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Life Projects: Passion versus Rationality

Abstract:

Philosophers of all ages and locales have ruminated on what it means to live a meaningful life. This particular essay seeks to tackle the same question but with more particularity. Is a meaningful life ethically good, rational, or even successful? Susan Wolf's work *The Meanings of Lives* gives a nuanced but affirmative answer. This essay counters Wolf's answer to that question. Although Wolf's notion of having a project does make for a meaningful life, this paper argues that her objective and subjective criteria are too restricting. What makes life meaningful is not the outcome or nature of the project, but rather that one feels "called" to a particular project and takes an active interest in it, even if the project seems absurd or futile. In order to support that claim, this essay forwards Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, as well as other critical appraisals of both Wolf and Kierkegaard.

Cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I am)

-Rene Descartes

Imagine a person who spent their entire life collecting paper clips. This collection has no greater purpose or agenda in mind; the person in question simply devotes their life to collecting paper clips because they feel like collecting paper clips. Is such a life meaningful? A philosopher like Susan Wolf would reply negatively, using their sense of rationality to disprove the idea that a life of collecting paper clips is worthwhile. Thus, such a life is meaningless. Nonetheless, the "call" of the paper clip collection still bears some meaning for the collector, as paradoxical and absurd as it may seem. Thinkers like Soren Kierkegaard call for an embrace of this paradox when it comes to living our lives in a worthwhile manner. In order to come close to finding an answer regarding what it means to live a meaningful life, we must seek a hybrid path that takes the best of both rational and suprarational approaches. After a thorough probing of both Kierkegaard and Wolf, I propose such a hybrid path. Meaning and absurdity are not binary

opposites, but rather coexist in a peculiar way. I believe that this peculiar balance is what gives our lives meaning and will begin by analyzing the work of Susan Wolf.

In her essay *The Meanings of Lives*, Susan Wolf lays out certain criteria for what it means to live a meaningful life. According to Wolf, a meaningful life has two components: a subjective component and an objective component. The subjective component states that a meaningful life has some sort of reward. However, this reward is not necessarily tied to pleasure or happiness. The subjective component also calls for engagement in your life; in others, you must go beyond simply “going through the motions.” On a different note, the objective component has three parts. First, a life must be engaged in a project of some kind, be it a job, a relationship, or some other objective. Wolf leaves the term “project” vague so as not to limit certain activities from being meaningful. However, this project must have some kind of positive value. Second, we must be actively engaged in that project. Finally, that project must somewhat successful for a life to be meaningful. Wolf also notes that lives can still have meaning “even if they are, on the whole, judged to be immoral.”¹

Wolf’s objective and subjective categories are based on rational assessments of feelings, emotion, and actions. Soren Kierkegaard offers a different take on the same categories in his work *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*. According to Kierkegaard, only the objective is based on rationality. For Kierkegaard, objective analysis is based on observation and acceptance of those observations.² Thus, Kierkegaard’s notion of objectivity can encompass Wolf’s subjective and objective components for living a meaningful

¹ Susan Wolf, “The Meanings of Lives,” in *Introduction to Philosophy: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Perry, Bratman, and Fischer (New York: Oxford, 2007), 67.

² Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 230.

life. The other category, subjectivity, is not based on rationality and acceptance. Rather, Kierkegaard claims that “subjectivity is essentially passion, and at its maximum an infinite, personally interested passion for one’s eternal happiness.”³ Moreover, this “interested passion” is not something that can be comprehended by an outside “third party”; it is inherent to the individual.⁴ Kierkegaard’s subjective category covers what Wolf’s purely rational, or objective, approach misses. Wolf’s “subjective” category is not truly subjective, but rather an extension of reason to emotion, something which cannot be easily quantified, if at all. Wolf’s supposedly “subjective” component is merely a rational assessment of pleasure. Wolf even seems to misunderstand what reward actually is. A “reward” cannot be explained without addressing the pleasure that it brings someone. Thus, Wolf’s subjectivity misunderstands the vital relationship between reward and pleasure. Kierkegaard’s approach accepts pleasure for what it is: something that is experienced on an individual level and that cannot be extended to all people in the same manner as a scientific law can. Moreover, pleasure by itself is fleeting. No one constantly feels pleasure and nothing else. Interest, on the other hand, is engaging, intriguing, and constant. Kierkegaard’s combination of the two anchors emotion down in a way that Wolf cannot.

