

Affinity, Worth, and Fecundity

On Susan Wolf's Advice for Living a Meaningful Life

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Abstract

I examine Wolf's hybrid theory of meaning in life and her recommendation of an important additional consideration for persons wishing to live meaningfully. Her advice is that we consider whether and to what extent our caring for something would create additional unique and transformative value. I call this fecundity. Wolf is correct to think that the prospect of fecundity matters to agents who wish to live meaningfully, though it is not a requirement on meaning like affinity and worth. Still the advice raises questions about her analysis. I pose the objectivists' query about the necessity of the subjective "affinity" condition, but also argue that key elements of the affinity condition are better captured by an emotional state theory of happiness.

1. An Important Third Consideration for Those Wishing to Live Meaningfully

Susan Wolf's hybrid theory holds that meaning in life arises "when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness." Thus, we should consider both affinity and worth in determining the reasonableness of our projects, cares, and activities. She seems to hold that activities or projects that meet the affinity and worth requirements may have another feature as well. One way she puts it is as follows:

In other words, meaning in life arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness, when one finds oneself able to love what is worth loving, *and able, further*, to do something with or about it—to contribute to or promote or preserve or give honor and appreciation to what one loves. (Wolf 2002, 237, emphasis added).

Just being at the intersection of affinity and worth is not enough. As the passage indicates, a certain kind of activity and some measure of success must happen as well. This is clear and consistent throughout Wolf's work as I'll show in part 3.

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But the sense that there could be something else *besides* affinity and worth comes earlier. She says that there are “at least three sorts of consideration” we should undertake when determining what would be most suitable to care about or love. The third is “whether (and how much) the relation between the person and the object has the potential to create or bring forth experiences, acts, or objects of further value” (235). Here is the fullest elaboration of her point:

Perhaps even more important than the considerations mentioned so far is a further point—namely, that affinity for an object, activity or person encourages or makes possible kinds of worth or value that would not exist without it, value that lies not in the object considered in itself, but in the lover of that object or the relationship between them. Some people bring out the best in each other; they allow or encourage each other to fulfill their potentials. Similarly, a person’s affinity for a genre or for a more particular type of entity can inspire and stimulate him in ways no other thing can. One thinks of Glenn Gould’s relation to Bach, of Merchant and Ivory’s relation to post-Victorian fiction. (Wolf 2002, 235)

Wolf states that the third consideration is possibly “more important” than the other considerations. Why?

This moment in Wolf’s argument invites us to look very carefully at the intersection of affinity and worth to better understand her advice to persons looking to live meaningfully. My paper aims to examine this intersection and her advice of a third consideration. I conclude that Wolf is right to offer this advice, but for reasons that differ somewhat from those implied by her analysis. I believe that the third consideration, which I’ll call “fecundity,” becomes visible in some instances of the affinity-worth intersection, though fecundity is not a distinct requirement on meaning. So far, Wolf might agree. But she will disagree with my reevaluation of affinity, the key features of which are better accounted for by the right conception of happiness. And she’ll disagree with one potential implication of my view, namely that worth is not only necessary for meaning, but may be sufficient for it. My aim here, however, is to argue that fecundity describes the condition of an agent who is more likely to successfully and durably produce transformative objective worth. On the view I favor, happiness characterizes the emotional state of such a person. Thus, Wolf is right to put

forward this evocative characterization of fecundity when advising those who wish to live meaningfully; and she is right to see meaning's motivation to be distinct from the motivations of hedonic conceptions of happiness as a final good. But on my view, it is because happiness, rightly understood, is playing an important role in making meaning more likely.

2. Fecundity in Wolf and Frankfurt

Let me now come back to Wolf's evocative picture of a life in which affinity and worth come together in the special way that creates unique value. Why, we can ask afresh, is this such an important element in life?

