

[Essay]

If Goldfish Give Us Meaning in Life, What's Next?

A Critique of Susan Wolf's *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*

Nathaniel Serio*

Abstract

In her widely influential and popular book *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, Susan Wolf formulates a hybrid theory of our ability to have meaning in life. She originally argues, meaning in life arises from loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way. I show that Wolf ends up crucially shifting her view from this original version to a revised version that she presents in her response to Nomy Arpaly and Johnathan Haidt's commentaries. Following this, I argue Wolf's account of meaning in life has very serious, possibly irrevocable, flaws because it structurally allows for a series of cases that are inconsistent with what she wishes to defend on the whole.

Introduction

Susan Wolf's hybrid theory of "meaning in life" as outlined in *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* aims to combine elements from objective theories of meaning in life and subjective or attitude-dependent theories of meaning in life.¹ Objective theories see meaning in life as being grounded in the actions one performs or the activities one participates in that promote "the greater good." Subjective or attitude-dependent theories, on the other hand, see meaning in life as being grounded in the attitudes of satisfaction or fulfillment that one derives from activities they engage in or, more generally, their life at large. So understood, Wolf's hybrid theory combines elements from both objective and subjective theories to suggest that meaning in life is grounded in one's engagement with activities that are (i) subjectively satisfying and (ii) are objectively valuable in a positive way. On that note, this paper has two aims that will be divided correspondingly into two sections. In section one, I will focus on sketching a crucial shift in Wolf's hybrid theory that I believe she commits herself to in the

* Student, Rutgers University, Philosophy Dept., 106 Somerset St., Fl. 5, New Brunswick, NJ 08901, USA. Email: nds88[a]scarletmail.rutgers.edu

¹ Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). Subsequent references to this work in the text.

appendix of the book. Following this, in section two I will raise some objections to this revised version of the hybrid theory and conclude with some brief comments on the implications for Wolf's view.

1. A Change in View

In this section, I will attempt to draw an outline of the account of “meaning in life” that Susan Wolf gives in her lectures. I am going to show that Wolf ends up shifting her view from this original version to a revised version that she presents in her response to Nomy Arpaly and Johnathan Haidt's commentaries. First, however, a few preliminary remarks are in order. I want to set up the scene by calling attention to how Wolf begins by framing her view against the background of two long-standing philosophical models of rationality. According to the first model, people act rationally only insofar as their actions are grounded in their own self-interest. Conversely, the second model holds that people act rationally only insofar as they do what is best from a strictly moral perspective. By most standards, I think, these two models are quite popular, but Wolf contends that they alone are not enough to adequately describe human motivation and practical reason. In fact, she says they leave out many of the motives and reasons that are most important and central to our lives. Consider for example common cases such as when we visit a family member in the hospital or stay up all night working hard on a philosophy paper. Here, Wolf thinks, it would be mistaken to say that our actions are grounded in self-interest or moral reasons, because we are neither maximizing our own welfare by doing them, nor are we duty-bound to perform them.² Moreover, it seems odd to say that in such cases our behavior is unjustified in terms of our motives and practical reason. Thus, Wolf suggests that in these cases and others like them we act on reasons of love (i.e., acting for the sake of the loved person, object, or ideal, or simply because the actor loves what it is they are acting for), which correspondingly serve as an ingredient for meaning in one's life.

Still, Wolf makes it a point to show that not all cases where our actions are grounded in reasons of love does meaningfulness come to play a role, there are conditions that limit what contributes to meaning in one's life. According to her, “meaning arises from loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a

² This isn't to suggest that moral reasons to perform a given action *only* amounts to whether or not there is a duty to do so.

positive way.”³ This characterization of Wolf’s view, however, is very not very detailed and overlooks some important aspects. With that being said, I want to try to formulate her view as follows:

Original version. A life with meaning in it is one that (i) subjects find fulfilling, (ii) contributes to or connects passionately with some person, object, or ideal, x , such that x has objective value (OV) outside of the subject, and (iii) that x is the thing that gives rise to the subject’s fulfillment.

