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Prompt 2: What makes a good life for human beings? Mill contends that the answer revolves around pleasure; Wolf, that it revolves around meaning; Smith, that it revolves around objective flourishing. Explain each of these differing views and the principal reasons by which the authors respectively support them. Highlight any overlap in their views as well as significant differences. (note: on this topic, you need not take a personal critical stance)

Word Count: 1799/1800 without headings

Paper 3 Final

Introduction: What makes a good life for human beings?

The question of what constitutes a good life is a timeless one that has intrigued philosophers and people across centuries. Although personal values heavily influence one's opinions on this topic, this does not imply the absence of meaningful insights. Philosophers have long explored this question, proposing frameworks to guide our understanding of what makes life worth living. John Stuart Mill associates the good life with maximizing pleasure and happiness. Susan Wolf emphasizes meaning, where personal passion aligns with objective value. Tara Smith views the good life as achieved by pursuing values that sustain life itself. By examining these views and their supporting reasoning, we can better understand what it might mean to truly live a good life.

John Stuart Mill: "The Good Life" through Pleasure and Happiness

John Stuart Mill argues that the good life is about maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. In his 1861 essay *Utilitarianism*, Mill presents the "Greatest Happiness Principle",

asserting that actions are morally right if they promote happiness and wrong if they produce the opposite. For Mill, happiness is the ultimate goal of life, and pleasure is the best yardstick.

A notable aspect of Mill's view is his distinction between higher and lower pleasures. Higher pleasures, such as intellectual pursuits, moral sentiments, or aesthetic appreciation, are superior to lower pleasures like physical comfort or simple gratification because they require 'more refined' human faculties. Mill believes that these higher faculties, like reason, imagination, or morality, are what distinguish humans from animals. As he explains, "Human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites, and when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification" (Mill 169). This assertion of a 'hierarchy of pleasures' elevates his framework beyond pure hedonism by emphasizing that some pleasures contribute more profoundly to human well-being than others.

Mill acknowledges that pursuing higher pleasures often requires more effort and can lead to dissatisfaction when unmet. Nevertheless, he maintains that the superior quality of higher pleasures and the purported deeper satisfaction they provide outweigh these challenges. As he states, "A being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy… but… can never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence" (Mill 170). He believes that engaging our higher faculties through these higher pleasures leads to a superior form of happiness.

To justify the alleged superiority of higher pleasures, Mill relies on a 'preference test', observing that "competent judges"—those who are experienced in both higher and lower pleasures—consistently prefer higher pleasures. He argues, "Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference… that is the more desirable pleasure" (Mill 170). Thus, Mill concludes that some pleasures are indeed superior and

that the consistent preference of ‘competent judges’ is sufficient proof. However, critics might question whether people’s preferences can reliably establish a valid hierarchy or superiority of certain pleasures, due to the potential fallacy of conflating what people ought to prefer (prescriptive) with what they do prefer (descriptive). Relying on individuals’ preferences assumes that people always recognize and prefer the higher pleasures, but this may not be the case. People might not know what they are ‘supposed’ to prefer due to lack of experience, societal influences, or personal biases. Without a more objective standard, Mill’s preference test may inadvertently prescribe preferences rather than describe them.

In summary, Mill believes the good life is achieved through happiness, which itself is achieved by pursuing higher pleasures that engage humans’ advanced faculties.

Susan Wolf: “The Good Life” through Meaning and “Fitting Fulfillment”

Susan Wolf approaches the good life by focusing on ‘meaning’. In her book *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, she argues that the good life involves “fitting fulfillment”, a concept that combines subjective engagement and passion with objective value. For Wolf, meaning arises when a person loves something “worthy of love” and actively engages with it.

Wolf’s view emphasizes a balance between personal passion and objective value. While subjective fulfillment is necessary, it is insufficient on its own; the object of one’s engagement must also possess intrinsic value. According to her, a life is meaningful “insofar as it is actively and lovingly engaged in projects of worth” (Wolf 35). This focus on external value distinguishes Wolf’s theory from purely subjective accounts of a good life.

She also differentiates meaning from happiness and morality. Meaningful pursuits may not always lead to happiness, as they often involve challenges or sacrifices. Wolf believes that “feelings of fulfillment are but one kind of positive feeling and potentially compete with other

kinds" such as ease or enjoyment (Wolf 14). Similarly, meaning does not necessarily imply morality; one can lead a meaningful life without being ethical provided that the activity still aligns with broader standards of objective value. Wolf clarifies this distinction, saying that "reasons of love… have a distinctive and important role in our lives. They are not to be assimilated to reasons of self-interest [happiness] or reasons of morality" (Wolf 6). This flexibility allows for many paths to meaning, beyond happiness or morality.

