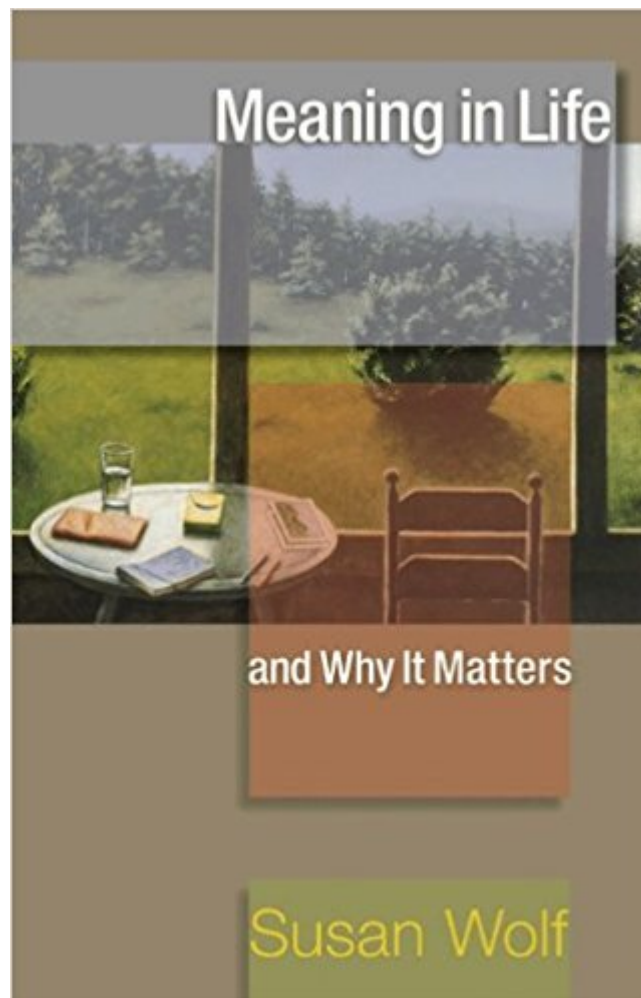




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# Meaning In Life And Why It Matters (The University Center For Human Values Series)



## Synopsis

Most people, including philosophers, tend to classify human motives as falling into one of two categories: the egoistic or the altruistic, the self-interested or the moral. According to Susan Wolf, however, much of what motivates us does not comfortably fit into this scheme. Often we act neither for our own sake nor out of duty or an impersonal concern for the world. Rather, we act out of love for objects that we rightly perceive as worthy of love--and it is these actions that give meaning to our lives. Wolf makes a compelling case that, along with happiness and morality, this kind of meaningfulness constitutes a distinctive dimension of a good life. Written in a lively and engaging style, and full of provocative examples, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* is a profound and original reflection on a subject of permanent human concern.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Given the unfortunate (but arguably necessary) divorce of psychology from philosophy more than a century ago, books like *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, which allow for dialogue between these disciplines, are a much-needed and much-welcomed development. . . . Wolf's essay is a psychologically sophisticated philosophical argument on the structure, reality, and importance of meaningfulness in life. Its psychological sophistication lies not in her mastery of any particular empirical literature but rather in her attentiveness to normal, everyday intuitions and feelings."--Russell D. Kosits, *PsycCRITIQUES*

"Susan Wolf's picture of what makes life meaningful is at once powerful and down to earth, deeply argued but unpretentious. Part of Wolf's persuasive force comes from her stylish prose and cool treatment of profound concerns. This book is absorbing and a pleasure to read."--Kieran Setiya, University of Pittsburgh

"Susan Wolf is one of the clearest, most thoughtful, and most incisively elegant writers in contemporary ethics. She has an uncanny knack for putting her finger on important points and expressing them in ways that capture the imagination. In this book, she develops her ideas about meaningfulness in life with considerable subtlety, creating a work of genuine depth and importance."--John Martin Fischer, University of California, Riverside

I love the basic idea in this book: to have a meaningful life, find a passion for something worthwhile. Once you know the basic idea, though, you really don't need to read the book. Usually I would give a low rating to a book where all you need to know is the basic idea, but in this case the basic idea is so strong that the book is worth 5\* to me. The book is short, well written, and easy to read (unlike many books written by philosophy professors), so it wouldn't hurt to read it if you want a longer explanation of the basic idea. The book does not, however, explain how to find a passion or define what is worthwhile. For those two, crucial aspects of having a meaningful life, you're on your own. But thanks to Susan Wolf, at least you know what to look for.

