Susan Wolf on Meaning in Life
Susan Wolf is an American philosopher

• Born in 1952, she studied under Thomas Nagel and others at Princeton and Yale
• She has taught at several American universities, most recently at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
• She has written several noteworthy works, including “Moral Saints” (1982)
Wolf asks lots of questions but many of them concern what we should do with our lives.

- In what way or ways can they have meaning?
- Is there a commonly-accepted reason for our existence?
- If not, what can we do to make them meaningful?
- In particular, she asks what we should do so as not to waste our lives.
Wolf believes that it is difficult for philosophers to discern the meaning of life; finding meaning in life is different, though

- Of course, not everyone agrees on what that meaning is
- Some emphasize that meaning is subjective in character; it differs from one individual to another
- Other people maintain, on the contrary, that this meaning must be objective in character, independent of people’s feelings and desires
Some people also say when people self-consciously look for something to give their lives meaning, it suggests that something is lacking

- This could cause them to turn to religion
- People believe that if a god or gods exist, then there is at least a chance that there is a purpose, and so a meaning to our lives
- Our task would be to discern God’s plan for us and try to follow it (See for example Rick Warren’s *Purpose Driven Life*)
Others like Thomas Nagel suggest that even if there is a god or gods, there is no reason why their purpose should be our purpose.

- It may also well be that there is no pre-ordained purpose at all.
- Whatever purpose that our lives have – even if we will have one – would then be determined by us and us alone (see e.g. the writings of existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre or Albert Camus).
Wolf develops these ideas further; she suggests there is a **false dichotomy** between these subjective and objective views.

- It seems that if you believe in one of these views, you cannot possibly accept the other.
For example, there are those who believe it important to find **self-fulfillment** in life

- This is what Wolf calls the Self-Fulfillment view
- According to it, “one must follow one’s passion”
- One derives meaning from finding something that gives one enjoyment
- One determines what one’s interests are and pursues them
- Personal happiness is described as the goal
Problems with the self-fulfillment view

• One can find fulfillment in something that has no greater social purpose or value.

• As Wolf indicates, doing endless crossword puzzles or Sudoku all day long or regularly smoking pot may give someone enjoyment but these things do not make one’s life meaningful.
Another view is the Larger-than-oneself view

• One strives to identify some goal **larger than oneself**, something of value to society for example, and then pursue it

• For instance, one can try to help others or one can serve one’s country

• Wolf suggests that here one is really trying to accomplish some goal **outside** of oneself (e.g., helping the needy, which many consider a moral duty)

“A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself.”

Joseph Campbell
The Larger-than-oneself View also has defects

- Doing something out of a sense of duty or because others find it useful does not make a life meaningful if the person doing these things does not find them personally worthwhile.
- The task is therefore not very fulfilling even if society says the task is socially useful.
Instead of these two views, Wolf suggests a third way

- Part of it has to do with recognizing that we do some things not out of self-interest or a sense of duty but rather for reasons of love.
- This love can be for an individual (or individuals) or for things that we love (either as objects or as activities).
- Wolf recognizes, of course, that not everything we do for love has meaning. Sometimes the object of our affection does not deserve our love. We love someone or something that we should not love (e.g., loving a scoundrel or worshipping a false god).
Wolf says that meaning in life occurs when we devote ourselves passionately to something that has objective value outside of ourselves.

- To give weight to her claims, Wolf cites several people as examples: **Gandhi, Einstein, Mother Theresa, Albert Schweitzer**
- She notes their accomplishing their goals rather than falling short, which she criticizes.
- She also mentions at least one example of a meaningless life – **Sisyphus** – the character from Greek mythology who was condemned to roll a boulder up a hill for all eternity.
Criticisms of Wolf’s theory of meaning in life

• What about people who don’t succeed? Are their lives not meaningful?

• Consider for example Claus von Stauffenberg. He failed in his attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler in WWII but does that make his life not meaningful?

• Or what of the scientist who devotes years to finding some cure for a disease but gets scooped by someone else? Wolf does not seem to appreciate the value of those who strive for a worthy goal but fall short.
Further criticisms of Wolf’s theory

- Steven Cahn disagrees with Wolf’s distinction between meaningful and meaningless activities.

- Why does Wolf consider mountain climbing or training for a marathon meaningful while for her collecting rubber bands, playing computer games, solving crossword puzzles or trying to establish a Guinness Book World Record are meaningless?
To sum up: Wolf believes that a meaningful life is one in which someone is actively and at least somewhat successfully engaged in a project of positive value.