

7. Wolf and Nagel on the meaning of life

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Many people think that an important part of having a life that is worth living is having a meaningful life. However, it's not at all clear what it is to have a meaningful life. Wolf and Nagel address the issue from very different perspectives. Wolf offers an account of what it is to have a meaningful life, and defends it against competition. Nagel's approach seems far less optimistic.

1 Wolf on the meaning of life

In her paper "Happiness and meaning: two aspects of the good life", Susan Wolf is trying to defend two claims. The first is her own account of what it is to have a meaningful life. The second is that having a meaningful life is an important part of what it is to have a good life; moreover, she wants to say that meaningfulness is intrinsically valuable, and not valuable because of something else.

The notion of meaningfulness as we use it in ordinary speech seems to vague for us to define. However, there are certain elements that seem to belong with it. Think about the kinds of questions that people usually ask themselves when they think their death is close, or simply when we stop our daily activities to ponder on the value of our lives for a moment: was it all worth it? were my projects and activities worth being carried out? Wolf thinks that if a life is or has been meaningful, it should provide us with the elements to answer these questions satisfactorily. Presumably, if a life is meaningful, some of its features will explain why the answer to these questions is positive.

Wolf thinks that a meaningful life is a life of *active engagement in projects of worth*. She doesn't define "active engagement" or "project of worth" but she gives us some useful illustrations. Think about a situation in which you started doing something and once you started you just couldn't stop it. Perhaps you have experienced this when trying to solve a complicated puzzle, when you are playing your favorite instrument, dancing at the club or playing a really good video game. Those activities are often *gripping*, we get excited about doing them. Active engagement comes with a cost, sometimes: whether you have stayed up all night playing video games or solving a mathematical puzzle, the next day you may feel tired or stressed. Yet you may still feel excited about the prospect of getting back to your activity. Hopefully these examples will help you grasp what Wolf means by active engagement.

What about projects of worth? Again, let's hope we can do with a few examples. Let's start with some projects that seem obviously worth pursuing: curing cancer, trying to eliminate poverty or stop global warming, etc. But not all projects worth pursuing need to be grand and lofty: taking care of your friend when she is sick, cultivating a better relationship with some family member, learning calculus or developing an appreciation for high quality literature are all things worth doing.

Compare these activities with others that we wouldn't exactly call worthy endeavors: staring at a blank screen for five minutes, watching a marathon of *The adventures of Paddy the Pelican*, trying

to find out how loud you can scream, ranking cat memes by cuteness. Many of us wouldn't find these projects worthy of our time.

Wolf thinks that whether a project is worthy of a person's time an effort may have little to do with that person's preferences, how much pleasure it would give that person to engage in the project, or even whether the person thinks that it is indeed a worthy project. Wolf thinks that there is a determinate, *mind-independent* fact of the matter which projects are worthy and which are not. She recognizes that her view might fall prey of certain kinds of criticism: several people have denied that there is a mind-independent or objective fact of the matter which things are worth pursuing and which things are not.

Wolf doesn't argue in all detail for her objectivist assumption, but she offers some reasons in its favor. First, someone can recognize that she had a lot of fun in her lifetime, but this wouldn't necessarily force her to recognize that her life was also meaningful. Second, the objectivist assumption helps us make sense of the fact that (despite some disagreements), there is widespread agreement about which things are more or less worth doing—compare, for instance, the two lists above.

Question: Is Wolf's account correct? Can you think of any potential counterexamples? A life of engagement in worthy projects which has no meaning and a meaningful life that is not engaged in worthy projects would both be counterexamples to Wolf's view. Can you think of concrete examples of that kind?

Challenges to Wolf's view

One challenge to Wolf's view is that it doesn't really seem to answer our needs when we ask about the meaning of life. For instance, it should answer questions about our place in the universe; however, however engaged we are in certain projects, facts about such engagements don't seem to answer questions about our place in the universe or reflections about our own mortality.

Nagel seems to think of the meaning of life precisely in terms about our place in the universe or the grand scheme of things. He points out that, once we take the perspective "from the outside" (we'll see what that means in a moment) we can't find anything that justifies our standards for what matters or what we should do. However, Wolf largely dismisses the issue by claiming that this is just a verbal dispute. **Question:** What do you think? Are Wolf and Nagel merely talking past each other or is there a substantive disagreement between them? Note that they may disagree on at least two fronts: first, whether Wolf's account of the meaning of life is correct; second, whether engaging in worthwhile projects is part of what it is to have a good life. If they really disagree about one of these issues, which one would that be, and why?

The second challenge takes the shape of an alternative view on meaningfulness. The idea is that a person's life is meaningful just in case that person has found it to be meaningful. We may characterize this in terms of the notion of *fulfillment*, which Wolf understands as some sort of feeling of satisfaction together with the belief that those things which produce fulfillment in us are independently worthwhile. **Question:** In p. 217 Wolf raises an objection to this view. What is it?

Meaningfulness is not instrumental

Wolf ends the piece with some brief reasons why meaningfulness is not good just because it is a means to an independent good of fulfillment. Rather, meaningfulness is good in itself. She thinks that, unless we think that pleasure is the only intrinsic good, most of us will agree that the experience

of fulfillment by itself is not valuable, but we value that experience when it is the result of an activity that is in fact worth doing.

