

2010

Susan Wolf on the Meaning of Life: A Review

Joseph Raz
Columbia Law School, jr159@columbia.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/faculty_scholarship



Part of the [Law and Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Joseph Raz, *Susan Wolf on the Meaning of Life: A Review*, ETHICS, VOL. 121, No. 1, P. 232, 2010; OXFORD LEGAL STUDIES RESEARCH PAPER NO. 82/2010; COLUMBIA PUBLIC LAW RESEARCH PAPER NO. 10-256 (2010). Available at: https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/faculty_scholarship/1668

This Working Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications at Scholarship Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Scholarship Archive. For more information, please contact cls2184@columbia.edu.

find that van Donselaar has chosen not to respond to these criticisms in the present volume. He has a remarkable ability in philosophic exposition. Countless times throughout the book we are provided with a dense summary of one of Gauthier's or Van Parijs's complicated arguments only to find it followed by a single elegant sentence in which van Donselaar captures the essence of the argument. Moreover, *The Right to Exploit* is full of innovative, surprising, and enlightening arguments. One wishes, then, that his evident philosophic skill had been better employed in filling some of the book's significant gaps.

MATT ZWOLINSKI
University of San Diego

Wolf, Susan. *The Meaning of Life and Why It Matters*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010. Pp. 160. \$24.95 (cloth).

The book comprises the two Tanner Lectures given by Susan Wolf at Princeton in 2007; helpful comments by John Koethe, Robert M. Adams, Nomy Arpaly, and Jonathan Haidt; Wolf's replies; and a brief introduction by Stephen Macedo. Wolf writes elegantly and thoughtfully, and the book, which seems to preserve in length and style its origins as two lectures, is full of sensible, suggestive ideas. The Tanner Lectures are meant to reach a nonspecialist audience, and some specialist readers may wish to have more on less, a desire likely to affect especially those who, like myself, share Wolf's basic approach to these matters.

Wolf advances what she calls the fitting fulfillment view of the meaning of life: "Meaning arises from loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way" (8). "Essentially the idea is that a person's life can be meaningful only if she cares fairly deeply about some thing or things, only if she is gripped, excited, interested, engaged, or . . . if she loves something. Even a person who is so engaged, however, will not live a meaningful life if the objects or activities with which she is so occupied are worthless" (9). Meaning, according to Wolf, is a distinct kind of value that the meaningful life possesses. Furthermore, "what gives meaning to our lives gives us reasons to live, even when we do not care much, for our own sake, whether we live or die." And this is so even when the prospects for our own well-being are bleak. As Camus said, what is worth living for is also worth dying for (56–57), so it gives us also reasons to die.

These are the main theses of the book. Are they right? "Meaning," Wolf tells us, "comes from active engagement in projects of worth" (58). This seems on the right lines. But compare it with: "Well-being consists in success in the whole-hearted pursuit of valuable relationships and goals." (The quotation is from "The Role of Well-Being," *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (2004): 269–94, 279, where I explore the relations of well-being and the meaning of life. It summarizes the view of well-being I have been advocating since *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).) Others have advocated similar views, and of course Wolf is aware of them. Ignore the success or failure of these formulations as accounts of either well-being or the meaning of life. The vital question is, what is the relationship between a life of well-being and a meaningful life? Why "vital"? Because, as Wolf, who is an attentive observer of normative phe-

nomena, notes, many diverse ideas are associated with the phrase “the meaning of life” and related phrases. While she rightly criticizes some of the accounts previously offered of the meaning of life, Wolf cannot and does not claim that there is an account of the idea which is totally faithful to the use of the related expressions which is also of more than lexicographical or stylistic interest. So, while not losing touch with the ideas commonly associated with the expression, the philosophical task, if there is one, is to spell out an account of the meaning of life which is of theoretical interest, that is, which shows the importance the meaning of life has in our life. That requires relating it to well-being, for that notion, as understood in philosophical writing, was developed (at considerable distance from the current informal uses of the expression) to mark the quality of a life which matters. For some it is central to our moral duties to others (to protect, facilitate, enhance, or something their well-being). For some it is what people care most about regarding their own life. Wolf’s account of the meaning of life can easily be seen as a variant of my account of well-being, or that of Scanlon, or that of Darwall. She remarks on the similarity of her account and that of Darwall, saying that his account of welfare “has much in common with the description of meaningfulness that I develop here” (25n). Does she regard ‘welfare’ or ‘well-being’ and ‘the meaning of life’ as alternative names for the same phenomena? I doubt it, but I found no clear explanation of the relations of these ideas in the book. Absent clarity on that point it is difficult to assess the success of her account. It seems to lack adequate mooring in a more comprehensive view of our practical/normative life. (Wolf’s “Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 14 (1997): 207–25, advances essentially the same view of the meaning of life: “Meaningful lives are lives of active engagement in projects of worth,” but it contributes little to the clarification of the relationship of a meaningful life and well-being beyond what is indicated in its title.)

