Does objectivity matter for the meaningfulness of life?

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Some of you will know of the late Professor Richard Hare. When I spent some time in Oxford I had quickly found a wonderful delicatessen in Oxford Market, so wasn't much worried about how to find the largest grocer, or indeed about much else that might have had a bearing on the language of morals, so I never heard him lecture. But a few years later I did meet him, at an interview for a job, where he asked me why anyone cared about the objectivity of morality. I hunted around for an answer, not persuasive enough to get me the job. I'm not sure I can do any better today, but I am stimulated to try by the position taken up by Susan Wolf in a recent book, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters.*

The book is one of those very useful volumes from the Princeton University Center for Human Values in which lectures are delivered and then commented on by a few others (in this case, John Koethe, Robert M. Adams, Nomy Arpaly, and Jonathan Haidt), the volume concluding with Wolf's responses to these comments. The key claim I want to focus on is the idea that to make sense of our thoughts about what makes for meaning or meaningfulness in a human life, we need a strong notion of the objectivity of that issue, strong enough to ground the idea that a person can make a mistake about what gives value to their life. (It is the sort of thought that inspires the position Roger Marples reminded us of in a talk he gave on Monday: someone who decides to devote his life to counting the blades of grass on a cricket pitch would be making a serious mistake.) There is much else in Wolf's lectures and I can't now try to cover everything she discusses, but I will need to summarise some of her position to get us to the version of Hare's question that I do want to address.

Wolf's initial position is that the meaningfulness of life provides a dimension of value that takes us beyond a traditional but false dichotomy between egoism and a Kantian-style concern for what matters "from the point of view of the universe" (Sidgwick's phrase she quotes on p. 2). We easily contrast self-interest or a quest for our own happiness with the demands of duty, justice or compassion. These can easily seem requirements imposed on us, rather than things that "engage us in the activities that make our lives worth living" (p. 2). Those are meaningful activities, not necessarily disposed to yield us great happiness/pleasure nor necessarily expressions of the demands of duty; just those things that give meaning to our lives and make them worth the living.

Her examples might help to elucidate her position. Doing things for someone we especially care about -- acting out of love. Love is not only for people but for activities: playing a cello, gardening, and you guessed it! philosophising. The goods involved and maybe achieved in these pursuits are not my goods, but neither are they the demands of morality.

Her claim is not that this dimension of value is unrelated to the others. Love can be mistaken, children can be spoilt, plants waterlogged. It can be misplaced or misguided: you can throw your life away on someone who does not deserve you; you can bequeath your fortune to a cult, or I might add, an established church. Wolf's position is that "acting in a way that positively engages with a worthy object of love can be perfectly justified even if it does not maximally promote either the agent's welfare or the good of the world, impartially assessed" (p. 6-7). And not merely justified -- for those of us who reject the egoism/altruism dichotomy by admitting Broad's "self-referential altruism" would not have a

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1 Princeton University Press, 2010. All quotations from this book, unless otherwise acknowledged.
problem with that characterisation of her position -- but also bestowing meaning. Noting that philosophers have tended to avoid this kind of talk of meaning Wolf offers us an updating of Aristotle's appeal to *endoxa* by summarising the self-help literature as split between a view that you should find what really turns you on and another that stresses involvement in "something 'larger than oneself'" (p. 10), where she says it is not so much the size as the independence from purely self-centred concerns that matters. Wilson thus sees meaningfulness as combining a subjective passional element with objective value, the worthiness she spoke of earlier, "meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness" (p. 62).

So we have reached objectivity. Before proceeding let me mention one other kind of example Wilson invokes: who are our paradigms of a meaningful life? She offers Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Einstein, Cézanne. Definitely not Sisyphus. And not Sisyphus even if he had been drugged to find his task immensely pleasurable and fulfilling. It is the intrinsic, objective worth, or worthlessness, of the activity that Wolf thinks counts, but it counts only when it is in some way recognised by the person; she wants both the subjective and objective sides of the account to hold as a unity.