There might be many different answers. First, the "experiences, acts, or objects of further value" denote a value that obtains uniquely. Second, it is a value that is grounded not in the object, but in the subject or in the relationship between subject and object (cf. Nozick's notion of relational meaning). There are also gestures toward the idea that we are engaged in the fulfillment of our nature, or in developing and exercising our capabilities, or in plumbing deep or core features of our identity.

Whatever precisely she means in that passage, Wolf certainly affirms that our caring can be generative of other values and productive of special outcomes that arise in no other way. I believe that this generative dimension of meaning obtains our caring results in deep, intense, or comprehensive engagement of a productive sort. Specifically, the caring should engage us deeply in ways that leave distinctive marks on us and on the world. It leaves a mark on us by fulfilling our potential, or realizing our nature, or exercising our capabilities. And it leaves a mark on the world by inspiring the creation of independent value that would not otherwise exist.

Call this "fecundity." At its heart is a generative and transformative dimension of living. It recalls Plato's *Symposium* when Diotima instructs Socrates that we all seek to "give birth in beauty." Socrates, now convinced of Diotima's account of what it is like to be in contact with Beauty itself and by itself, seeks every day to honor Eros (212b). He does this by giving birth to true virtue and rearing it (212a). That is to say, he creates or brings forth experiences, acts, or objects of further value. In this way, Socrates is engaged in an activity

that transforms himself and the world.¹ I'll come back to Diotima very briefly at the end, but first I want to say a few more words about fecundity as it appears in more contemporary discussions.

A brief look at Frankfurt may help us understand the generative dimension of fecundity and its contribution to enhancing the goodness of one's life. To begin, Frankfurt speaks of the way that loving and care produce value. "[E]very possibility of loving is a possibility of bringing about a state of affairs that possesses some value" (Frankfurt 2002, 246). What is more, he writes that when people love things for which they have an affinity, they are provided with "rich opportunities for fulfilling their most satisfying capacities, and that enable them to flourish" (2002, 245).² This captures the idea that affinity can leave a mark on us. In addition, he shows how caring shapes our identity and directs our actions (1988/1982, p. 83), which are conditions that make it possible for us to impact the world. A summary of his position on these matters is no better stated than in *The Reasons of Love*: "It is by caring about things that we infuse the world with importance. This provides us with stable ambitions and concerns; it marks our interests and our goals" (2004, 23).

Frankfurt can accept my characterization of fecundity to the extent that he understands how care and loving both create value and are personally transformative or structuring. On these points, he and Wolf agree. But—famously or infamously—his view is that love and care not only create value and make one's life meaningful, but they may do so regardless of the objective worth of the object of care.³ This is a big difference since for Wolf, meaningful activity must involve the agent in something of independent worth, whereas Frankfurt's meaningful activity is significant because it connects the agent intrapersonally. Specifically, the loving agent connects him- or herself via distinctive volitional states that give rise to oneself and one's identity. Wolf's

¹ The *Phaedrus* tells a similar story, but (1) adds an essential role for interpersonal eros and (2) offers a fuller account of how the loving subject is transformed by his erotic engagement. The philosophical lovers in the *Phaedrus* find in their love for one another a path that connects them to the truth (252d). This is a pattern that permits them to imitate the god and the right way to live (253a) and which, if they remain chaste, yields virtue (256b). Like Socrates, then, the lovers in the *Phaedrus* also bring forth virtue, and in so doing, transform themselves and the world.

² What are "satisfying capacities"? Does he mean to say that the value of exercising our capacities is hedonic?

³ "An enthusiastically meaningful life need not be connected to anything that is objectively valuable, nor need it include any thought that the things to which it is devoted are good. Meaning in life is created by loving. Devoting oneself to what one loves suffices to make one's life meaningful, regardless of the inherent or objective character of the objects that are loved" (Frankfurt 2002, 250)

examples in the passage above, by contrast, also link the activity of the caring self to outcomes or states of affairs like beauty in music or film. In Wolf, the further value created by the fecund agent is not neutral or agnostic with respect to its mind-independent outcomes or objects. Let's turn to her picture now.

