CEO who spends a life developing a business that is superseded by new technologies, e.g., the CEO of a nuclear power plant company that ends up seeing nuclear power replaced by solar power. These lives are clearly tragic. There's something miserable about devoting your life to a project that never sees fruition. In contrast, the lives of M.L.K, Gandhi, Mandela were clearly meaningful. Not only did they single-mindedly pursue some project, they were successful. So too were those athletes who spent every waking moment not only training for the olympics, but securing a place and doing well. (Compare this to, say, the person who trains all day every day to compete for the Olympic track team, but has never and will never run a mile in less than 10 minutes) These cases show us that for a life to be meaningful it must be organized around some project that the person succeeds at (or at least has a very reasonable chance of succeeding at).
Projects of Positive Value Consider cases in which a life, though actively engaged, is wasted on a project without any positive value. Someone might

²'The Meaning of Lives', Susan Wolf

decide to adopt as their life project the task of counting the number of grains of sand on Sandy Hook beach. Someone might decide to take as their project the task of everyday digging a hole and re-filling it. These projects energize the person; they actively pursue them. Furthermore, the person might succeed at these projects. Nevertheless, a life devoted to such works seems utterly worthless. Wolf concludes from this that a meaningful life must be one dedicated to project of some positive value. ## Objection The Atheist claims that life can have internal value without external value. Wolf's defense of this claim relies on the claim that a life must be devoted to a project of positive value. That is, it is not enough that you value a project, the project itself must be of some genuine positive value. It seems we are back where we started. Tolstoy worried that since he and everyone else will ultimately die, none of his goals and accomplishments were of any external value. If a goal had positive value, it would have external value. So Wolf owes us an account of external value that is compatible with our mortality.

Meaning re-considered

We are at an impasse. Atheists think we can do without external meaning, but it is unclear that a life without external meaning would be satisfying. Theists, on the other hand, are convinced that life has external meaning, but they struggle to give a satisfying account of what that meaning is. Is there an alternative?

One option is to re-consider Epicureanism, an option towards death that Tolstoy rejects.

- Epicureanism: while knowing the hopelessness of life, make use meanwhile of the advantages one has, disregarding the dragon and the mice, and licking the honey in the best way, especially if there is much of it within reach. This, though, is an unsustainable attitude. Many live in terrible conditions. Many have no honey to taste. It is a mere accident, claims Tolstoy, that you have good circumstances rather than poor, and "the accident that has today made me a Solomon may tomorrow make me a Solomon's slave." Epicureans try but cannot ultimately forget that all these pleasures are ephemeral. They are as easily lost as gained. Nobody can be confident that life will always provide these distractions. (Tolstoy, p.22)

Tolstoy assumes that the only pleasures in life are ephemeral, that they only things we can desire are those that ultimately will cause us pain. Buddha would agree that desiring the ephemeral is a cause of pain, but is Tolstoy right that we can *only* desire the ephemeral? Read *Buddhism* in ch.2 for Buddha's views on how desire can be changed and its pain lessened.