So Wolf says, meaningfulness "seems to me to include a cognitive component that requires seeing the source or object of fulfillment as being, in some independent way, good or worthwhile" (p. 24) and she wants this thought to be true. She says "[i]f there is no such thing as (the relevant kind of) objective value, or if talk of distinctions in worth is nonsensical, then meaning in life ... is impossible" (p. 35) and she fears that if we cannot fully understand meaningfulness we might lose our interest in it (p. 63). She is, however, fully aware of the difficulties some philosophers have found with such claims to objectivity for our values. And she is aware of the danger of parochialism in supposing one's own socially and culturally conditioned values are somehow underwritten by the nature of things. To this she responds with a fallibilistic and democratic conception: our judgments of value are fallible, liable to change as we experience more, and liable to change as human societies innovate. "The absence of a final authority on the question of which things have value, however, does not call into doubt the legitimacy or coherence of the question itself or of the enterprise of trying to find a more or less reasonable, if also partial, tentative, and impermanent answer" (p. 40).

Objective values, on this view, are no worse but also no better than spacetime or the nature of electrons, matters about which our answers are equally partial, tentative and impermanent. Wolf notes also that there is an unmysterious sense in which nonsubjective values exist, in that it is easy to distinguish things that have value just for me from things that do not, because they have value for others. But the problems grow when she adds, what is surely required for any substantive claim about objectivity, that people can make mistakes about value.

Wolf wants to hold that accepting the legitimacy of making mistakes about value does not commit one to the kind of metaphysical extravagance that Mackie thought objectivists were stuck with: values as nonnatural chunks of reality. Nor, she says, does it "imply that values might even in principle be independent of human ... needs and capacities" (p. 45). She claims there are many positions in between radical subjectivism and the Mackie's picture of extreme objectivism, both of which she rejects, but she admits she has "no positive account of nonsubjective value with which I am satisfied" (p. 45) She rejects a position that value depends on a group of people valuing; but if I can be mistaken, why not some of the groups I belong to, however large they may be? I agree; but if the whole human race might

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2 Cognoscenti will miss Gauguin. He gets a mention in her later discussion (p. 58) but not a clear endorsement so far as I can see.
be mistaken, what has become of her assurance that value is not independent of human needs and capacities? She also rejects what she thinks a more promising proposal: one that links "value to the hypothetical responses of an idealized individual or group" (p. 46). If this is an account of the constitution of value, why is it an advance on subjectivism? If it is merely an account of how best to track value, as it might plausibly be taken to be despite her anti-élitism (we do right to defer to physicists about electrons, and Fred at least thinks we should defer to sages about a lot else), it leaves unanswered what that value is that is being tracked.

In commenting and elaborating on her position a couple of Wolf's respondents dispute the need for objectivity. Nomy Arpaly, for instance, simply denies the existence of the kind of mistaken people Wolf has alluded to (some one for whom her whole life is wrapped up with her goldfish). Our reaction if someone claimed to be such a person would be disbelief, because they are deluded, not about values but about the simple facts: goldfish do not understand people. "[B]asic human needs are not being met, ... things that we know are necessary for fulfillment are absent" (p. 88). The psychologist Jonathan Heidt likewise claims that people simply do not as a matter of fact get "vitaly engaged" in the activities Wolf offers as lacking objective worth. The dangers of rampant relativism are then merely apparent.

Wolf's response to these Humean considerations about actual human nature is that they might seem to be gratuitously privileging normality, but that this can be deflected when one sees the appeal to a rounded picture of the needs and capacities of a human life: absorption by a goldfish fails to provide companionship, intellectual stimulation, etc., etc. She takes them as advocating a roughly Aristotelian account of human fulfilment. But she still refuses to identify such fulfilment with the meaningfulness she has in focus.