A clear, gracefully written, and philosophically deep attempt to understand how meaningfulness can constitute a third dimension of a life well lived, in addition to the dimensions of self-interest and moral duty. Susan Wolf presents her theory; three other philosophers and one psychologist (Jonathan Haidt) offer critical comments; and Wolf responds to them. The volume is not only stimulating as a work of philosophy; it also offers a useful vantage point for thinking about how one's own life might be made more meaningful.

Conversational, challenging, and actually about an issue that is significant. Add to that the fact that Wolf's lectures are collected here with thoughtful, critical yet constructive comments and you get the best of a discipline that spends too much time arguing over minutiae most of the time. Great stuff.

This book presents an analysis of the key philosophical rationales that have been put forward through the ages to explain how and why humans lives become meaningful. Particularly useful as a device to explore these issues is the author's inclusion of essays written by other philosophers that critique the thesis she presents, thereby drawing out implications that I missed in my first pass.

Reading this book requires close attention because it's written in the style of an academic philosophy seminar, but it's well worth spending the time: incoming students at Princeton University were asked to read this book so they could think about how a person's choices shape the trajectory of a life before they chose a career--and as for me, a 70-year-old man, I found this book to be a profound aid in my own reflections about the past, present and future.

great

The question of meaning in life has only been tackled by a select few philosophers in history, usually indirectly (such as asking what values are and how they ought to be structured). This is surprising. It is an interesting question and important. If there is no point in living life, no real meaning, why ought we keep living? Wolf does a good job of explicating this problem and defends her conception with clarity and rigor in this work which happens to be some lectures she gave on the topic plus a critical response section by some colleagues and a section that is a rejoinder by Wolf to these criticisms. I think she is mostly right but there are some problems. Wolf's thesis is that meaning in life come at the conjunction of "subjective attraction" meeting "objective attractiveness". That is, she thinks that there are two basic components of meaningful life activities. She calls her view the fitting fulfillment view. "Meaning" as used in this context means when one gets fulfillment (and she gives a list of all the specific subjective states this may mean) from doing or loving something that is worthy of love and attention. The worthy part is the objective aspect. Something has to be objectively worthy for the activity or thing to be a contributor of meaning to one's life. Here she is less clear on what indicates worthiness but Wolf offers interesting suggestions. She suggests that what accurately indicates worth is an activity that all of us discover through contributing our own perspectives in an continuous dialogue to see why it is objectively worthy. All sorts of activities may be deemed as such. She suggests that the test of history may also be a good test for anything that has staying power may accurately indicate that it has something that makes it important for us to engage in (say, the activity of philosophy itself which is as old as humankind) and thus, in some sense, it may rightly be deemed objectively valuable (or at least non-subjectively valuable). One may also get meaning from loving and caring for someone worthy of being loved (such as a child, spouse, friend or parent e.g.) Wolf satisfies my questions regarding this aspect of objectivity with some further discussions in some detail of the metaphysics and metaethics of what she means by "objectivity." Most people I would imagine may simply opt for a simple fulfillment view and see no need for the objectivity criterion. They may think that whatever fulfills someone is meaningful.