Now, there is a lot to unpack here, so let’s begin. For one thing we have these vague notions of “fulfillment” and “objective value outside of the subject” present in our formulation of the Original version that need to be made clear. For Wolf, a subject’s fulfillment just is “the feelings one has when one loves, or when one is engaging in activities by which one is gripped or excited.”⁴ As for the second concern, the notion of a person, object, or ideal having objective value outside the subject is merely used by Wolf to avoid a radically subjective account of value. Otherwise, Wolf’s proposal is, as it stands, pretty straightforward and we need not spend too much time on it. I do wish to acknowledge that something seems right about the account justifying those common cases—like visiting a family member in the hospital or staying up all night to write a philosophy paper—in terms of practical reason.

Although it has this appealing consequence, the Original version isn’t very strong as it stands. Arpaly raises the worry that the Original version provides an objectionable result when given an easily imaginable case of a mentally disabled child that is positively engaged with caring for his pet goldfish and who finds the very activity to be fulfilling. As Wolf expresses throughout her lectures, she takes caring for a pet goldfish to be a paradigm instance of when an activity does not meet the conditions necessary to give rise to fulfillment.⁵ At least she thinks this is true for normal adults. However, according to Arpaly, “in caring for the fish, the child, unlike the adult, may well be working at the edge of his abilities, giving himself challenges and reasons to feel pride... a beloved goldfish or two can give

³ See note 1, p. 8.

⁴ See note 1, p. 14.

⁵ As Wolf’s own discussion renders clear, this is because she does not take caring for a pet goldfish as being an activity in which the subject contributes to or connects passionately with some person, object, or ideal, that has positive objective value.

the [mentally disabled] child a measure of fulfillment that would require much bigger projects in a normal adult...”⁶ Given this, if one embraces the Original version along with Wolf’s assumptions about the objective value in caring for a pet goldfish, then it must follow that the imagined mentally disabled child is not doing something which contributes to meaning in life. However, it seems clear from Wolf’s discussion following this objection that she feels this is an issue her account ought to accommodate.⁷ Following a worry of this sort, both Arpaly and Haidt suggest that the Original version is too restrictive in this way. For them, an account of meaning in life should focus on the subject’s fulfillment as meeting psychological needs and the exercise of human capacities, rather than place so much weight on the objective value of the person, object, or ideal that the subject engages with when determining meaning in one’s life.

Of course, I am certainly not the first to think Wolf shifts her view when she responds to these objections in the appendix of the book. Frances Kamm also notices this and says, “[Wolf] hypothesizes that [(i)] it is the exercise of whatever capacities one has to the highest extent and [(ii)] the opportunity this gives for interacting with others that may create objective value in that to which one is attracted.”⁸ At a minimum, (ii) seems right, however, I want to suggest that (i) is an incorrect interpretation of what Wolf says. In fact, she can even be found saying, “Haidt’s and Arpaly’s discussions of human psychology are insightful and instructive, with interesting implications, I believe for the [Original version]. Still, I believe there are reasons to resist using their insights to defend a fulfillment view of meaning that is independent to any reference of objective value.”⁹ This is to say, that she wants to hold on to (iii), or something like it, from the Original version despite what might seem like pressure for her to reconsider. In an attempt to offset all these worries, she gives, at least implicitly, a revised version that I will try to formulate as follows:

⁶ See note 1, p. 89.

⁷ “Although Haidt and Arpaly offered their examples (of the horse-loving student and goldfish-loving disabled child) as challenges to the idea that meaningfulness need be understood as essentially connected to objective value, I see their examples as offering hints about where the objective value might be found and how it can emerge. By understanding their examples in this way we can not only acknowledge the plausibility of their assessments, but explain what makes them so effective.” Wolf, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

⁸ Frances Kamm, *Almost Over*, (unpublished manuscript). From Ch. 6 of her forthcoming book on death, dying, and public policy.

⁹ See note 1, p. 120.

Revised version. A life with meaning in it is one that (i) subjects find fulfilling (ii) contributes to, or connects passionately with, some person, object, or ideal, x , such that x has objective value (OV) outside of the subject. (iii) Furthermore, there is a continuum of OV along which the OV of engaging with x can lie (e.g., building relationships, communion that comes from shared activity, cultivation and exercise of skills and virtues, etc.) and (iv) the whole or overall sum of those engagements the subject has, rather than x itself, is what gives rise to the fulfillment.