That being said, Wolf’s approach is well-thought out and worthy of praise. Her desire to leave the notion of a project vague does an excellent job of allowing for a variety of different ways to live meaningfully. However, I take issue to a number of the specific components of Wolf’s prescription. In general terms, Wolf’s ideas are too restrictive because they focus solely on rationality and do not address anything that may be considered suprarational or irrational. More specifically, Wolf’s subjective component is highly restrictive in that it requires a

³ Ibid., 33.

⁴ Ibid., 509.

meaningful life to be satisfying. Oftentimes, our most meaningful experiences are not satisfying. As a collegiate distance runner, I put my body through an enormous degree of hardship in any given week. Sometimes, we run our event, in my case the 10,000 meter run, faster than we ever have before. This does create satisfaction. However, failing to achieve a certain goal is not satisfying in any way. Failure, a notion which I will return to later in this analysis, is a specter that constantly lurks on the edges of the track. All it takes is one missed opportunity, and the sore muscles and thirty minutes we spent running circles around the track suddenly are not in the least bit satisfying. It is sheer pain. However, we do learn from failures. In my case, I may have needed to start increasing my pace earlier or started out slower so that I have more in the tank when I finish the race. The fact that this race was not satisfying bears no impact on the meaning I got from it.

Now I will turn to Wolf's objective components. The idea of life requiring a project to be meaningful is not an issue. Neither is the "active engagement" portion of the requirements. However, I would like to dispute the notions that this project "requires" positive value and a degree of success. When dealing with the notion of success, history provides examples of projects that ultimately failed, but still had a degree of meaning. During World War II, Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg was a decorated German war hero who suffered grievous wounds in combat and went back to Germany to be treated. In Germany, senior *Wehrmacht* army officers recruited him into a plot to assassinate Hitler and oust the remaining Nazis from power via coup. The officers involved in The "July Plot", as it was known, sought to kill Hitler in his "Wolf's Lair" headquarters and then initiate the coup so that Germany could be saved from a reckless two-front war. In July 1944, Stauffenberg planted a timed suitcase bomb in the Wolf's Lair and waited for it to go off. Once the bomb detonated, he left for Berlin to aid the coup. However, a

different officer moved the suitcase after Stauffenberg left. The last-minute location change shielded Hitler from the blast and left him almost unscathed. Hitler's survival ensured that the Valkyrie coup failed, and all of the conspirators, including Stauffenberg, were either executed or committed suicide.⁵ His entire project was derailed by one man who just happened to move a suitcase. According to Wolf's philosophy, it follows that a random event entirely outside of our control (the suitcase getting moved) can totally negate our life's work. I do not agree with such a fickle picture. Stauffenberg's life was far from meaningless; he stood against one of the most maniacal leaders of all time in an attempt to save his nation. Stauffenberg did everything that he could in service of his project: he set the bomb up and attempted to start the coup. The chance act of some random officer moving the bomb does not negate all of Stauffenberg's work. He went against the grain and took a stand when many others witnessed evil and followed along with it, justifying their actions with "I was only following orders." A random event does not carry the same significance as Stauffenberg's noble plan.

Wolf and "Moral Saints"

Susan Wolf is also clear that a meaningful life is not necessary a moral one. She continues this strand of thought in her essay *Moral Saints*. Susan Wolf's core argument is that moral perfection is not a good model for living. Wolf defines a person who lives, or attempts to live, a perfectly moral life as a "moral saint."⁶ They come in two varieties: the Loving Saint (who is moral because they love being moral) and the Rational Saint (moral because they view it as their duty).⁷ Wolf regards this as a poor way to live because a moral saint is required to disregard their own happiness and preferences in an attempt to live as morally well as they

⁵ History.com, "July Plot," *A&E Entertainment Networks*, 21 Jan. 2016, <http://www.history.com/topics/july-plot>.

⁶ Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (Aug. 1982): 420.