3. A Closer Look at Wolf's Intersection of Affinity and Worth

In her 2010 book, Wolf writes in familiar ways when she holds that meaning arises “when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness, *and one is able to do something about it or with it*” (26, emphasis added here and below). But she also speaks in somewhat different ways to illuminate things, saying that meaning arises from “loving objects worthy of love *and engaging with them in a positive way*” (2010, 8; cf. 2010, 8-10). Later, these same ideas return: “meaning arises when we *actively engage* in loving objects worthy of love *in a positive way*” (2010, 27). This way of putting the point leaves aside the evocative specification of what our caring might do to us and to the world; also, there is no more mention of Gould or Merchant and Ivory. In fact, when she captures the dynamic and generative dimension of meaning in life, she does so in a different way:

By living in a way that is partly occupied by and directed toward the preservation or promotion or creation of value that has its source outside of oneself, one does something that can be understood, admired or appreciated from others' points of view, including the point of view of an impartial indifferent observer. (2010, 28-29)

With this passage, she is moving away from, or merely emphasizing less, the picture she offered in her 2002 piece. Indeed, the focus here is to specify what sort of objective worth is present in a meaningful life; there is less attention on the condition of the agent living a meaningful life (as she herself recognizes; see n. 5 below).

In her 2007/2016 essay, a similar stress on the objective worth side of her formula emerges. She offers a series of cases, starting up from the most meaningless life she can think of, in order to “highlight by their absences other elements of meaningfulness” (116). Blob spends day after day, and night after night, watching sit-coms on TV and drinking beer. Blob's life is lived in a “hazy

passivity” that while not unpleasant, is “unconnected to anyone or anything, going nowhere, achieving nothing” (2007/2016, 116). The Idle Rich Person, contra Blob’s passivity, has a life full of activity. But the activity is silly, decadent or useless. Finally, the Corporate Exec unlike the others, has activity that is serious (they work “twelve-hour, seven-day weeks, suffering great stress”) but does it only in order to amass personal wealth. Wolf also mentions Wiggins’ Pig Farmer as a person who resembles the Corporate Exec. Like the Exec, there is activity, and activity that has an aim. But it is an endless toil of buying land, to farm corn, to feed pigs, to buy more land, to farm more corn, to feed more pigs, etc.

The dominant activities in the first group of lives share a common feature: they seem “pointless, useless, or empty.” She labels them all Useless. And unlike the cases below, they are activities which may succeed at what they are doing, but are not meaningful because their values are “shallow or misguided” (2007/2016, 117). Also, for Wolf these three cases are meant to be rather clearly meaningless, while the next three (and especially the last one) are cases about which, she acknowledges, it may be more controversial to say they lack meaning. First on the list is the Bankrupt Manufacturer who devoted “his life to creating and building up a company to hand over to his children,” only for the product to become obsolete right as he retires. Then comes the Scooped Scientist whose imminent discovery is published weeks earlier by another scientist. Finally, there is the person in a Fraudulent Relationship whose devotion made another person central to their life, but the relationship was a fraud (2007/2016, 117). These three cases she labels Bankrupt. They are aiming at the right kinds of ends, but are unsuccessful in bringing them off.

These paradigms of meaningless lives provide the opportunity for her to show what a meaningful life must contain. Blob’s meaningless life helps to establish that meaning in life requires activity, and she means this to involve more than just motion or physical activity.⁴ After all, the cases of the idle rich person and the corporate executive help to secure a requirement that the activity

⁴ “If there is nothing we love or are able to love, a meaningful life is not open to us” (Wolf 2002, 237). In part five, I use the case of the Exiled Daughter to suggest, as various objective theorists have also done, that this is not true because we can have a meaningful life despite being in a disfavorable emotional state with respect to our dominant project. If Wolf’s claim is that meaning in life is unavailable to the person who could not love their project, perhaps because it does not merit love, then I would agree. But then this is really a problem for the project’s worth, not the agent’s attitude toward it; and as the rest of this paragraph and the next footnote shows, for Wolf the person must have the right attitude toward it.