So, what has changed? Well, let me emphasize an important difference between the Original version and the Revised version. Because Wolf adopts a new notion of there being “a continuum of value” along which the value of engaging with a person, object, or ideal can lie, the Revised version can account for those problems raised by Arpaly and Haidt. Without pretending that I have fully captured what is meant by this, I wish to say more to ensure there is clarity here. One simple way put to it, is that, by “continuum of value” Wolf means the network of valuable activities around the person, object, or ideal that the subject engages with—call them “associated values,” if you will—and as I hinted above these include things like refinement of skills or friendships made through the subject’s engagement. So then, on the Revised version, if the mentally disabled child who finds fulfillment in caring for a goldfish is engaged with other children who come to see the fish and rapport is achieved with his parents who help him care for it, then even if those engagements are associated with what Wolf would have described as an activity that has no objective value (the caring for a goldfish) on the Original version, they are still valuable and give the child meaning in life.

In any case, it might be suggested that this shift is actually more problematic than helpful for Wolf’s account of “meaning in life,” and in the next section, I will discuss why I think this is so.

2. Problems with the Revised version and My Worries

As mentioned above and hinted at by the title of this section, I wish to discuss my worries that arise as a result of the shift to the Revised version and problems with Susan Wolf’s account of “meaning in life” as a whole. In what follows, I’ll largely be concerned with the question of what is allowed to count as giving

meaning to one's life as a consequence of this revision.

First, an important proviso: when looking at a theoretical level, the kind of objective value that some person, object, or ideal can have tends to be sorted into three general categories, that is, positive, negative, and neutral. As should have already been made clear by our discussion in section one, Wolf's account of "meaning in life" has always held that, other things considered, if the person, object, or ideal with which the subject is engaged has an objective value that is positive, then this gives the subject meaning in life.¹⁰ This changed with the shift to the Revised version, because now the account allows for the person, object, or ideal with which the subject is engaged to have an objective value that is neutral (e.g., caring for a pet goldfish) or be what Wolf would more recently refer to as "good-for-nothing."¹¹ I am inclined to think, however, that even in these good-for-nothing cases such as caring for a pet goldfish, meaning in life is still determined, other things considered, by the positive objective value of those things within the network of valuable activities associated with the goldfish (e.g., the friendships made with the other children who come visit to see the goldfish).

If that analysis is right, namely, that on the Revised version engagement with good-for-nothings can give the subject meaning in life, albeit in a somewhat indirect way, and that process rests on the main contributors of meaning in life to be within the network of activities having positive objective value that are merely associated with the good-for-nothings, then I think this account begins to crumble. My point is that, in that case, the shift from the Original version to the Revised version just represents a shift from the subject previously having to be passionately connected with a person, object, or ideal that had *in itself* positive objective value in order to have meaning in life, to now, the subject only having to be passionately connected with associated values which have positive objective value. That is, so long as the whole or overall sum of the engagements the subject has (i.e. the objective value of the person, object, or ideal itself with which the subject is engaged plus the associated values) is positive, then the subject has

¹⁰ By "other things considered" I mean that given those subjective components (i.e., the subject being connected passionately with some person, object, or ideal they choose to engage with and find it fulfilling), we can speak of the objective component as being met in such a way. Further, I want to note that what I am saying here is, on the Original version, meaning in life is determined (other things considered) by the subject's engagement with some person, object, or ideal, that has positive objective value outside of the subject.

¹¹ Susan Wolf, "Good-for-Nothings" in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 85 (2010): pp. 47-64.