⁷ *Ibid.*

possibly can. Moreover, Wolf suggests that this emphasis on morality makes for “a barren life” because you cannot have any interests that are not related to living a morally perfect life.⁸ Even more detrimental, in the opinion of Wolf, is that devotion to morality strips a moral saint of their “selfhood”, or idea of self.⁹ A Loving Saint will eventually lack a sense of self entirely because they are absolutely devoted to morality. On the other hand, a Rational Saint will be forced to deny the self because they reach the conclusion that you cannot be split between a having an idea of self and utter devotion to morality.¹⁰ Regarding the issue of positive value, Wolf does not provide any parameters as to what exactly “positive” means. If positive value is taken to mean morally good, then a person seeking to live meaningfully will soon run into trouble. Sometimes, the absurdity of life requires us to engage in a project that seems to have negative moral value, such as Abraham having to sacrifice his son Isaac to prove his faithfulness to God. The ritual sacrifice of one’s own son is clearly negative and goes against what society often views a parent’s fundamental duty to protect their child.¹¹ Thus, Abraham fails to meet Wolf’s classification as either a Loving Saint or a Rational Saint. However, Kierkegaard says that “With Abraham it is different. In his action he overstepped the ethical altogether and has a higher *telos* [purpose] outside it.”¹²

Herein lies the problem with Wolf’s approach. The idea of “morality” varies considerably based on the time and place in which it is defined. Since we live with different ideas about morality than Abraham, the application of modern morality to his time creates absurdity and inconsistency that Wolf’s purely rational approach is ill-equipped to handle.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (New York: Penguin Group, 1985), 70-88.

¹² Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 88.

Kierkegaard's claim about Abraham's "higher telos" suggests that we require a different standard for evaluating action. Clearly, morality, or what is considered "ethically good", cannot provide a steady framework for finding meaning in life because it is dependent on some sort of context. Edward Lawry primarily claims that what is considered morally good stems not from an act itself, but rather from the broader framework that an act fits into. Lawry explains his position with an analogy:

The Good isn't just the "moral good" if we think of "moral" as qualifying particular *acts*. But the Good is moral insofar as it picks out the best *life*. If we ask what is the best *act*, playing golf or helping your neighbor with her plumbing problem, perhaps we reluctantly say the plumbing help. But does the best *life* never include golf? While no one is motivated to play golf because of its superiority over some imagined act of great moral worth, they are motivated to play because it is "better", all things considered, than anything else they may actually substitute for it on a particular Saturday morning¹³.

In other words, Wolf's focal point on analysis of acts by themselves is too restrictive when it comes to evaluating morality. Certain acts certainly have a quality of "goodness" about them, even if they are not by themselves the superior moral option. However, humans are not always aware of what action provides the best route for "becoming themselves."¹⁴ Lawry calls this uncertainty "para-natural ignorance...the question of how to best live."¹⁵ I believe that "para-natural ignorance" refers to something else. "Para-natural ignorance" stems from the fact that we all have some sort of calling in our lives. How can we feel a yearning for meaning in life if we had no primal instinct that life was worth living? Boiling down the complexity of humanity, as Wolf does, to merely what we do disregards an entire facet of our existence: pathos. Humans are

¹³ Edward Lawry, "In Praise of Moral Saints," *Southwest Philosophy Review: The Journal of Southwestern Philosophical Society*, 18 (2002): 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

more than mere automatons clanking our way through existence before we run out of fuel and waste away. We do not live according to Wolf's objectivity, which emphasizes rational assessments of purpose. Neither do we simply accept observations without questioning them. Instead, we have feeling and emotion that defy, contradict, and sometimes transcend logic. Such feelings leave us with questions. Thus, Lawry's use of the term "ignorance" is a bit of a misnomer. In my opinion, Lawry is actually referring to a yearning that all people have. We may not comprehend this yearning, or why it exists, but it exists nonetheless. We recognize this yearning as a quest for meaning in life.

Coming to terms with Kierkegaard

Notions of suprarationality are prevalent in Kierkegaard's work. A primary idea in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is the attempt to become truly faithful, which requires one to rise above aesthetic and ethical modes of thinking. Once we do so, we arrive at a faithful mode of thinking that is "above" rationality, or suprarational.¹⁶ In order to sort this out, Kierkegaard uses the story of Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac and other invented tales, such as that of the lad and the princess. Kierkegaard describes the situation in the following way: "A young lad falls in love with a princess, the content of his whole life lies in this love, and yet the relationship cannot possibly be brought to fruition, be translated from ideality into reality."¹⁷ In order to become faithful, Kierkegaard argues that this lad must first become resigned to fact that the relationship will never occur. Thus, he becomes a "knight of resignation."¹⁸ Then, the lad must then believe "on the strength of the fact that for God all things are possible" that the relationship

¹⁶ David W Crowe, "Lecture on Kierkegaard's Problema I" (lecture given during HONR 103, Rock Island, IL, April 2016).