involves *active engagement*, which they all notably lack. This term, active engagement, is doing rather heavy lifting. The projects we're actively engaged in are ones that we identify with, embrace, and regard with pride (118-119).⁵ To be sure, one will not find meaning in life, she thinks, in a state of passive receptivity, nor in unserious flitting around in amusements. But crucially too, she claims, one will not find meaning where there is alienation or when "going through the motions." Thus, Wolf's alienated housewife (118-119, cf. 115-116 and 121) lacks the subjective sense that her experience of endless chores is rewarding or fulfilling, and instead feels "emptiness and dissatisfaction" (116). So too for the conscripted soldier (2010, 113), where subjective affinity of the necessary sort is called "fulfillment" (see also Wolf 1997 and 2010). Let's take a closer look at this so we can understand the significance of its absence.

Fulfillment, Wolf says, is a type of hedonistically-valued subjective state, but one that is contrasted with the "fun" of an amusement park ride and other mere pleasures. But there is much more to it than this. It is a rewarding subjective experience that one feels, but also that has a cognitive component directed at the object or activity that provides the feeling. Wolf holds that to meet the affinity requirement, the object or source of the feeling must be seen as good or worthwhile in some independent way (2010, 24). Indeed, she thinks that the object of affinity is not merely desired but recognized as desirable and "*felt* to answer a certain kind of human need" (26). The felt need is for a kind of objective or independent value that one's activity links up to. In fact, when we feel that were occupied with something of independent worth, it can be thrilling (29). Her view of affinity or fulfillment, then, really takes seriously the idea of its intersection with worth. She is careful not to make the feeling into something too intellectual, but it does involve an appreciation or felt sense of the independent value of the activity by which we are engaged. In the ideal case, the activities that engage us are ones that the alienated housewife "would proudly and happily embrace" as "constituting at least part of what her life is about" (2007/2016, 119).

For Wolf, the affinity condition on meaning requires the right sort of subjective attraction, one denoted by "active engagement" or "fulfillment." Not

⁵ Wolf cites her 2007/2016 and her 1997 as sources for the claim that "meaning in life consists in and arises from actively engaging in projects of worth" (2010, 26) but says in a footnote that "this formulation fails to emphasize the element of love (or passion or identification) as much as the other" (26, n. 12).

every subjective proattitude will rise to the level needed for meaning to emerge. Active engagement is rather thickly conceived to involve a range of attitudes and affects, as well as volitional and cognitive commitments.⁶ Only on this thick construal will we see subjective attraction as “a great and distinctive good in life” (2010, 15). This shows how complicated the intersection of affinity and worth becomes. It is no mere intersection, nor a haphazard coming together. The subjective state must be partly constituted by a judgment of the worth of the source of the subjective state; the affinity or sense of fulfillment must be fitting or apt.

We can see this in her discussion of the first three cases under the Useless category when she says that the activity must be positive. Her sense of this term is not initially obvious. Wolf says she wants to be pluralistic about what sorts of activities meet this characterization of being “positive,” recognizing that people like different things (e.g., some like sports, others like intellectual pursuits). The only firm line she draws is saying that the activity must be value-bearing apart from the subject’s regarding it so (2007/2016, 119-120). This is objective worth, clearly. Additionally, Wolf draws on the three Bankrupt cases to say that we need some success in our activity if it is to contribute meaning to our life. Abject failure, or even significant thwarting, cuts against the intuition that an activity is meaningful.⁷ These points help us to see that the objective worth condition can only confer meaning in life when there genuinely is independent worth and there is some degree of success in bringing out that value or linking up to it.

