

## Introduction

*Stephen Macedo*

SUSAN WOLF'S TOPIC in these essays—formerly lectures delivered at Princeton University in November 2007—is familiar and inescapable, and yet the topic has not received sustained philosophical attention. Her subject is not the question of the ultimate meaning of human life: whether humans are part of a larger narrative or higher purpose or plan of the sort associated with religious traditions. Nor does Wolf make it her project to fend off existential dread or the fear that, absent some larger narrative, human life must ultimately be meaningless, snuffed out by death and the eventual implosion of the universe. Nor, finally, do these lectures propound a particular recipe for constructing a meaningful life, though Wolf does help clarify what it means to do so and why it matters.

We all seek meaning in our lives and recognize meaning's absence in lives characterized by boredom, dullness, alienation, and listless disengagement. But what is meaning in life? Is it distinctive, or reducible to other aims and conceptions? Is it a helpful category for thinking about good lives that are worth living? Is it sensible and coherent to want it in one's life?

Wolf seeks to explicate, defend, and secure the category of meaningfulness as a distinctive dimension of good lives. She distinguishes it from two other categories; namely, happiness, often associated with rational egoism, and morality, often associated with an impartial concern with human well-being. Meaningfulness is neither of these, on Wolf's view,

but it is much to be sought for and an essential element of a fully satisfying life.

Wolf argues in her first lecture that meaning in life is best understood in terms of Fitting Fulfillment. According to her, “meaning in life arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness, and one is able to do something about it or with it.” The three crucial elements are subjective attraction, objective worthiness, and active, productive engagement. Human beings long for fulfillment, on Wolf’s view, and we admire people whose lives are lovingly and productively engaged with projects that are worthy of engagement.

But exactly how should we understand the different elements of meaningful lives? Are all of them necessary? Are there aspects of meaningfulness that Wolf has not identified? Is Wolf right to insist on the importance of objective standards of worth or fittingness: to claim that we ought to engage with something larger than ourselves or at least something outside of ourselves? Does she risk being too judgmental, or even elitist? Or, rather, is she not judgmental enough?

Wolf pursues her inquiry with rigor and subtlety, in part via an “endoxic method” that takes seriously what ordinary people say about their desire for meaning in their lives. The view she develops supports what ordinary people often say about the importance of living meaningful lives, and so, Wolf’s account helps vindicate much human striving. The essays that follow, including the commentaries, do not rest on abstractions alone but are richly illustrated with both hypothetical and real cases. This is philosophy at its best: grappling clear-mindedly with a familiar category of value whose import and structure are nevertheless far from clear and whose reality might even be doubted. Wolf makes a powerful case that *meaning in life* does amount to an essential evaluative standard for human well-being.

INTRODUCTION **xiii**

Wolf's two essays on meaning in life are followed by four critical but constructive commentaries. John Koethe and Robert Adams are largely sympathetic to Wolf's project, and seek to clarify the subjective and objective elements of meaning in life. Nomy Arpaly and Jonathan Haidt express some skepticism about parts of Wolf's account, and question the need for criteria of objective value.

John Koethe—philosopher and poet—interrogates Wolf's account of meaning in life from the point of view of artistic endeavor, including painting and poetry, and especially the avant-garde. Here, judgments about whether projects are ultimately worthwhile and contribute to meaning seem especially controversial and uncertain, in part because the criteria for success and their application—*You call that art?*—are so often contested and contestable. When Wolf calls a project or activity objectively valuable, does she mean that it is of a *kind* we value, or, that in this case the project or activity has been successfully pursued? In some fields—engineering for example—there would seem to be straightforward tests of success (did the building survive the earthquake?). But the dividing line between successful, meaningful artistic endeavor and failed or bogus attempts is vague and contested, especially for innovators. And yet the question of success matters to our assessment of lives. If Gauguin can be excused for neglecting his family to pursue his calling as an artist, this is so at least partly because his art turned out to be a magnificent success. But what if he were an “untalented hack”? When and how can we know for sure? Koethe argues that with respect to many aesthetic endeavors, “the possibility of delusion is internal to them,” and the line between greatness and fraudulence is often fine and shifting.

