

Comment

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PEOPLE SPEAK OFTEN ENOUGH of a human life as being meaningful or meaningless, having or lacking a meaning, either at a given time or in its history as a whole. Almost always, when we think in those terms, we want to find meaning in our lives; we do not want them to be meaningless. Philosophers, at least in the English-speaking world, have published relatively little about meaningfulness in life, despite its apparently profound human importance. We have found the concept of it a tough nut to crack and pry open.

A most welcome exception to this generalization is Susan Wolf's account of "meaning in life." In her view, "meaning arises from loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way." That seems to me insightful and right-headed. It also seems fruitful, offering a way forward in thinking about this difficult topic.

Wolf conceives of meaningfulness of life as having both a subjective and an objective side. It has a subjective side insofar as it involves love and positive engagement, and an objective side insofar as what one loves in a meaningful way must be worthy of love, must have value independent of oneself.

A further interesting and important structural feature of Wolf's thinking is her insistence that meaningfulness offers a perspective on the evaluation of lives that is distinct from those of self-interest and morality. A meaningful life is not the same as a happy life or a morally good life.

I

The questions I want to pursue first have to do mainly with the subjective side of Wolf's view. In particular, it is not clear to me why she should *not* say that the *only* requirement, on the subjective side, for meaning in life is love, and acting coherently for reasons of love. Why add any requirement of feelings of fulfillment?

One sort of fulfillment that *could* be part of a life's meaning is the success of one's major projects, insofar as that is the fulfillment of those purposes in which one's love is expressed. It is plausible to think that it could make a difference to the meaning of your life whether you succeed in a major project—for instance, whether you finish your big book before you die. Not that the incompleteness or failure of your project necessarily deprives the project—let alone your whole life—of meaning. We may well believe that “it's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.” Still, it seems reasonable to think that the meaning of one's life might be *enhanced* by the completion of a big book. And *what* an intellectual's life means can surely be affected by what actually got written and what actually got published.

Though success and failure can make a difference to a life's meaning, I believe that a life can derive meaning of the greatest value from a project that has failed. The archetypal case of such meaning-laden failure, in our cultural tradition, is the projects of Jesus that failed in his crucifixion. A probably related case that connects interestingly with our topic is

Claus von Stauffenberg's project of rescuing Germany from Nazism, which culminated in his attempt to assassinate Hitler and lead a coup d'état, on July 20, 1944. His project failed and cost some hundreds of deaths, including his own. Yet his life, especially in its last year or so, seems extremely meaningful to most of those who know about it—and rightly so, in my opinion.

Did Stauffenberg himself, in the end, find his life meaningful because of his project, despite its failure? From what I have read about him it seems practically certain that he did. But suppose he did not. More precisely, suppose that in the moment of failure he was so disappointed and so depressed that he thought his life was meaningless. Should we in that case conclude that it was in fact meaningless? I think that conclusion would be very implausible.

I raise this question because Wolf contends that if one's involvement with "something larger than oneself" does not bring the "reward" of *finding* the involvement meaningful, then "it is unclear that it contributes to meaning in one's life at all." If this means that one's life is not meaningful unless one sees it as meaningful when one looks back upon it, then I would disagree. Of course, the view backwards is not the only view by which one might assess the meaningfulness of one's life. If I love in such a way that purposes springing from my love make sense to me, and I act on those purposes and they seem to me worth acting on, then to that extent I think I may find my life meaningful *in* living it, regardless of how it may look in retrospect. I am inclined to agree that love does not confer meaning on one's life unless it gives rise to purposes that make sense to one in that way. And I take it that this is part of what Wolf has in mind.

I'm not persuaded, however, that consciousness of meaning, or valuing one's life, either retrospectively or while acting,

need involve *feeling good*. Not much is known about how Stauffenberg *felt* when he was finally compelled to recognize, late in the evening of July 20th, that his conspiracy to overthrow Nazism had failed. Someone he spoke to then thought he looked “indescribably sad.”¹ Great sadness would certainly have been appropriate to the context. It does not follow that it would not also have been appropriate for him to see his life, and his efforts to rescue his country from Nazism, as meaningful.

Attitudes and feelings can be complex. It would be possible for Stauffenberg, in the hour of recognizing the failure of his project, to feel awful about the fate he foresaw for Germany, and at the same time to find some consolation in the thought, “At least I don’t have to despise myself. I’ve done what I could.” But consolation is different from fulfillment, and it need not involve feeling good on the whole. This is terribly important. For one of the great things about positive meaning in life is that one can have it even when one’s hopes and projects are not fulfilled and one does not feel good.