These arguments confirm that Wolf’s slogan characterizes two distinct sources of value which can intersect, and that the additional clause details a requirement of what must happen at that intersection. Affinity and worth are necessary, she thinks, but something like these extra elaborations, captured by the phrase “active engagement in a positive way,” merely show what sort and degree of affinity and what sort and amount of worth are needed for meaning to

⁶ See her 2010, 112-114 where, when responding to critics, she says that “fulfillment” names a complex and variable subjective state (like love), but she adds that this cannot be cashed out in terms of happiness. I argue in part 6 that to an important degree it can and should be cashed out in terms of happiness.

⁷ There are many cases, however, where a measure of meaning can emerge (See Schmidtz’s failed sandbagging efforts [2001/2016, 103]; Wolf’s scooped scientist or her failed poet also come to mind) but an account would be required (as Wolf rightly agrees cf. 2007/2016, 117; I offer such a case and such an account in my discussion of the exiled corporate exec in part five). In her 2010 reply to critics, she affirms again that success matters, to some degree. See pp. 104-107 and her discussion of what we’d say to the failed scientist and how we can’t say whether a minor poet’s life is less meaningful than a major poet’s life (108).

appear.

Soon I'll raise a doubt about this picture by asking what would happen if the activities and experiences merit pride and identification, but the person having or performing them holds back, or does not find the characteristic subjective rewards in them. Wolf's position entails that such a person is not living meaningfully, but objective theorists like Metz, Smuts, and Bramble disagree. And supporters of a rival hybrid view, like Evers and van Smeden, think that the affinity requirement is too strong and wish to recast it as a valuing requirement. Like these critics, I think that the affinity requirement, as Wolf characterizes it, opens her position to counterexamples. However, the impact of these counterexamples can be mitigated by Svensson's stress that meaning in life "depends at least in part on what that person likes, enjoys, cares about, or desires" (Svensson 2017, 50), and my case in part five features a person whose project is desired and cared about, but who still experiences significant disaffection. In this way, I think that Wolf's point about having subjective attraction to our projects and activities matters, and so I think she is right to advise us to consider what our affinity makes possible and how it does so.

4. What the Search for a Third Condition Called Fecundity Shows

Initially in Wolf, the third consideration for agents seeking to live meaningfully, which I call fecundity, looks like a separate claim about agents straddling the affinity-worth intersection who then bring forth special value. But that impression may be formed more by the way she is arguing there. Her examples—of Gould, and Merchant and Ivory—imply that she's looking at exceptionally meaningful lives, or at least lives that are unambiguously meaningful. This approach helps her to draw out the full importance of having meaning as a concept distinct from happiness and morality.⁸ We can judge that Gauguin's life, for example (cf. Wolf 2007/2016, 120), is quite meaningful *even as he* shirks moral duty by abandoning his wife and children, and, I would add, *even as he* endures considerable unhappiness, given all of his suffering, poverty, illness, and frustration. Once Wolf establishes meaning as a concept distinct from the concepts of happiness and morality, she can then begin to work through her particular conception of meaning as a hybrid of affinity and worth. This is

⁸ Metz uses "admiration" or "love" to capture the third value (Metz 2016).

where she makes refinements that detail what thresholds must be reached in both affinity and worth, or what degree of intertwining they have. As we have seen, her argument proceeds not with a vision of a life of resplendent meaning, but via several paradigms of meaninglessness that permit her to construct a particular conception of meaning that would successfully match our intuitions about meaning in life. Central to these intuitions, she believes, is that the concept of meaning in life speaks to our desire and need for objectivity.

The case she makes for the necessity of objectivity is quite effective.⁹ To see what role is played by the affinity condition, I'll examine a case of a meaningful life in which robust subjective attraction is lacking. But in the final section, I want to follow out Wolf's advice on fecundity. I'll show that fecundity is certainly a property found in many good lives, and so it is prudent for agents to consider the likelihood that their projects will have the generative and transformative impacts that fecundity denotes.