meaning in life.¹²

While this might not seem problematic when we're only dealing with a hypothetical mentally disabled child who finds fulfillment in caring for his goldfish, when we further consider the consequences of what has been said above, the account seems, at least to me, beyond repair. The idea, roughly, is that if the account permits the network of activities with positive objective value to be the sole contributor in the event of the subject's engagement with good-for-nothings, then it seems required to permit the network of activities with positive objective value to be the sole contributor in the event of the subject's engagement with what I will call *bad-for-someones*.¹³ More specifically, this will structurally allow for Nazis to be doing something that contributes to meaning in their lives when they help out with the Nazi bake sale to raise money for their annual vandalism night, because they'll be passionately connected to friendships and have shared communal activities (of which, generally on this view have positive objective value) along the way.¹⁴ Again, that is so long as the whole or overall sum of their engagements produce a positive objective value. Ultimately, this raises an interesting question: can an individual who is objectively bad have meaning in life? As I have expressed, it immediately seems that there is something disqualifying about objectively bad individuals having meaning in life, especially in an extreme counterexample like the one I just presented where the individuals are Nazis.¹⁵ However, I anticipate that insofar as one embraces Wolf's Revised version, there are two possible ways they might respond to this concern.

¹² It bears emphasizing that the model for representing evaluations of meaning in life on the Revised version assigns "parthood" relations to the person, object, or ideal with which the subject is engaged and to each of things that make up the associated values. From this, it seems natural to elucidate the model using a framework of additivism or atomism to derive the sum of those values. At any rate, Wolf's shift in view now presents a picture where meaning in life is determined (other things considered) by a positive (in terms of value) sum of those things holding a parthood relation. (Sill it's difficult to assert what exactly the parthood relation is in relation to, for our purposes let's just call it x, and what exactly is a "part," or can be a "part" of, x. Nevertheless, this need not concern us in advancing the discussion). For more see Campbell Brown, "Two Kinds of Holism About Values" in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 57 (2007): pp. 456-463.

¹³ By "bad-for-someones" I mean to refer to those cases where the person, object, or ideal with which the subject is engaged has an objective value that is negative (e.g., what most of the middle ages consisted of in Europe).

¹⁴ Please do not take me to be saying the Nazi's communal activities has positive objective value. All I meant here was that the general events of building friendships and shared communal activities have positive objective value. Also, I will later reference this imagined scenario as the Nazi bake sale example.

¹⁵ Perhaps it's worth addressing the objection that some readers make at this point. That is, any person, object, or ideal related to Nazism has an objective value so negative that realistically, no amount of objectively positive associated values could ever make the whole or overall sum of the subject's engagements produce a positive objective value (see Landau, 2011; Campbell & Nyholm, 2015). Even

First, defenders of the Revised version might try to retreat by claiming it's fallacious to assume the governing function of the account is based on an *atomistic model of value holism*—i.e., representing (for our purposes) evaluations of meaning in life by the sum of *independent* values without factoring in considerations for “interaction effects.”¹⁶ That is when combined, those associated positive objective values offered in the above scenario with the Nazis actually contribute, all things considered, to the *overall disvalue* or badness of the case. In fact, I quite agree with those defenders that it may be, crudely put, “bad philosophy” to hastily make assumptions about what model the governing function of any account is based on. But, as far as I can see, their complaint has little force and will not provide them with the resources to avoid Wolf's account from crumbling. After all, if one decides to pursue this anticipated retreat it remains necessary for them to reconfigure the Revised version with an alternative model that represents evaluations of whole values in terms of the composition of their part values. But my sense is that, even if this is accomplished, various unaddressed concerns still interfere with the Revised version being a philosophically satisfying account of meaning in life.

For one thing, suppose we stipulate that the Revised version's governing function is based on a sort of value holism supported by G.E. Moore or Jonathan Dancy where the contextual value of parts plays a critical role in representing evaluations of whole values. In this way, the Revised version would be able to offer a satisfying response to the Nazi counterexample, namely, that those associated positive objective values actually contribute, all things considered, to the overall disvalue or badness of the case. Call this the Revised version*. But, as

if that is so, I feel there are other less-extreme cases, one of which I will soon offer, where we could reasonably conceive of the person, object, or ideal with which the subject is engaged having a negative objective value that, when conjoined with objectively positive associated values, could allow for the whole or overall sum of the subject's engagements to produce a positive objective value.