I grant that *some* of one’s feelings can affect, or enter into, the meaning of one’s life. In a meaning-constituting love, what one feels pleased about, and what one feels sad about, should cohere with one’s commitments. The meaning of the feelings in those cases rides on their intentionality; it’s a matter of what one feels good or bad *about*. But feeling good or feeling bad does not necessarily have any intentional content. One can feel “up” or feel depressed without those feelings being clearly *about* anything. And it seems very doubtful that

¹Peter Hoffman, *Stauffenberg: A Family History, 1905–1944* (Cambridge University Press, 1995) 276, summarizing the report of Delia Ziegler, a secretary who worked in the same office as Stauffenberg.

feelings, good or bad, without intentional content enter into the meaning or meaninglessness of one's life.

II

This is a point at which it seems to me that there is an important analogy between meaning in life and other sorts of meaning, such as the meanings of words, the meanings of texts, what we mean to say, and what we mean to do. Wolf does not raise these questions, and it could be that she is wise not to raise them. Words can have different meanings that do not illuminate each other in any very interesting way, and this could be true of the word "meaning" itself. Wolf's account provides an illuminating explication of a way in which people surely do speak of lives having "meaning," whether or not there is an enlightening analogy between it and other meanings of "meaning." In fact, however, I believe there are similarities worth noticing.

One has to do with intentionality. What you *mean* is what you intend. To say you *mean* to do something is to say you *intend* to do it. To say that in saying, "He's very cool" in a certain context you *meant* that the person in question is attractively stylish, is to say that you *intended* to express that sort of approval. In a more general semantic view, what our language means depends on how it is related to what it is about. We speak of such cognitive content, perhaps metaphorically, as a matter of intentionality, of what the language stretches out to grasp, which we call its "intentional object."

It is worth trying on the hypothesis that meaning in life, on its subjective side, is a matter of intentionality. This hypothesis fits Wolf's view at important points. Love is certainly an intentional attitude. Similarly, Wolf speaks of fulfillment having "a cognitive component," which even the "deep and intense pleasure" of "eating a perfectly ripe peach" does not

have. What I take it she thinks the pleasure of eating lacks, is the intentional content it would have if it were in part a regarding of something as objectively good.

A second point at which there may be an analogy between the meaning of a life and the meaning of a linguistic utterance concerns *communication*. Both about someone's verbal statement and about someone's life, one can ask what it means *to other people*. What a life means to the person who lives it, in her understanding of it, belongs presumably to the subjective side of our topic. What her life means or communicates to other people should be seen perhaps as belonging to a third side of the topic, *intersubjective* rather than purely objective. This can be a very important aspect of a life's meaning. Claus von Stauffenberg provides an example here too. He and his co-conspirators seem to have been motivated in large part by the meaning they hoped their deeds would have for others, believing that even if it couldn't succeed in its own terms, the plot against Hitler should be attempted for the honor of Germany, to show the world that some Germans stood up against Hitler's crimes.²

A third analogy has to do with *rational* or *intelligible structure*. The meaning of a linguistic utterance or text depends heavily on various aspects of its structure. There is no sharp line between rational or structural incoherence and meaninglessness. Something similar appears to be true about meaning in one's life, which seems to be undermined if one's major purposes do not cohere with each other, or do not remain stable over at least a significant period of time, or are not expressed in one's actions. I think this will be pretty widely agreed.

² *Stauffenberg*, 238, 243.

Less easily granted, perhaps, but worth taking seriously, in my opinion, is the idea that those things that happen to people through no choice of their own can enter in a structural way into the meaning or meaninglessness of their lives. To take an example again from the Second World War: Heinrich Böll's *And Where Were You, Adam?*³ about the last stages of the war on the eastern front, may be seen as portraying the lives and deaths of retreating German soldiers as meaningless. In speaking of meaninglessness here I am I think responding mainly to the story's description of arbitrariness and a lack of coherent purpose in the commands and actions to which those soldiers were subjected by the collapsing German war machine. I find it a plausible representation of an all too possible sort of meaninglessness in life, in which the ordinary soldiers were certainly complicit, but of which most of them were definitely not the primary authors. No doubt such meaninglessness in an individual's life depends also on not having coherent purposes of one's own to act on. But it can be very difficult, and for many impossible, to organize one's own life around coherent purposes if one's social context lacks coherent meaning. If our lives have meaning, we do not create it all by ourselves.