Moreover, having a meaningful life is not good just because we want to have a meaningful life. We think that it's independently good that we want a meaningful life, and that anyone who didn't should want to have a meaningful life.

2 Nagel on absurdity

Nagel wants to claim that human lives are absurd, but more than that, he wants to offer an analysis of what the absurdity of life consists in. His paper is full of interesting observations and lines of reasoning, so we better examine it carefully. He starts by examining some arguments in favor of his view, which he thinks are pretty bad. Let's start with those arguments.

Two arguments that life is absurd

First, he considers what we may call the *argument from duration and size*: we are but tiny little things in the vastness of the universe and our lives last but a blink in the eyes of eternity. Thus, nothing that we do with our lives will matter in any large portion of the universe, nor will it matter long from now. Hence, nothing that we do with our lives matters. This argument relies on two implicit premises: that tiny specks like us can't really affect what happens far away in space and time, and that our actions matter just in case they affect (meaningfully) what happens far away in space and time.

Then he considers the argument from *interrupted justifications*: our lives have a finite length. Because of this, nothing that we do in our lifetime will reach a final end—it's all done for nothing. So nothing we do matters. As before, the argument relies on two implicit premises: that actions matter just in case they reach their final end, and that if a life is interrupted, then nothing done in its course will reach a final end.

Though these two arguments are in favor of his conclusion, Nagel thinks they are both bad. The first is a bad argument because it relies on the false assumption that actions matter just in case they affect what happens far away in space and time:

For suppose we lived forever, would not a life that is absurd if it lasts seventy years be infinitely absurd if it lasted through eternity? And if our lives are absurd given our present size, why would they be any less absurd if we filled the universe (either because we were larger or because the universe was smaller)? (p. 717)

In other words, there doesn't seem to be anything special about how far our lives and actions go that could justify our thought that absurdity comes from our small size relative to the universe.

He offers several criticisms of the second argument. The first is that many (perhaps most) of our actions in fact reach their final end—we take an aspirin to alleviate pain, and that is where the ends end. The second is somewhat more subtle: consider some final end of an action that makes that action meaningful. What confers meaningfulness to that end? If everything that matters matters in virtue of some further end, then our original end would require some further justification, and so on *ad infinitum*. But surely justifications, if there are any, must come to an end somewhere.

What is absurdity?

Nagel thinks that absurdity arises when there is a discrepancy between aspiration and reality. For example, think about a solemn situation, say a funeral, where the family members are approaching to the body of the defunct to pay their last respects and suddenly one of the attendants farts loudly. More mildly, to use Nagel's example, your pants fall down as you're being knighted.

Nagel thinks that the absurdity of life is similar to the absurdity in those kinds of situations. We pursue certain goals and interests in all seriousness, since to pursue such goals and interests is what life partly consists in, yet the possibility always lurks of seeing those very endeavors from an outside perspective, realizing that they are arbitrary or their importance open to doubt. To be clear, the absurdity doesn't come from the fact that the seriousness or importance of our actions can be disputed or doubted. It comes from the fact that we ourselves can take this outside perspective of our own goals and interests without ceasing to be the people that ultimately have those goals and interests.

Nagel thinks that this absurdity is inescapable for humans, so he argues that both the seriousness and the doubt are inescapable. With respect to the first, our very lives requires us to make efforts, deliberations, plans, etc. The very fact that we make those efforts and deliberations implies that we take our lives seriously to some extent or other. Even if our only interest is survival, as long as we do something or other to survive, the required seriousness will be present.

Though seriousness may be inescapably attached to life, doubt is not so attached. Rather, doubt arises from the fact that we, as humans, have the capacity to step back and examine our own aims and endeavors:

Yet humans have the special capacity to step back and survey themselves, and the lives to which they are committed, with that detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand. Without developing the illusion that they are able to escape from their highly specific and idiosyncratic position, they can view it *sub specie aeternitatis*—and the view is at once sobering and comical. (p. 720)

However, we should be careful in how to understand that "step back". The kind of step back that leads to the absurdity of life is *not* one on which we adopt new standards of what is important and we see that, judged from those new standards, our aims are not important anymore. Rather, what we see when we step back is that our whole idea of what is important and our whole system of justification rests on assumptions that we never question, that we can't defend without circularity, and which we continue to hold even after having questioned. Once we take this outside view, we can't discover any standards that can justify the ones we already have.

Reactions to absurdity

One initial reaction is to attempt to escape absurdity by trying to be a part of a project larger than our own lives. This won't help when it comes to philosophical absurdity, for just like we can question our own aims and interests, we can also question the aims and interests of any larger organization or project. We can step back and see that there is no way of justifying them except circularly. **Question:** Nagel often talks about circular justifications, but what does he mean? Can you give an example of one such justification?

Can we escape absurdity by abandoning our own earthly interests to become as close as possible to the point of view of eternity? Nagel thinks that we can't:

Insofar as this self-etiolation is the result of effort, will-power, asceticism, and so forth, it requires that one take oneself seriously as an individual [...] Thus one may undermine the aim of unworldliness by pursuing it too vigorously.

Ultimately, Nagel thinks, the best option is to get back to our own endeavors after having seen them from the outside, but with a bit of irony.