A REVIEW OF SUSAN WOLF'S *MEANING IN LIFE AND WHY IT MATTERS*

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Abstract

This paper reviews Susan Wolf's *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* and interprets her work through the lens of formal axiology.

I have been an ardent student of formal axiology for more than fourteen years. Nonetheless, each time I think that I have mastered enough of the fundamental concepts of the theory to explain them to someone unfamiliar with it, I find myself tongue-tied, struggling to explain in plain English about I, E, S and about super-valuation and sub-valuation, compositions and transpositions, and so forth. To my relief, I recently came across a philosophy book—one whose author is not a formal axiologist—that provides everyday language with which to describe some of the precepts of formal axiology in common sense terms. This article is a review and an axiological interpretation of that book: *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, by Susan Wolf.

Susan Wolf is the Edna J. Koury Professor of Philosophy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The essays in this book were formerly delivered as a series of lectures given by her at Princeton University in 2007. That explains much of its readability. Similar to Hartman's *Lectures* and Dicken and Edwards' *Dialogues* (2001), Wolf's book has its roots in the spoken word. Her book has a conversational flow that leads the reader to an easier comprehension of a complex subject than do most philosophy books. It's a brief treatise, a mere 63 pages, followed by comments and responses from four other scholars. The book is then capped by Wolf's response to their critiques.

Wolf begins by describing two worldviews that have shaped most philosophical models of human psychology since the beginning of motivational discourse. She describes the first of these as the self-interest theories, which hold that acting rationally means to act in one's own self-interest. This conceptualization of the "good" has led to the various egoistic, happiness, and utility maximization theories that abound today. In contrast, a second theory of the "good" exists, as espoused by Kant. This conceptualization argues that the good is based on something higher than self-interest. Taking an impersonal perspective, Kant—and theories derived from Kant—maintain

that reason dictates that we should at all times act in accordance with what is best for the universe. Wolf refers to these dichotomously opposed theories using many different terms, frequently calling them, in turn, the egoistic and the dualistic models of practical reason.

Wolf's purpose in her essays is to propose that a third description of human motivation is also needed in order for us to lead meaningful lives. According to Wolf, meaningfulness as an attribute of a good life "is not reducible to our subsumable under either happiness, as it is ordinarily understood, or morality" (Wolf, 3).

First Essay

Using examples from everyday life, in her first essay Wolf argues that when we human beings act out of reasons that give meaning to life, we often act neither out of self-interest nor out of a sense of duty to some sort of impersonal standard of reason. Rather, we act out of love. Without using axiological terminology, the examples she gives run the gamut of loving intrinsic, extrinsic, and systemic value objects. Furthermore, she continues, acting out of love in these circumstances serves a distinctive and important role in our lives. Hence, much of Wolf's argument reads as though she were a formal axiologist arguing in defense of intrinsic valuation of worthy objects, in proper proportion, of intrinsic, extrinsic, and systemic sorts.

Wolf acknowledges that not all acts of love are worthy of the moniker *meaningful*. For example, someone who devotes his or her entire life, lovingly, and with full commitment, to completing crossword puzzles probably does not qualify as leading a meaningful life. Wolf promises to wrestle more deeply with the concept of objective value in the second essay, which she does. First, however, she devotes the remainder of the first essay to her concept of meaningfulness and valuation.

This leads Wolf to state her primary thesis about meaningfulness in life and why it matters:

> According to the conception of meaningfulness I wish to propose, meaning arises from loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way (8).

Admitting that the words she chose to use in this description can be both misleadingly specific and regrettably vague, she elaborates:

> What is perhaps most distinctive about my conception of meaning, or about the category of value I have in mind, is that it involves subjective and objective elements, suitably and inextricably linked (9).

Eventually, she arrives at a slightly different re-statement of the same proposition:

> According to my conception, meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness (9).

What excites me about Wolf's thesis is that she provides the simplest plain-language explanation of subjective valuation and objective value that I have yet come across. Three elements of Wolf's thesis, in particular, seem quite closely tied to the precepts of formal axiology:

1. "When subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness" defines what formal axiologists usually refer to as valuation (superscripts and subscripts in the HVP) and value (base objects in the HVP).
2. She proposes her definition of worthy objects more tentatively than does formal axiology. Wolf insists that meaning arises (only) from loving objects *worthy* of love and admits to possible disagreement as to who should decide which objects are worthy of love. This is a matter she addresses in greater detail in her second essay. Here, I believe, the I, E, and S categories of value could bring clarity to Wolf's own understanding of what makes an object worthy of love, especially if one is forced to choose between directing one's loving attention (say, because of time constraints) to only one of several different objects, each of which, in itself, is worthy.
3. Wolf then adds a component to her definition that relates to the concepts of super-valuation and sub-valuation, or compositions and transpositions, as used by formal axiologists. That is, she writes of "loving objects worthy of love and *engaging in them in a positive way*" (italics mine, 8). With this phrase, Wolf's conceptualization extends the precepts of formal axiology from mere dispositions or valuational tendencies to the world of action. Her definition, if I understand it correctly, requires that, for a person to have a meaningful life, such a person must both be able to act upon his or her valuational/value combinations and also must choose to act accordingly. She argues persuasively for the need to tie action to valuation. For those of us axiologists, especially, who work with the HVP, Wolf's thesis provides an important extension of Hartman's instrument to the world of action. In the *Manual of Interpretation of the HVP*, Hartman writes: "The test measures…the capacity for value judgment, not for value action" (127). The HVP neither measures nor predicts behavior; it indicates merely a propensity to act in certain ways. This being said, most axiological practitioners who make use of the HVP in coaching, education, or counseling do strive to help clients or students to translate their increased knowledge of their own valuational proclivities into action. Wolf's thesis makes this connection to action explicit in a way that the HVP, alone, does not do.

Wolf has mentioned (personal correspondence, 2016) the she is not familiar with the theory of formal axiology. If she were, then I expect that she would no longer be so tentative in her defense of the need for discussions of "this sort of objectivity into our discussion of values" (3).

Second Essay

As Wolf introduces her second essay, she raises the questions that are most likely already in the minds of her readers: "*Who's to say?—Who's to say* which projects are fitting (or worthy or valuable) and which are not?" (39). She continues by admitting, "My answers to all these questions are tentative."

Much of the critique from two of the four commentators upon her essays centers upon her requirement that, for a life to be meaningful, the objects of a person's love must have some sort of difficult-to-define objective value. In their comments about her thesis in this book, Haidt, to some extent, and Arpaly, in particular, argue against the very notion of objective value.

Arpaly writes:

> When deciding between two values, we are "on our own"—that is, there exists no argument that can, independently of the point of view embodied by each value, tell us which of the choices would be right for us (91).

This is one place where the hierarchy of values, as espoused by the theory of formal axiology, would provide Wolf more than tentative responses to her critics. Formal axiology could provide her a way to rebut to Arpaly's insistence that our conceptions of value can only be, by definition, relative and subjective.

To summarize Wolf's argument in axiological terms, a meaningful life is one in which a person intrinsically values intrinsic, extrinsic, and systemic value objects in proper proportion to their degree of worth—and acts accordingly. Her construct is clearly in alignment with formal axiology, insofar as she develops it.

Extending Wolf's Essays

For reasons unknown to me, Wolf begins and ends her explanation of a meaningful life with intrinsic valuation. She makes allowance for intrinsic, extrinsic, and systemic value objects, properly valued in proportion to their objective worthiness. But, in terms of valuation, her thesis focuses only upon intrinsic valuation. It seems to this axiologist, at least, that her construct could be expanded and made more meaningful and useful if she also incorporated the realms of extrinsic valuation and systemic valuation into her schema. Perhaps she feels that those two realms of valuation are already adequately developed in the philosophical literature. I do not know.

What if the Kantian perspective and the egoistic perspective were not dichotomously opposed, as Wolf says, but rather are theories that, in various degrees, are richer or more or less complex in valuational properties, with intrinsic valuation (love in Wolfs's terminology) being the richest of the three?

The Kantian perspective, it seems to me, is a systemic mode of valuation. Various versions of egoistic philosophies of maximum utilization, perhaps, could be characterized as being subsets of theories of extrinsic valuation (where everything and everyone is simply useful to me). Rather than juxtaposing her theory against the others, if Wolf were to weave all three of these perspectives into a valuational theory that takes into account the richness of each, in proper proportion, she would have a theory that is, to all extents and purposes, a theory of formal axiology, whether she uses its terminology or not.

Conclusion

Wolf and Hartman approach the same subject using very different methodologies. Formal axiology is a deductive theory; its foundation rests upon a small number of irreducible axioms (Hartman, 1991, 11). The remainder of Hartman's theory is deduced from those axioms. Wolf, on the other hand, follows an endoxic method. She takes her method from Aristotle, about whom she writes, "he takes the *endoxa*, 'the things which are accepted by everyone, or by most people or by the wise' as a starting point in his inquiry (10)." When two theories, with such different starting points, reach so nearly the same conclusions, they each provide support for the validity of the other.

Although Wolf's theory emphasizes only intrinsic valuation, it does provide powerful support for one of the chief merits of formal axiology as a theory of human valuation and values—that is, Hartman's emphasis upon the importance of intrinsic valuation. For that reason, alone, I recommend her book to any formal axiologist who struggles, as I do, with how to succinctly and clearly explain the precepts of Hartman's theory to the uninitiated. Furthermore, it is my hope that this review may prompt a reply by Wolf, by supporters or critics of her thesis, or by other axiologists who have studied her book, in a future issue of this *Journal*. Her theory merits ongoing dialogue.

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