¹⁷ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 70-71.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 75.

will nevertheless happen¹⁹. Kierkegaard's God is can be described as *totaliter aliter*, which is a Latin term meaning "pure possibility"²⁰. I again quote Kierkegaard: "With Abraham it is different. In his action [obeying God's command to sacrifice Isaac], he overstepped the ethical altogether, and had a higher *telos* [purpose] outside of it."²¹ Kierkegaard calls this "higher telos" faith. However, I believe that this "telos" is instead a raw calling that lies in all humans. Upon first glance, this makes no sense at all. However, Edward Mooney, a professor at California State College at Sonoma, thinks otherwise. For Mooney, the lad and princess metaphor is Kierkegaard's way of evaluating human relationships.²² Mooney believes that this metaphor represents taking interest in an "appropriate object."²³ That object is also something you desire for the object itself, not for what that object may bring you. I believe that Mooney's ideas also provide a strong framework for determining how a project can have meaning. I believe that a life project requires some form of "calling", a primal instinct that pulls you toward a certain objective. In order for a life to be meaningful, you must desire your project because you feel a raw, instinctual attraction to it. Engaging in a certain activity because you want to make money does not fit the bill. Just as Kierkegaard's notion of God is "pure possibility" and able to be felt in an infinite number of ways, so to can a person feel any number of callings in their life. This calling is subjective in a Kierkegaardian sense because the pull that one feels from their calling is a form of "passionate interest." This differs from Wolf's subjectivity in that the passion refers not to the reward or pleasure that it brings, but rather refers to a strong magnitude of the interest. Pleasure is a completely different emotion altogether. The imposition of an artificial barrier on

¹⁹ Ibid, 75.

²⁰ Crowe.

²¹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 88.

²² Edward Mooney, "Understanding Abraham: Care, Faith, and the Absurd," in *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1981), 100-101.

²³ Ibid.

what brings meaning, namely limiting it to the rational, eliminates a huge number of ways to live meaningfully. It makes no rational sense for a doctor to leave his or her comfortable home and administer medicine in war-torn countries abroad, but there are doctors who still make that choice. To label those lives as meaningless would be unfair at best and an insult at worst. Thus, we cannot use rationality as a standard for measuring a meaningful life.

A different but still helpful analysis of Kierkegaard comes from Nancy Crumbine. Crumbine compares Kierkegaard's depiction of Abraham with that of Meursault, the main character in Albert Camus' *The Stranger*. Both of these men are confronted by the absurdity of the world around them. Meursault takes this absurdity to mean that the world is only an illusion, with life being a kind of malady that ends with death.²⁴ On the other hand, Kierkegaard's treatment of the paradoxes present in existence allows for the potential of rebirth. This rebirth stems from becoming a knight of resignation and then a knight of faith.²⁵ Differences also arise between Abraham and Meursault in how they view the world. In the story of Abraham, Crumbine believes that Isaac represents both past and future. Thus, Abraham's attempt to sacrifice Isaac shows that he is willing to sacrifice both his past knowledge and future concerns in order to live freely in the present without fixation on knowledge (or lack thereof).²⁶ This conduct falls into line with Kierkegaardian subjectivity in that Abraham frees himself of constraint by rational assessment of his choices. Instead, he lets his impassioned interest in serving God dictate his course of action. Meursault, in contrast, lapses back into *past knowledge* and concludes that life is meaningless.²⁷ I think that Meursault's view, as Crumbine describes, is

²⁴ Crumbine, Nancy, "On Faith," in *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1981), 197-203.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