5. Meaning Without Affinity: The Case of the Exiled Daughter

Wolf has argued that even the intense activity of the Corporate Exec fails to meet the standard of "active engagement in a positive way" because their "misguided values" seem to misconstrue the worth of amassing a private fortune either as such, or in relation to the frenetic activity that it requires. The problem may also be that the goal of amassing personal fortune is not one that the person embraces in the right way. They may be doing it automatically, say, rather like the pig farmer who just continues the cycle endlessly. Or it may be something that they cannot or do not take pride in or identify with, or that won't bear up if a justificatory demand is made. Whether through lack of objective worth, or insufficiency of subjective attraction, we can imagine that the Corporate Exec is one long dark night of the soul away from a collapse.

Let's consider a variation of the case. Imagine that a family now lives in exile, having fled a corrupt state that destroyed the family business, seizing all of its assets and all of the family's wealth. This so aggrieves that father that he lives the rest of his life in bitterness. The daughter grows up and decides to amass a personal fortune equal to the amount that was seized, and strains every

⁹ Moreover, as Metz has argued, "many of what initially appear to be motives to adopt subjectivism lead us, upon reflection, to think that there are things that are good not solely because they are the object of a propositional attitude" (Metz 2013, 170).

nerve to achieve it before the father dies. It becomes her overriding project; it defines her. Surely the life of *this* Corporate Exec, the Exiled Daughter so described, is not meaningless anymore.

Wolf would be right to object. On this scenario, it is not a “mere” personal fortune, but a project that has both real and symbolic meaning. The project aims at rebuilding the family fortune and, by doing so, mending the sorrow that ails the father, restoring the family’s honor, and providing the legacy that was lost. I believe, and think that Wolf would too, that this life is no longer a paradigm of meaninglessness, but perhaps even an exemplary case of meaning in life. But let me make it harder for her to accept this with one last wrinkle.

It’s the same scenario but in this version, the daughter achieves everything in a state of disaffection.¹⁰ Perhaps she is burdened by demands of filial piety that she can neither fully endorse and make her own, nor entirely resist in order to live differently. Then we are back with a case that feels more like it is meaningless for Wolf. She resembles the alienated housewife insofar as both regard the endless swirl of unfulfilling obligations as something they cannot embrace and identify with. Let us add further that in this situation, the father’s mood brightens considerably; he finds himself delightedly telling stories of how he started his business back in his home country, and he now beams with pride when he speaks of his daughter. Other family members find inspiration in the daughter’s project, and they aren’t the only ones. The news media transmit the story in ways that draw positive attention to her and her family, while also driving increased scrutiny of her former home country and its corrupt past. Eventually, legal action is taken successfully against the corrupt officials, some of whom go to jail. All through this process, the family legacy is enhanced. People see the daughter as possessing the same traits that the father used when making his business so successful, and this inspires other emigrants in similar circumstances to take action. A political movement is born; in time the country’s corruption is removed, root and branch.

One would be hard pressed to find a more profound impact of a life. Even

¹⁰ Landau 2017 (171) and Metz 2013 (183-4, cf. 135) each discuss a case like this one, with a pained or bored Mother Teresa, respectively. Bramble’s example of Alice the Master Economist (2015, 448), whose beneficial work is sheer drudgery for her, is closer to mine since our unhappy persons are each uniquely fitted to do the beneficial work that no one else can do. But my case is different still because other important features of fecundity are present in the Exiled Daughter. She finds that her capabilities are both expressed in and further refined by the work that she does, but for which she has lost her passion.

without sharing the money or doing something with it (it remains “a personal fortune”), the daughter’s work has objective worth because it successfully carries out a positive project. Moreover, there is a significantly fecund outcome: her activity brings forth real value but it is value that only she could create. Such value is expressive of her own values and the values of family members whom she loves. The activity also tests her talents and refines her capabilities through her considerable struggle, with the result that she is altered for the better, at least in these respects. Still, like Wolf’s alienated housewife and the conscripted soldier, she finds no joy in the activity. What is more, she does not identify with or take pride in it, even as those closest to her, whom she loves, do so and urge her to do likewise. Or, if she identifies with or takes pride in it, she does so weakly. Either way, she lacks the customary felt-sense of fulfillment, or the thrill of connecting up with independent worth. It would appear that this is a case that lacks the right degree of, or an importance aspect of affinity, active engagement or fulfillment that Wolf believes is partly constitutive of meaning in life.