If Koethe focuses on the objective dimension of worthiness, Robert Adams takes up the subjective dimension of

fulfillment, wondering whether and in what sense “fulfillment” is crucial to meaningfulness in life. He doubts that *feelings* of fulfillment are essential to the meaningful life. Fulfillment, in the sense of *actual success* in one’s projects, may matter more. Great success surely contributes to meaningfulness, but is at least some modicum of success essential if a life is to be regarded as meaningful? Adams argues that in fact a magnificent but failed project might make for a highly meaningful life, and he offers as an example the mastermind of the failed plot to kill Hitler in the waning months of World War II.

Adams further considers some suggestive analogies between meaning in life and other sorts of meaning, including in the use of language. Finally, he explores the relationship between the objective dimensions of meaning in life and impartial morality, suggesting that these may be more closely and completely related than Wolf suggests. What should we think about those who oppose evil, but do so based not on impartial moral considerations, but rather out of patriotism or love of country or some other partial motive? Must impartial moral judgment be brought to bear to insure that love takes its proper—or at least a morally acceptable—object?

Nomy Arpaly questions the role that Wolf claims for “objective worth” in providing meaning in life. It is enough to say of a life that it was fulfilling for the person who lived it, she argues, without having to add that it was fit for fulfillment according to some objective criteria. If we are lucky enough to spend our lives engaged with the things we care most about, why isn’t that sufficient? Why add that there must be a modicum of objective worth? After all, says Arpaly, no normal adult would be fulfilled by, say, a life spent gazing at a goldfish. Insofar as particular people claim to be fulfilled entirely by their relationship with their pets, they typically

## INTRODUCTION xv

are mistaken about the facts (for example, exaggerating the cognitive capacity of cats and dogs by suggesting that “only my pet understands me”). Or, they may be people who lack certain human capacities, so that caring for a pet is in truth the limit of their capability. The mentally retarded really may be fulfilled in significant part by successfully keeping a pet. No appeal to objective value is needed here, Arpaly argues, only an appeal to intuitions and evidence about what in fact fulfills humans as we know them.

Arpaly raises the additional question of whether meaningfulness is itself properly understood as a reason for which we act. We act for the sake of the things we love and are devoted to, she insists, not for the sake of meaningfulness. To do things *because* they contribute to meaning in life is “one thought too many.”

Jonathan Haidt argues that psychology helps illuminate two elements that are key to the achievement of meaningfulness in human life. One is the idea of vital engagement, which is characterized by experiences of “flow,” defined as enjoyed absorption and deep interest in a project around which people build their lives and relationships. Meaningful, generative lives are characterized by vital engagement. Haidt argues that vital engagement does not need to be supplemented by any idea of objective value. Like Arpaly, Haidt argues that there is no danger that normal human beings will find fulfillment—or vital engagement—in lives dedicated to goldfish gazing, flagpole sitting, lawn mower racing, or other amusements that people sometimes engage in just for fun. A philosophical account of objective value is not only superfluous, Haidt suggests, but positively dangerous, since such an account could fall prey to elitism, wrongly ruling out activities that people do deeply and productively engage with, such as the care and breeding of horses.

Psychology's second crucial insight for understanding meaning in life, says Haidt, is hive psychology. Human beings are "ultrasocial," not individualistic, and in this we more closely resemble "bees, ants, termites, and naked mole rats" than our ancestors the chimpanzees. Meaningfulness would be more easily achieved, Haidt suggests, if we placed the group rather than the individual at the center of our thinking about fulfilled lives, and recognized the importance of participation in collective rituals and projects.

In her response to these friendly but perceptive critics, Wolf extends and deepens her argument, acknowledging ways in which the commentators help refine her basic view. She resists the suggestion that we would do well to dispense with objective judgments about worthiness or fittingness when thinking about the activities that contribute to meaning in life. Objective standards can help us understand why some activities are not properly objects of deep engagement and loving attention. Insofar as a belief in objective standards of fittingness leads us to question whether great attention should be lavished on horse breeding, analytic philosophy, or any number of other pursuits whose value might be doubted, that belief is a good thing. Wolf argues that we should welcome critical reflection on our success in discerning and pursuing projects that are both fulfilling and genuinely worthwhile.

These essays—philosophically rigorous but also accessible, topical, and colorfully written—do not purport to be the last words on these vital and inescapable questions. They are, however, a terrific place to begin thinking seriously about meaning in life and why it matters.

Princeton  
July 2009