A challenge to Wolf's viewpoint is determining what constitutes objective value. Who decides what is "worthy of love", and are such standards universal? Wolf acknowledges that "not all reasons of love are good reasons," emphasizing that love can be "misplaced or misguided" if directed toward unworthy objects (Wolf 6). She suggests that activities contributing to knowledge, beauty, or human flourishing—such as science, art, or social causes—are likely candidates for objective worth, as they are valued by both individuals and society (Wolf 37). While the above criteria avoids the pitfalls of pure subjectivity, critics may argue that it still lacks a robust method for evaluating objective worth. By suggesting broad categories like art or science, Wolf provides a general direction, but her reasoning behind these choices could be more explicit. Nonetheless, her emphasis on fitting fulfillment offers a compelling alternative to Mill's focus on pleasure.

Tara Smith: "The Good Life" through Objective Flourishing

Tara Smith's opinion of the good life is based on the concept of objective flourishing, derived from the fundamental requirements of human life. Drawing on Ayn Rand's philosophy, Smith argues in *Viable Values* that a good life is achieved by pursuing rational values that sustain and enhance life. She asserts that life itself is both the source and the standard of value: "The

requirements of human life furnish the yardstick by which we measure whether a thing is good or bad and whether an action is right or wrong" (Smith 83).

Central to Smith's philosophy is the idea that values are objective facts resulting from the conditional nature of human existence, not subjective preferences. She explains, "The alternative of life or death is what allows and necessitates the pursuit of values" (Smith 85), emphasizing that living beings must actively pursue goals that maintain and enhance their existence. For humans, this means identifying and striving for rational values that promote both our survival and flourishing, such as nutritious food, shelter, productive work, and meaningful relationships.

Smith connects flourishing to moral principles, arguing that morality, like values, is also based on the objective facts of human existence. She explains that "the requirements of survival are determined by reality, independently of a person's beliefs or feelings" (Smith 97), implicitly offering a rational framework to evaluate moral actions: choices are good if they promote survival and flourishing, and bad if they undermine it. For example, virtues like honesty and integrity are moral because truthfulness is "the most effective path… to achieve life-enhancing purposes" (Smith 98). By contrast, 'anti-virtues' like dishonesty, though not explicitly mentioned by Smith, would logically be considered immoral in her view, as they often distort reality and prevent the rational decision-making needed to achieve life-promoting values.

Smith's reliance on life as the sole standard of value might be criticized for seemingly reducing morality and the meaning of life to mere biological necessities. However, Smith clarifies that her concept of "life" encompasses the full spectrum of human experience—including mental, psychological, and emotional dimensions—not just physical survival. She argues that "value is a function of the interaction between the thing called valuable and the person to whom it is valuable" (Smith 98). It logically follows that while the

requirements for flourishing are rooted in objective reality, they can also extend to the enrichment of our inner lives and emotional well-being. This relationship between the individual and what they value allows for more freedom of interpretation and diversity in pursuing flourishing, while still maintaining universal standards based on the facts and needs of human life. For instance, while all humans require things like purpose and happiness to flourish, the specific ways they achieve these can vary—such as scientific research to satisfy intellectual curiosity, creating art to express emotions, or entrepreneurship to achieve personal ambitions. This shows that Smith's concept of life's requirements includes much more than mere biological necessities.

In sum, Smith offers a compelling viewpoint of flourishing as rational and purposeful living. By connecting the good life to the objective requirements of human existence, she directly integrates morality with reality and advocates flourishing as a practical guide for a meaningful and good life.

Overlaps and Differences

Mill, Wolf, and Smith all acknowledge higher human capacities as essential for a good life. Mill's focus on higher pleasures aligns with Wolf's emphasis on meaningful engagement and Smith's pursuit of rational values that elevate life. All three perspectives imply that a life consisting solely of physical satisfaction or superficial activities fails to realize its full potential.

Key differences among their views lie in their definitions of the good life and morality's role. Mill prioritizes pleasure, tying morality to maximizing happiness. Wolf, by contrast, defines the good life as meaning derived from subjective passion and objective worth, separating it from happiness and morality; for her, meaningful lives do not always have to be moral as long as they align with objective values. Smith ties the good life to flourishing, with life itself as the ultimate

goal. She views morality as the rational framework for achieving values that sustain and enrich life.

The differences between these philosophies have practical implications in real-world scenarios. Consider the case of an artist who dedicates his life to his craft. Mill might evaluate the artist's work based on the happiness it brings to him and others. Wolf would focus on whether the artist's work is personally fulfilling and objectively valuable, such as contributing to cultural or intellectual progress. Meanwhile, Smith would assess whether the artist's pursuit is a rational engagement with values that contribute to his long-term flourishing.

Conclusion

John Stuart Mill, Susan Wolf, and Tara Smith offer diverse answers to what makes a good life—pleasure, meaning, and flourishing, respectively. Despite their differences, each philosophy provides valuable insights into how individuals might lead fulfilling lives. By examining their views and reasoning, we gain a broader understanding of the many possible paths to living a good life.

Works Cited

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Wolf, S. (2012). Meaning in life and why it matters. Princeton University Press.

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