Wolf or her supporter might say that this case is not likely, and I agree.¹¹ But supposing it psychologically possible, as I think it is, then the life in question is meaningful without being subjectively rewarding. So, at any rate, might Metz, Smuts, and Bramble argue. Even if they are right, however, I believe Wolf’s advice to persons who want to live meaningfully remains sound. We should look for experiences and activities that are apt to hold us in their thrall for a long while, and which test our capabilities, draw on our skills, and alter us for the better when engaging them. Such undertakings promote meaningfulness. They do so in part because they provide lasting inspiration, which sustains us through reversals, begets opportunities for additional creative or transformative activity and experiences, and makes more independent value more likely to appear.

6. How Fecundity Describes One Kind of Very Good Life

Wolf’s discussion of the alienated housewife, like my case of the Exiled Daughter, helps us to see how much of a loss alienation brings us. It is a loss to the goodness of our life. Even if our life remains good because it is meaningful, it would be better still were the subjective rewards present. Still, as many argue,

¹¹ In her 1997, she calls the possibility “dubious” (208; cf. 222 on how happiness tracks meaningfulness much more frequently than it does meaninglessness).

what matters for meaning is not our affinity for our projects but what we're able to do with our projects. Diotima agrees. Though true virtue is begotten by the philosopher who is gripped by eros, it is the fact that he gives birth to true virtue that matters ultimately, not the state he is in when doing it, and still less the attitude toward his own state or the objects he produces while in that state.¹²

It should also be noted, however, that what matters for meaning is not all that matters in life. Consider what Wolf says about the alienated housewife when the reader first meets her:

When a person self-consciously looks for something to give her life meaning, it signals a kind of unhappiness. One imagines, for example, the alienated housewife, whose life seems to her to be a series of endless chores. What she wants, it might appear, is something that she can find more subjectively rewarding. (Wolf 2007/2016, 115).¹³

This is exactly right. Like the Exiled Daughter, she wants something that is subjectively rewarding even as she is doing important work. Her work of parenting and supporting a family may be a deep ideal, one that was long dreamed-of and not to be abandoned when the going gets tough. What she wants, though, is that a certain kind of positive feeling attend the efforts to which she has committed herself. But the feelings are missing; the moods, emotions, and propensities that normally draw an agent toward creative or constructive activity are not there. I do not know what these feelings are if not the kind of things found in happy people. Therefore, I would call for us to reject the “ordinary understanding of happiness” and go for a richer one that better captures our intuition about what happiness is and the role it plays in our lives.¹⁴ This conception helps us to see that what the alienated housewife lacks is better

¹² Diotima surely believed that our emotional condition mattered greatly to our ability to be creative and productive. Eros aims at eudaimonia, but one is eudaimon when giving birth in beauty. Elsewhere Plato holds that eros is a divine madness (*Phaedrus* 244a-245c, cf. 265a-b), but this is so because it fires us to exercise deep capacities that are proper to our nature and also helps us to transcend and perfect ourselves.

¹³ “It is the absence of such feelings [sc. fulfillment] (as opposed to the absence of love, for example) that indicates that there is an important good missing in these lives that is not captured by our ordinary understanding of happiness, but which cannot be cashed out purely in terms of objective value either” (Wolf 2010, 113 cf. 113 n.3).