Meaning in life is achieved simply by finding "one's bliss" as it were, whatever that maybe, even if the activity or thing is seemingly trivial to most people (such as watching grass grow) it is meaningful to that person on the simple fulfillment view. I agree with Wolf here that there needs to be an objectivity criterion so that activities that are at least clearly silly like watching grass grow is ruled out as meaningful. I think the most serious objections have been voiced in the response section at the end of her lectures. I am most in agreement with Robert Adams. Adams suggests that the subjective criterion is superfluous and only the objective criterion is required for meaningful lives. Some people may live very meaningful and interesting lives but yet gain very little personally from living such a life. They may experience constant grief, disappointment and self-doubt but objectively, they may live incredibly meaningful lives. Adams gives two examples of people living such lives. Jesus Christ and von Steuffenberg. Jesus died on the cross according to the Bible and went to the grave thinking his struggle to save humanity was a failure and yet we don't want to say that Jesus lived a life without meaning. von Steuffenberg was a real-life, patriotic German citizen who had tried repeatedly to assassinate Hitler and overthrow the Nazi regime because he believed such a regime was destroying his beloved country. He failed. We would all probably say that this person lived a very meaningful life despite the fact that his life, during his long struggles with the Nazi regime, was replete with harsh, bitter, and disappointing setbacks ending only in his death. There was, in other words, no subjective fulfillment for von Steuffenberg in any sense of the term but his life's work, despite its failures, seems (albeit tragically) very meaningful. I am not convinced of Wolf's rejoinder to Adams's criticisms defending her subjective criterion. I also have my own reservations about some principle philosophical arguments in her argument. In establishing an objective criterion, Wolf argues that one way we may distinguish truly worthy projects and things from not worthy (or less worthy) ones is through a 'proportionality' constraint. This constraint is designed to not allow activities such as a life devoted to the well-being of some goldfish as meaningful. Wolf suggests that the effort, care, and emotional commitment required to devote one's life to one goldfish may not be proportionate to the good that results (a very content goldfish if successful). However, this constraint seems to imply a hierarchy or at least a spectrum of objective worthiness. There is not simply worthy and unworthy things but things tend to be on a continuum. But this is seriously problematic if we are to construe any normativity in meaningful lives. That is, as Wolf seems to suggest, that more worthy projects and things have some normative pull away from less worthy projects and things. If devoting all one's care for the well-being of a future Nobel Peace prize winner is more meaningful than taking care of a goldfish, then her thesis seems to imply that we ought then to focus less on the goldfish so as to devote more to the well-being of the future Nobel winner. There is then a serious

further implication. The normative pull may then imply that we ought to devote all our attention to only the \*most worthy\* activities we can establish through our collective discovering which activities are meaningful. There may be many activities that are tied for most meaningful but certainly, many activities that we engage in daily for fun would then be completely ruled out. I see no way around this implication. Her thesis seems to imply an austerity and restriction towards many life's interesting activities because it implies a pull towards the worthy away from activities that are less so but ones we none-the-less do for some personal reasons (maybe even goldfish raising). If Wolf denies that there is any normative force towards more worthiness then it is unclear to me why she brought up the proportionality criterion in the first place and what she can muster against the goldfish fanatic. In short, I identify with Wolf's views about the objective criterion (but not the subjective criterion) but I also see significant philosophical problems with it. I am thus rather conflicted but the book does a good job of showing me my conflict. Wolf also makes an important and insightful distinction between what is meaningful and happiness and morality. Philosophers who have engaged in the question of meaning in life often assume that happiness and morality are the only two values worth considering in talking about meaningfulness in life but Wolf shows that many of our most meaningful projects may not fall under either categories. I'm not so sure about this claim but it is an interesting distinction to keep in mind. I also think that there are relevant meanings of "meaning" that ought to be covered in any work on meaning in life but has not been in this one. Wolf is certainly correct that what people mean by meaning in life or "life's meaning" is quite different than the meaning of words (semantic meaning). What people mean by "meaning in life" is something like ultimate purpose or significance or what makes life really worth living, its highest value, etc. But some people may be thinking of something else entirely too. They may believe in something like "fate" or "destiny" in life and think of this as the meaning of life. Of course, there is also a related hermeneutic meaning of life for many religious people who tend to think that God or some Higher Power may have some intended course for the world and that this is the meaning of life. I wish Wolf's analysis could have taken into account these alternative possible meanings of meaning even if to reject them as either untrue or not of real value to us even if true.

There is such depth to this book and it helps to solidify many tenets I have adopted in my life.

It's a book

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