¹⁶ To illustrate this point, consider the following example offered by Campbell Brown: “As the opinions of competent judges will attest, gravy complements chips, yet spoils ice-cream. That is, chips with gravy is better than chips alone, but ice-cream with gravy is worse than ice-cream alone. On an ‘atomistic’ view of value, these judgements are puzzling. The sole difference between chips with gravy and chips alone is the gravy. So any difference in value between these two must be the value of the gravy. But just the same is true of ice-cream with gravy and ice-cream alone: the only difference is the gravy, and so any difference in value must be the value of the gravy. The difference in value between the first pair is, therefore, the same as that between the second pair. In particular, chips with gravy is better than chips alone if and only if ice-cream with gravy is better than ice-cream alone.” Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 1. In short, the response from loyal advocates of Wolf's Revised version can be seen as claiming that the Nazi bake sale objection I raised doesn't take into consideration that there might be an “interaction effect” between values as there is with ice-cream and gravy.

I hinted at before, the Nazi bake sale case is an extreme counterexample and of course there are other less-extreme cases. For example, suppose there's a farmer who spends his entire adult life slaughtering cattle. (For our purposes and because it's a matter of huge debate, let's say that slaughtering cattle is a type of harm and hence a bad-for-someone case).¹⁷ Suppose that the farmer does this in order to provide food for his family and that he also donates the additional meat to those in need during the holidays making him a valued and respected member of his community.¹⁸ Intuitively, this might appear to be a bad-for-someone with a significant amount of associated objectively positive goods that *should* contribute to meaning in the individual's life, however, I think we ought to reject this inference or at least be very suspicious of it. Right off the bat, it appears unclear how the Revised version* would, all things considered, represent an evaluation of meaning in life for the cattle farmer—do the associated positive objective values here also contribute to the overall badness of the case? Based on what Wolf has said in the past about *moral saints*¹⁹, it may be that in this particular scenario she does not see the contribution from the negative elements in the cattle farmer's engagement as being a matter of concern for meaning in life.²⁰ Notice, however, that this would mark a significant departure from what she originally wished to claim in *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, namely, that “an individual cannot get meaning from worthless projects, much less from projects of wholly negative

¹⁷ I suppose on the traditional use of the word a cow isn't a “someone.” In that event, one could refer to these this case as a *bad-for-some-being* case. See Harman, 2011; 2015, for debate on whether on not killing animals for farming practices constitutes a harm.

¹⁸ This example came from Danny Underwood in comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Additionally, John Partridge brought to my attention a possible real-life instance of the cattle farmer example. Dario Cecchini, a world-renowned Italian butcher from the Chianti region of Italy, was previously on a path to become a Veterinarian before he left university to take over the family business from his dying father. In doing so, he became the eighth generation of Cecchini butchers. Now, I'm not sure Cecchini donates leftover meat to those in need during the holidays the above example describes, but he is certainly a well-respected member of his community and, for that matter, the more global cooking community. His mission is to protect and advocate for the local butcher against the rise of powerful supermarkets and moreover, serve as a teacher and educator. These could considerably be associated positive objective values.

¹⁹ Susan Wolf, “Moral Saints” in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 79 (1982): pp. 419-439.

²⁰ Frances Kamm pointed out to me that the cattle farmer case might be particularly interesting here since it seems to be a case of compensation. That is, by donating his spare product to the needy and serving as a valued and respected member of his community, the cattle farmer is attempting to compensate for his engagement in an immoral activity. Perhaps that's why it intuitively seems as if this is a bad-for-someone with a significant amount of associated objectively positive goods that should (or at least could) contribute to meaning in life. At any rate, another question that might be worth asking is how something like compensation, sacrifice, or other contexts weigh on the all things considered value of an immoral action, activity, or what have you.

value.”²¹ At the very least, it seems evident that the cattle farmer scenario raises concerns that require further consideration.

The second way I anticipate defenders of the Revised version (and also Revised version*) might respond to the issues that arise from the Nazi bake sale case (and the cattle farmer scenario just outlined) is by positing *anti-meaning* as part of the model’s conceptual framework. That is, one could suggest that meaningfulness is not monopolar and in fact has a negative pole that represents adding something of distinctly negative value to one’s life. In this way, Nazi bake sale people would be engaged in an activity that substantially weighs against whatever contributions to meaning in life they might have had from the positive associated values. Although this accounts for the Nazi bake sale case, I find this response to face the same issue as the first response. More specifically, it still remains unclear how the account would represent an all things considered evaluation of meaning in life for the cattle farmer—is he engaged in an activity that, like the Nazi bake sale people, substantially weighs against the contributions to meaning in life that stem from the positive associated values? As before, the cattle farmer case intuitively appears to be a bad-for-someone with a significant amount of associated objectively positive goods that should (or at least could) contribute to meaning in life. But, as before too, if the contribution from the associated values can offset the anti-meaning that stems from the negative elements in the in the cattle farmer’s engagement, then there clearly has been a departure from what Wolf says about “projects of wholly negative value.”