similar to that of Wolf in that it focuses strongly on the observable. Thus, it bears similarities to Wolf's objectivity and subjectivity in that after a rational reflection upon his life, Meursault concludes that life has no meaning. He utterly lacks interest in anything²⁸ and totally misses Kierkegaard's subjectivity. It even focuses too much on the observable in that you end up neglecting the present. Sometimes, in our present lives, we come across paradox and events that simply cannot be comprehended on the strict basis of past experience. I do not doubt that past experience can have value in determining how one should live, but it should not be the sole determinant. Sometimes, finding a purpose for living can seem contradictory or unexplainable. One might feel inexplicably drawn to one project and utterly repulsed by another. These deep yearnings are not sentiments to ignore. The past and future are constantly growing, but the present lies only in a moment. What ultimately matters is that one has a purpose to guide them when confronted with the absurdity of life, even if one does not know why they have that purpose. This purpose can be distinguished from a gut feeling in that one's purpose is not impulsive in nature but rather inherent. A gut feeling can go just as easily as it arrived, but a purpose remains constant. In my opinion, reflection on the past or anticipation of the future can dispel a gut feeling, but a true "calling" will survive those cognitive exercises. Ethics and success are good things take with on the journey toward that goal, but they are not the goal itself.

Counters of Kierkegaard

One potential issue with Kierkegaard is that he writes from a Christian standpoint, which means that his ideas are also intertwined with Christian thought. I do not view this as a bad thing, but some may object to Kierkegaard's ideas on religious grounds. Thus, in this section, I

²⁸ Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Matthew Ward (New York, Vintage Books, 1988), 41-42.

will seek to alleviate these fears. The Jewish faith does not view the Isaac incident in the same way as Kierkegaard does. Jewish theologians see the Isaac sacrifice as a moment of moral responsibility for both God and Abraham, instead of a suspension of ethics along Kierkegaardian lines. God knew all along that Isaac would live, so the commandment to sacrifice Isaac was simply God's way of "trying the righteous" and making Abraham known to the world as a man of faith.²⁹ Thus, Abraham can be seen in a similar light as Job.³⁰ However, there are intellectuals who believe that Jewish scripture does contain suspensions of ethics, which would allow for Kierkegaard to be reconciled with Jewish theological thought. Jacob Helavi points out that one of God's commandments is to honor your mother and father. But since Abraham left his mother and father to venture into what would become the Promised Land, he violated this commandment. This should make Abraham a poor example of faith; however, God allowed Abraham to violate one of His commandments because Abraham's father was an idolater.³¹ Although God essentially grants Abraham clemency, this is still a suspension of ethics (God's law) that matches Kierkegaard's ideas. Furthermore, Kierkegaard's subjectivity and objectivity have applications beyond religion. If we embrace our passion and interest in the same way that Kierkegaard embraces absurdity, then we will be able to explore the plethora of things that can make our lives meaningful without the constraint of rationality. This embrace of absurdity applies to all faiths. Jewish theological thought, on the other hand, seeks to explain Abraham's conduct within the framework of its own faith and religious laws. There is nothing inherently wrong with such an approach; however, that approach also lacks the universality that goes along with Kierkegaard's ideas.

²⁹ Roland Green, "Abraham, Isaac, and the Jewish Tradition: An Ethical Reappraisal," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 10 (1982): 4. In this case, "trying" is used in legalistic way, i.e. the verb form of "trial."

³⁰ *Ibid*, 5.

³¹ *Ibid*, 6.

A New Formula

My prescription of a meaningful life draws primarily from Kierkegaard but also contains pieces of Wolf's ideas as well. It has two parts. First, I agree with Wolf that a meaningful life requires some kind of project. I also like how Wolf keeps the requirements of that project vague so as to not arbitrarily limit what can and cannot be considered meaningful. For me, a meaningful life can be found by having a concrete life goal that you are constantly working towards, and one that can be improved if you reach it. Second, this project requires some kind of "calling." Your life goal must also result from some kind of primal yearning, one that may not necessarily be explainable. In this way, a person will find some kind of greater purpose in their life. It may, or may not, come from a God. As long as ones feels *totaliter aliter*, or pure possibility³², in whatever they choose to do, their life will have meaning. This yearning is not quantifiable, but not everything in the human experience can be explained or numbered. Reason certainly has its usefulness, but it also possesses limits. If one ignores what they do not understand, they risk becoming mired in their own paradigm. You begin to "go through the motions" and life ceases to be anything more than a cycle. Furthermore, success does not make a life meaningful. What is the meaning of a life that has success but no passion behind it? Such a life is empty and inadequate. Finally, a meaningful life does not have to be ethically good. Just as the past and future are ever changing, so too is our sense of morality. A meaningful life requires constant criteria for evaluation, and morality does not fit the bill. It is my sincere hope that having a "called", improvable goal is all that one needs to live meaningfully.

³² Crowe.

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