If not the normal, she says it privileges the natural, and that might be something one ought to change. One might be belligerent or vicious. Again she invokes the notion of transcending one's nature and suggests that that might well be a way to living a meaningful life. She also claims that the Aristotelian picture leaves no room for asking, not whether I have had a good life but whether I have lived a worthwhile life, a life I could be proud of.

For myself, I do not see that a partially Aristotelian approach cannot find place for some at least of these criticisms. After reflection on the varieties of human, and other animal, life, and their ways of working, perhaps especially their unintended outcomes, one can see that certain tendencies, however natural they may be, might also be things that, for other naturally given motives, one ought to check or temper. We have, both individually and collectively, a variety of goals, not all of which are compatible; discouraging belligerence might well be the outcome of such reflection.

I am not sure I find much content in talk of 'transcendence' but whatever it might be, it is open to the general argument that if we can do it then it is natural after all. I would not plump for the feats of yogis, but I can acknowledge those as a possibility for living a human life.

In finding scope, within an "error" theory of morality, for mistakes, one can also, as Wolf noted, appeal to hypotheticals. A person might be convinced that, had they done X rather than Y, things would have
gone better for them, on their own terms, than it did. They made a mistake. To answer Wolf's objection to that move, the position as I see it is, in broad outline, saying that our preferences determine value, and my hypothetical person's preferences are determining that person's values; they are just acknowledging that, as things turned out, different and better consequences would have flowed from a different choice.

Wolf's objection about worthwhile lives, a life I could be proud of, can be parried, perhaps not very satisfactorily, by seeing it as seeking some sort of consensus: is this the sort of life that people, or my more restricted reference groups, find value in? In the absence of a god or value-laden universe to endorse it, there would seem little else such a concern could relate to. And given that we are human beings, knowing that human beings find your way of life valuable, or the opposite, doesn't seem too irrelevant an answer.

One worry Wolf expresses is that if we cannot underwrite her type of objectivity, then we won't fully understand the issue of meaningfulness, and then might lose interest in it. But some of her last suggestions seem to me, not only to provide an answer here, but also to concede a significant element to the anti-objectivist. She writes of certain things, intrinsically of no value or meaning themselves (getting a ball through a ring as in basket-ball, making a sentence with the structure of a haiku, ...), becoming the focus around which meaning is created. It is the fact that people put energy and effort into doing these things and the myriad surrounding activities that create this meaning; there is no value in the starting point itself. True, but that is very much a matter of value being created by our valuing and our other associated activities.

People might surely come to recognise that the issue of getting balls through hoops or into holes in the ground is nothing of intrinsic importance, but is that any reason to doubt their continuing commitment to the games that involve these goals? People may see that there is nothing in the world that makes participation in a particular culture more valuable than anything else, but is that a reason for abandoning it? Doing it my way does not necessarily mean that I have invented a new and idiosyncratic way of doing things, but it can be sufficient answer for all that. There is no external objective value in perpetuating the species, but again one's metaphysical beliefs are not likely to lessen our appetite for so doing.

The Dean's opening remarks remind us that human energy and ingenuity have been focussed, not only on neutral or praiseworthy objects, but on the most horrible and degrading. Humans have pursued bull-fighting or gladiatorial contests as avidly as basket-ball. As one of her commentators noted, it is not clear what one should say about meaning found in what we now find abhorrent, but if we can reflect on natural aggressiveness and see a natural reason for curbing it, I don't see that these other cases of the creation of meaning in objectionable ways stand in the way of the position I am arguing for. There is an uneliminable element of choice in my version of an Aristotelian story, choice that perhaps helps to distinguish our species from most others; such choices need not be arbitrary, for they can be based upon a balancing of what we find the outcomes of different ways of behaving actually to be. But neither do they need to be objectively endorsed, categorical imperatives in the nature of things; just technological hypotheticals: if we prefer X to Y then these qualities, dispositions, institutions, ... serve better to achieve it than those. Our preferring X to Y, or my preferring X to Y while you prefer Y to X, just is that; it is the sort of animal we are.