Assuming that there is a solution to the foregoing concerns I have raised, the Revised version* stands to completely fly in the face of what Wolf seems to say, at least implicitly, about what I will refer to as *Gauguin cases*.²² These are scenarios where an individual contributes to, or connects passionately with, some person, object, or ideal, that has positive objective value outside of the subject, but meanwhile, also is engaged with a network of associated activities that have negative objective value. Wolf makes it clear when discussing the scorned artist and lonely inventor on the Original version that it’s not a necessary condition for there to be a network of associated values in order for the subject to attain meaning in life. Against this background, when analyzing Gauguin cases on the Original

²¹ See note 1, p. 60

²² So called because of Bernard Williams’ discussion of Gauguin in his essay on moral luck. As the story goes, Gauguin abandoned his family in Denmark and isolated himself to pursue art in Paris, hence, he aptly represents an individual in the kind of scenario I want to draw on here.

version Wolf would have considered an individual—one such as Paul Gauguin—to have meaning in life. However, given the above discussion of the shift in her view to the Revised version and the anticipated responses to the Nazi bake sale counterexample that brings to attention the Revised version*, analyzing Gauguin cases in the same way as before becomes extremely problematic. To reinforce this picture, reflect on how a value holism that takes into account the contextual value of parts in the evaluations of whole values—a G.E. Moore and/or Jonathan Dancy value holism—would parse these Gauguin cases. According to this way of theorizing, the model would likely represent an evaluation of a “Gauguin scenario” as a negative whole value, since considerably, it’s just the reverse of the aforementioned Nazi bake sale example. By this, I mean to point out that, in the latter, the person, object, or ideal with which the subject is engaged has a negative objective value and the associated values are positive, while in the former, the person, object, or ideal with which the subject is engaged has a positive objective value and the associated values are negative. So understood, they are switched. But, unlike the Nazi bake sale example, Wolf previously seemed committed to the idea that an individual like Gauguin would be making a contribution to meaning in their life.

Summing up, if some of what I have argued turns out to not to hit the mark, it nevertheless seems evident that Wolf or her supporters need to address the concerns I’ve presented in order for the revised hybrid theory to be a philosophically satisfying account of meaning in life. On the other hand, if what I have argued hitherto does hit the mark, then Wolf’s account has very serious, possibly irrevocable, flaws. To say more about why I consider these to be “possibly irrevocable flaws,” recall from our earlier discussion that the shift from the Original version to the Revised version required a reconfiguration of the hybrid theory such that it included a model for representing evaluations of whole values in terms of the composition of their part values. Through that process, the worries against atomism in the form of the Nazi bake sale case led us to invoke value holism in the Revised version*, but, as I see it, this won’t suffice for a theory of meaning in life.

The first point to note is that having meaning in life is generally seen as something that (all else being equal) makes one better-off and renders their life more desirable to have. To put it another way, meaning in life is generally seen as

a *prudential good*.²³ Given that, ideally a theory of meaning in life will be able to inform our decision making, that is, insofar as we wish to make ourselves better-off. In order to do this, a theory needs to be able to provide consistent evaluations in the form of meaning in life judgments. Drawing a connection to the examples presented earlier, that means a theory needs to be able to provide a single meaning in life judgement for each of the individuals in the above cases, more specifically, the goldfish owner, the Nazi bake sale people, the cattle farmer, and Paul Gauguin. As it turns out, both the Revised version and Revised version* won't meet this criteria. On both of those versions, the objective value of an individual's engagement with some person, object, or ideal, *x*, considered as a whole depends on the values of its parts, namely, the objective value of *x* and the associated values, which allows for multiple meaning in life judgements to be available for cases like the cattle farmer and Paul Gauguin. That is to say, in both of those examples, a story where the sum of the parts forms a whole with positive objective value can just as easily be told as a story where the sum of the parts forms a whole with negative objective value.²⁴ At any rate, the bottom line is this: a theory of meaning in life that provides contradictory evaluations based on the same case information is not a philosophically satisfying theory and can't inform our decision making as it relates to achieving meaning in life or making our lives prudentially more valuable.