It may therefore not be surprising that some of Wolf’s observations may leave some readers unconvinced. Among the questions that I was left with was why she insists on high emotional tone as a condition of having a meaningful life. The agent has a meaningful life only if she is gripped, excited, interested, engaged, or . . . if she loves something. At other places she uses love as a generic term for the attitude agents with a meaningful life have toward the objects they engage with. Wolf makes clear that love and excitement do not preclude anxiety, pain, and the like: “The fulfilled person need not be happy in the conventional sense” (14); this presumably signifies that life need not be a life of unadulterated pleasure. But it seems that people differ in their disposition to heightened emotions independently of their degree of commitment to their relationships and projects and independently of whether their commitment is wholehearted (namely, unstained by doubt, self-hate, and the like). Cannot people with a cool temperament have a meaningful life? Perhaps there is nothing here at odds with Wolf’s basic view. But is the same true of people who pursue their goals in life out of hatred of evil, corruption, cruelty, and the like, and whose hatred is justified and proportionate and whose commitment is again wholehearted? Must we either deny that such people can have a meaningful life or say that such people love to hate? Must we love working as a porter to be proud of doing so well and to find meaning in our life in doing this job? Why disguise the

variety and richness of our emotions by imposing hallowed formulaic epithets on them? Given the cognitive content of many emotions, this kind of cognitive impoverishment may well lead to emotional impoverishment. If the attitude of the person whose life is meaningful is none other than wholehearted engagement, then the meaningful life seems even closer to that of well-being, or at least so it seems to me.

There are other questions. In his comment, Adams questions whether a meaningful life requires fulfilment, that is, “success of one’s major projects” (76). As noted above, I think that success is part of well-being, for success is what one aspires to achieve and well-being connotes (among other things) having the life one aspired to have (and this includes that it has the value one aspired to give it). But I feel that success is less important when we consider the meaning of life. Here an engaged, wholehearted attempt to pursue worthwhile goals gives some meaning to life, even if the attempt is not successful, even if the life is not successful. A degree of success, something like succeeding in seriously attempting, is presupposed by Wolf’s sensible requirement that the project would be worthy of pursuing. Arguably, if one cannot even seriously try to realize it, then it is not worth trying (and thus on that occasion not worth pursuing). But it is not clear why success—even partial success (toward which Wolf gravitates in her reply)—is needed. Is Wolf right on that point, or is Adams, or am I? This may be another example of the dead-end one reaches in pursuing the nature of the meaning of life without locating it in a wider view of human life.

As noted, Wolf explains that meaning is a distinct kind of value that the meaningful life possesses. But the reason action endows life with meaning is not the pursuit of that value. Rather, and I am entirely in agreement with Wolf here, in such cases, our reasons are the value of philosophy, the beauty of music, and so forth, and “the love for these things may not only explain but may also . . . contribute to the justification of . . . choices and behavior” (5). It would be good to know more about the value of a meaningful life and whether, and if so how, it can furnish reasons for action. (Arpaly raises several questions closely related to my generalized question here, and a similar issue arises in connection with well-being. On my view, as well as Scanlon’s, that an action will enhance one’s well-being is not a reason for the person whose well-being is in question.)

Wolf ties her account to two important claims in theoretical ethics, which left me puzzled. First, she believes that there are (at least) three kinds of reasons for action: self-interested reasons, reasons of duty, and a third class consisting of “the reasons and motives that engage us in the activities that make our lives worth living; they give us a reason to go on. . . . They and the activities they engender give meaning to our lives” (2). Examples of actions for reasons of this third kind are manifested in acting out of love of a person or of love of any of our interests (playing the cello, gardening, writing philosophy, etc.). I was left wondering what Wolf meant by reasons of self-interest and why it is impossible for people to have a meaningful life through following them. I cannot believe that she thinks that fulfilling or securing one’s interests is without value. Perhaps she thinks that being excited by such value is disproportionate, but it would be good to know more about it. These doubts multiply when we turn to reasons of duty. Later in the book, one has the impression that these are identified with