III

I want finally to say something about the *objective* side of Wolf's account. I will leave aside questions, which could be raised, about whether a life (Hitler's, for example) could be meaningful but with a meaning that is objectively bad rather than good. I want to focus on Wolf's claim that the objective perspective that is crucial for the meaning of a life is distinct

³Translated by Leila Vennewitz (London: Secker and Warburg, 1974).

from that of impartial morality, though not unrelated to it. I want to underline both a difficulty we may feel in accepting this claim, and the very important appeal I think we should nonetheless find in it.

Stauffenberg is again a case in point. I certainly believe (and imagine Wolf would agree) that his actions against Nazism could be *justified* from a perspective of impartial morality. The difference to which Wolf calls attention begins to bite when we ask whether his actions were actually done with the *intention* of satisfying principles and concerns that are impartially other-regarding. It bites even deeper when we ask whether those actions were driven by impartially other-regarding *motives*. What was Stauffenberg's central motive, the love at the heart of his project? Most of what I have read about him suggests that it was *patriotism*, his love for Germany, rather than an impartial love for humanity in general.

Not that his patriotism was amoral. Fundamental in his motivation was his loathing of Nazi crimes;⁴ but he viewed the moral wrongness of those crimes through the lens of patriotism. He saw them as a disgrace to Germany, which demanded a German response. Moreover, he wished to extricate Germany not only from crimes against humanity but also from the Nazis' war, which he, like most of the German military leadership, saw as heading toward a catastrophic national defeat. These are not *impartially* other-regarding motives. But it does not follow that what is loved in them is *not* an objective good of the sort that is at the center of Wolf's account of the objective side of meaning in life.

Patriotism is a morally dangerous love, which has inspired enormous wrongs and follies. Can love of country really

⁴Including persecution of the Jews, and crimes against Poles and other Eastern Europeans. See, for example, *Stauffenberg*, xiv–xv, 226, 283.

have an object good enough to satisfy Wolf's criterion on the objective side? In part it surely can, for patriotism typically springs in large part from caring about one's family and friends and the other people among whom one has lived, and about the goods of the culture in which one has been educated. There is much of objective, positive value in that. And when we consider also the ethical dimension of Stauffenberg's patriotism manifest in his shame about Nazi crimes, it is hard to deny that his patriotism had positive value of a kind that can sustain objective meaning in life.

We may still feel some moral unease about Stauffenberg's patriotism. It inspired not only his conspiracy against Hitler, but also his service in military aggressions launched by the Nazi government. If we went into the details of what he wanted for his country, I suspect that most of us would be at best ambivalent about some of his goals. (Probably, of course, we should also be at best ambivalent about some things in our own lives.) Stauffenberg himself was hardly without ambivalence toward his moral record. His conception of a military officer's responsibility did not allow him to acquit himself of the guilt of crimes committed by German officials acting supposedly for Germany. It appears that he and other conspirators were motivated in part by a feeling of guilt "that they had been too slow to oppose the evil."⁵

The place of guilt in this story points to an important difference between meaning in life and virtue. I take judgments of virtue (or vice) to be assessments of a person's character at a given time. Virtue and vice as such do not have a narrative structure, though narratives may reveal virtue or vice. But judgments of meaning in life are assessments of something that does have a narrative structure. And a life-narrative that

⁵ *Stauffenberg*, xiv.

has very positive meaning as a whole can include things that are negatively valued. For instance, it can include guilt, as part of a narrative structure of guilt and expiation.

Stauffenberg's patriotism was at any rate not a form of *impartial* moral virtue. But that should not distract us from the decisive point in assessing the meaning of his life objectively, which is (in my opinion) his extraordinary response to the objective values that were salient in his situation in the last months of his life. In an appalling context that demoralized to some extent most who worked within it, Stauffenberg could see a path that held at least a slight hope of leading to a better future for his country—a future better in moral as well as other respects than the future toward which it was heading. And his patriotism inspired him to follow that path, not only with courage, but with an energy, tenacity, and resourcefulness more or less unique among the rather many German officers who recognized at least implicitly what needed to be done. I find that awesomely meaningful. And shame on me if I fancy myself in a position to look down on Stauffenberg! In such a context it seems particularly important to be able to recognize, as Wolf urges, a very important kind of positive meaningfulness in a life that responds to objective goods with motives of love that are not impartially moral motives.