¹⁴ See note 13 above. My paper takes some initial steps down the path recommended by Svensson 2017, namely to examine “more demanding notions of happiness” and their relationship to meaning in life (48, n. 9).

understood as happiness, not meaning or an essential aspect thereof.¹⁵

The alienated housewife and the Exiled Daughter want something worthwhile which at the same time provides them with rewarding experiences. These experiences are the sort that flow from and help to sustain the emotional states that Haybron locates as central to happiness. For him, happiness is “an individual’s responding favorably, in emotional terms, to her life—responding emotionally to her life *as if* things are generally going well for her” (Haybron 2008, 111). This is not a wellbeing or hedonist conception. To be happy on the emotional state theory of happiness is to be in a condition he calls “psychic affirmation” unless it is in a more pronounced form, when it is called “psychic flourishing” (111). He goes on to analyze this into three broad categories of favorable emotional condition: attunement, engagement, and endorsement (112). They need not all be present together, but they are modes of response that correspond to a particular aspect or dimension of happiness. The Exiled Daughter lacks happiness, or she may be in some state of unhappiness.¹⁶ Eventually this might sap the inner resources for doing the work that makes for meaning in her life. But on my view, were this to happen, then the failure to living meaningfully owes not to the presence of a disfavorable emotional condition *per se* but to the effect of that condition on her ability to create value.¹⁷

Fecundity characterizes a life that has very much going for it. It is apt to be a life that is brimming with vitality and happiness, and it is apt, for that very reason, to be a life that produces and promotes objective value. But it is not the case that we do the activity to become happy. It is because we’re happy that we do the activity. We are advised to consider what marks on the world we are capable of leaving, but also what engagements we can focus and sustain long enough to create those marks. The chief insight of a hybrid theory is that it recognizes the importance of objective worth and the role of subjective affinity

¹⁵ “[I]t is a mistake to think that just because someone is yearning for passion he is yearning for meaning” (Bramble 2015, 448).

¹⁶ Paradigmatic cases of unhappiness might answer to one or more of these descriptions, a few of which are true of the Exiled Daughter, Alice the Master Economist, and the variations on Mother Teresa in note 10 above: “being depressed, melancholy, despondent, anxious, ‘stressed out’, seething with rage, overwhelmed by fear, worried sick, heartbroken, grief-stricken, lonely, empty, low, burdened with shame, bored, feeling insecure or worthless, feeling spiritually reduced, pressed-upon or ‘compressed’, or deeply dissatisfied with life.” (Haybron 2008, 49)

¹⁷ Some people might construe long stretches of lack of happiness as being worse, *inter alia*, than sharp but brief bursts of unhappiness, as it relates to the motivations needed to initiate and sustain the work of having or producing experiences, acts, or objects of independent value. One’s judgement on this matter probably has more to do with temperament than principles.

in bringing it about. Ideally, I should consider, among available activities and experiences, which ones are tied to deep features of my nature, and which might sharpen or refine those features in ways that generate more value, or which equip me to be produce value in other areas or endeavors. From the standpoint of meaning, the subjective condition matters as part of what makes our creation and promotion of objective worth more likely.

There is much more that needs to be said about fecundity. It may embrace multiple conceptions of meaning in life—from perfectionist, to utilitarian, and perhaps narrative value (cf. May 2015), among others—and some may be more at home in the concept than others. In addition, some aspects of Haybron’s conception of happiness might be emphasized more than other aspects as it pertains to the creation or promotion of objective worth. Finally, the stress on individuality—with the focus on uniqueness and creativity—may bind fecundity to some cultural contexts more tightly than to others. But as Wolf rightly recommends, we want to preserve the insight that it is better for us when our have active engagement, a propensity to undertake the activity or project in a wholehearted way, and in a way that prompts us to identify with it. But it is also better for us, and fundamental to our life’s meaning, that the activity links up with or creates value of the sort that can be recognized from a third-person standpoint, or which warrants judgements of esteem, respect, and admiration.¹⁸

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¹⁸ I am grateful for very helpful comments from an anonymous reviewer, as well as for audience comments on an earlier version delivered at the Second International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life, at Waseda University, in October 2019.

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