moral reasons. Is it impossible to find meaning in life by the pursuit of a moral goal? Cannot spending one's life supporting refugees, and doing so out of the conviction (given one's character, opportunities, and the moral duty we owe refugees) that this is the best way for one to lead one's life, result in one having a meaningful life? Is it that Wolf does not believe that it is possible to be excited about doing one's moral duty? Perhaps dedicating the whole of one's life to refugees goes beyond the call of duty, but it certainly does not go beyond what we have moral reasons to do, and it does not suggest the existence of a different kind of reasons. Perhaps an important clue to Wolf's thinking here is her observation that the very action out of a reason of love, as she calls the third kind of reasons, is part of the justification of that action, part of the reason for it. I believe this to be an important, if here unexplored, observation. But it does not help to establish the third kind of reason Wolf believes in. I would apply this to any case of choice among incommensurable reasons. In any case, even if rare, there certainly can be people whose misfortune it is to live in times of extreme emergencies, where doing philosophy, gardening, or music would be wrong (from the most comprehensive point of view possible—see below) and where one is inclined to say that people devoted to their moral duty have meaningful lives.

Wolf's second theoretical application of her views concerns Williams's observation that "it is absurd to demand of such a man . . . that he should just step aside from his own project . . . and acknowledge the decision which utilitarian calculation requires" (J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 156), except that, recognizing that the problem can arise with nonutilitarian moralities as well, she takes it as a question about the relations between moral demands and personal projects to which one is strongly committed: "The moralists' injunction that the agent should sacrifice that which gives meaning to his life for the sake of morality is liable to take on a hollow ring. For first, the suggestion that . . . one must sacrifice one's own interests for the sake of the moral order, neglects the possibility that the action one is being asked to take may not present itself under the description of 'a sacrifice of one's own interests.' One's reasons for wanting to take the contrary action are apt rather to be a reflection of one's seeing that action or its goal as independently worthwhile. Second, it is hard to see how reasons for staying within the moral order could override one's reasons for doing something without which one would lose interest in the world, and so presumably in the moral order of the world, altogether" (57). This is because the reasons one has to be moral would be undermined by such a demand. Hence, moral reasons cannot trump. But that is not a modification of morality but of our understanding of its role in our life (58). Both arguments lack force. The first implies that in following reasons of love one is serving one's interest. However, one's actual reasons are more stringent, or have greater force, for the agent is moved by the value of philosophy, or of gardening, or of poetry, and the like. But is there any reason to think that moral reasons, whatever their importance, cannot defeat any reasons for continued engagement with philosophy, gardening, or poetry, so long as one's strong commitment to them is commensurate with the independent value of one's engagement with them? The second argument relies on the supposition that the force of moral reason

is the force of one's reasons "for staying within the moral order" and that the force of those reasons cannot be greater than the force of one's "reasons of love." The argument relies on at least two doubtful assumptions. One is that one may always be justified in not following moral reasons that require one to sacrifice one's life. The second is that if one's commitment to the projects to which one is currently strongly attached is abandoned, one would have no further reasons to live. We can agree with Wolf that the relationships and projects we are strongly attached to give "us reasons to live," while doubting the assumption that when those attachments are lost we may not reasonably expect to form others to which we would be equally strongly attached or that this does not give us a reason to live.

Wolf believes that "from a perspective that steps back, not just from one's own interests, but from an absolute commitment to morality itself, if a value or project with which one's life is bound up (a value or project . . . that gives meaning to one's life) conflicts with a demand of impartial morality, there is . . . no guarantee that the moral demand will win" (59). The puzzling aspect of the assertion of this perspective, which is, Wolf underlines, not egocentric, is what it can tell us that we do not know already. The conflict between what one is attached to and morality does not appear to involve further unknown values. At least Wolf's discussion up to that point led one to believe that she takes it to be the value of our engagement with that to which we are attached, or, alternatively, the value of what we are attached to. So it is the value of philosophy, gardening, and poetry, or of our attachment to them. What leads her to assume that, when morality, so to speak, requires us to abandon these attachments for the sake of some other ends (saving people or other animals from torture or starvation and the like), it does so disregarding the value of what we are required to sacrifice, rather than in light of the fact that those attachments and their value notwithstanding the sacrifice is the only right action open to us? Some would argue, and have argued, that such a judgment is rarely justified. Wolf may or may not take that view as well, but in this book she does not invoke it. She invokes a mysterious perspective of which she tells us little. We can only ask her to tell us more.

JOSEPH RAZ
Columbia University Law School