As for what an alternative account might look like in that case, I am still unsure. Rather, this paper has more so aimed to illuminate a negative result of not only Wolf's Revised version/Revised version* but also her account of "meaning in life" as a whole.²⁵

²³ See Campbell, 2013; Campbell & Nyholm, 2015; Metz, 2013. Using different terms, Metz suggests that meaningfulness is what Tim Scanlon would call a *personal good*—i.e., "[a] condition that makes and individual person's existence better or worse and so...in a broad sense 'good for' one (cf. p. 62)."

²⁴ With respect to Paul Gauguin on the Revised version*, one could plausibly say that while there is some negative OV from the associated values, there is much more positive OV from the art that he is engaged in and, moreover, no noteworthy interaction effects between the art and the negative associated values. As a result, this makes the sum of those values positive. Therefore, Gauguin has meaning in life. But, one could also just as plausibly say the reverse, namely, that while there is so much positive OV from the art he is engaged with, there is also a smaller but still sufficient amount of negative OV from the associated values to result in interaction effects that make the sum of those values negative. Therefore, Gauguin doesn't have meaning in life. Suffice to say, both judgements about Gauguin can be given on the Revised version* despite being based on the same case information.

²⁵ Previous versions of this paper were presented at The College of William & Mary, the Rutgers Undergraduate Philosophy Reading Group, and Waseda University. I would like to thank the audiences of each for their input, especially John Partridge, Thaddeus Metz, Philip Swenson, and Frank Wu. I am most grateful to Frances Kamm, Danny Underwood, Frank Wu, and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments on earlier drafts, which resulted in many adjustments to the paper.

References

- Brown, C. "Two Kinds of Holism About Values." *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 57 (2007): pp. 456-463.
- Campbell, S. "An Analysis of Prudential Value." *Utilitas*, Vol. 25 (2013): pp. 334-354.
- Campbell, S. & Nyholm, S. "Anti-Meaning and Why It Matters." *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 1 (2015): pp. 694–711.
- Dancy, J. "The Particularist's Progress." In *Recent Work on Intrinsic Value*, edited by Rønnow-Rasmussen T. & Zimmerman M.J., 325-345. Dordrecht: Springer, 2005.
- Harman, E. "Eating Meat as a Morally Permissible Moral Mistake." In *Philosophy Comes to Dinner* edited by Chignell, A., Cuneo, T., & Halteman, M., 215-231. New York: Routledge, 2015.
- Harman, E. "The Moral Significance of Animal Pain and Animal Death." In *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Ethics* edited by Beauchamp, T. & Frey, R., 726-737. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Kamm, F. *Almost Over*. (unpublished manuscript).
- Kipke, R. & Rüter, M. "Meaning and Morality: Some Considerations on a Difficult Relation." *Social Theory and Practice*, Vol. 45 (2019): pp. 225-247.
- Landau, I. "Immorality and the Meaning of Life." *Journal of Value Inquiry*, Vol. 45 (2011): pp. 309-317.
- Metz, T. *Meaning in Life: An Analytical Study*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Moore, G. E., *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903.
- Temkin, L. *Rethinking the Good: Moral Ideas and the Nature of Practical Reasoning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Williams, B. *Moral Luck*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Wolf, S. "Good-for-Nothings." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 85 (2010): pp. 47-64.
- Wolf, S. "Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life," *Social Philosophy & Policy*, Vol. 14 (1997): pp. 207–225.
- Wolf, S. *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.
- Wolf, S. "Meaning in Life: Meeting the Challenges." *Foundations of Science*, Vol. 21 (2016): pp. 279-282.

Wolf, S. "Moral Saints." *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 79 (1982): pp. 419-439.