

Meaning in Life: Meeting the Challenges

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Abstract Responding to comments by Cheshire Calhoun and Arnold Burms, this piece clarifies some of Wolf’s ideas about the relation between meaningfulness in life, on the one hand, and reasons of love, fulfillment, and objective value, on the other. Meaning tends to come from activities whose reasons are grounded in love of a worthy (objectively valuable) object, and not necessarily from reasons having anything to do with an interest in meaningfulness itself. But what counts as a worthy object cannot be determined either from a totally neutral and impersonal point of view or from the points of view of specific other people who matter to the subject.

Keywords Fulfillment · Impersonal point of view · Objective value · Meaningfulness · Reasons of love

I am fortunate to have commentators who, in addition to being acute and sensitive philosophers, are largely sympathetic to my overall proposal that, first, we see meaningfulness as a distinct and important dimension of an ideally desirable life, and second, we understand this dimension as arising out of a loving (subjective) engagement with (objectively) valuable activities and things. Indeed, I find myself agreeing with everything, or nearly everything, they say, so I shall take this opportunity to clarify and refine my proposal in ways that build upon my commentators’ remarks and suggestions.

Cheshire Calhoun’s remarks focus on ‘reasons of love’, a phrase she understands to refer to reasons a person has for loving one object (say, a person, group, cause or activity) rather than another. As she points out, our reasons for love frequently include features of the beloved that make it objectively valuable. (One loves a painting in part because it is beautiful in a unique and original way; one loves a person in part because she is kind and brave.) Calhoun nicely refers to such reasons as ‘reasons-for-anyone’, but quickly goes on to point out that, typically and appropriately, we have other sorts of reasons for love, too, among them ‘reasons-for-the-initiated’ and ‘reasons-for-me’. She concludes therefore that ‘not everything that is loved is

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loved exclusively or primarily because of its objective value. And not everything that makes our lives meaningful does so primarily or exclusively because of its objective value.'

The fact that Calhoun takes herself to be disagreeing with me shows that I have expressed myself unclearly. At least one source of the confusion seems to lie with the phrase 'reasons of love'. Unlike Calhoun, I meant to use the phrase to refer, not to reasons for loving something, but to reasons for doing something (e.g., helping my friend move, laboring over a philosophy paper) that are grounded in love. By contrast, sometimes our most salient reasons for acting are grounded in self-interest (for example, I set down the papers I am grading in order to watch a favorite TV show); at other times our most salient reasons are grounded in morality (thus, I keep the TV turned down low so as not to disturb the people who live in the apartment next door).

My point was that we tend to get meaning from the activities we do for reasons of love, as opposed to reasons of self-interest or morality. When we engage in such activities, we typically do so not for ourselves or for (the impersonal good of) the world, but for the sake of the loved person, object, or ideal. But I did not mean to suggest that the reasons we loved the object in question were exclusively impersonal. Indeed, if they were, it would hardly distinguish reasons of love from reasons of a certain conception of morality.

It is possible that another source of confusion that led to the misunderstanding between Calhoun and myself comes from my failure to explain the relation between reasons of love (in my sense, having to do with reasons for acting that are grounded in love) with what one might call reasons of meaning (reasons for acting that are grounded in the idea that so acting will make one's life more meaningful). Calhoun imagines someone who thinks she needs more meaning in her life, and so searches for something valuable that she loves or can see herself coming to love so that she can go out and engage with it. No doubt such a scenario is conceivable. Indeed, it may be especially plausible in connection to some people's decisions to get involved in civic volunteering. But I assume that people more typically get involved with things they love simply because they love them. No thoughts about making their own lives more meaningful come into it at all. Assuming that the things they love and the activities that are inspired by them are sufficiently worthwhile, these things will give meaning to their lives without their having explicitly or self-consciously sought it.

The practical value of a philosophical exploration of meaningfulness and its sources, then, may have less to do with its usefulness for individuals seeking to increase meaning in their own lives than with other endeavors. For example, insofar as it makes clear the importance for people's well-being of their having the opportunity to discover and develop interests, loves, and passions for worthwhile things and activities, it helps explain and direct the ways we educate our children (why we give them music and art lessons, for example, or expose them to the beauties of nature). It gives us reason to support public funding for, say, museums and symphonies and public parks. The service-learning programs in schools to which Calhoun refers also gain support from these considerations.

Arnold Burms' commentary focuses on different aspects of my paper. The larger portion of his remarks concerns my account of the wholly subjective conception of meaningfulness I call the Fulfillment View, which I take to be the most popular alternative account to the one I propose. As he rightly points out, however, my discussion of the subjective view lumps together two sorts of subjective possibilities that it would be better to distinguish. On the one hand, we may imagine someone who is, or at least who takes himself to be, happy and satisfied with his life, but who has no interest in whether anything in his life has any worth beyond his enjoyment of it. Perhaps the pot-smoker or Sudoku-enthusiast is such a case. But this is quite different from other cases I mention, like the woman who is deceived by her lover or the teenager who is hoodwinked by a charismatic cult leader. As Burms

points out, the first sort of person neither believes nor cares whether his life is concerned with anything valuable. The second sort of person presumably does care but is mistaken or deluded. Burms correctly points out that to describe the first sort of person as fulfilled strains the meaning of 'fulfillment'. It seems more plausible to imagine such a person being skeptical of the application or the value of that term rather than applying it to himself: 'Who needs fulfillment?' he might ask. 'I am happy without it.' The second sort of person, on the other hand, might well take her activities and relationships to be fulfilling, but only as long as she is blind to the disillusioning truth about them.

In my paper, I did not mean to address the challenge posed by the first type of case. If someone does not care about the value of what he is doing, or about fulfillment, then I presume that he also does not care about whether his life is meaningful, and I do not know how to change his mind. I was rather interested in addressing those—I assume, very many—of us who are interested in all these things, but who are not clear about what such interests amount to. I was in particular concerned to meet the challenge of people who might agree that meaningfulness has a conceptual connection to fulfillment but who deny any implicit presupposition that links fulfillment to the belief in or perception of objective value or worth of that by which the subject is fulfilled. 'An activity is meaningful if it is meaningful to the actor,' he might say, denying that there is anything external to the actor's psychology that can call the meaningfulness of the activity into question. Had I restricted my discussion to cases like the deceived lover or deluded cult-follower, and to what they themselves would say if and when their illusions are uncovered, this would have perhaps offered a clearer and more realistic challenge to the view to which I was responding. Still, I believe that the line between the one sort of case and the other is a fuzzy one, since we are often not self-conscious or articulate about what we take to be valuable or about why we are satisfied by the activities that we deeply enjoy.

In any case, I suspect that the temptation to be either a skeptic about the value of fulfillment or a subjectivist about what fulfillment is, is often fueled by a discomfort with the idea of objective value, and the consequent desire to avoid anything that seems to invoke it. And though, with Burms, I believe this avoidance is a mistake, I acknowledge and to some extent sympathize with those who find the idea of objective value perplexing and problematic. This is the topic of Burms' final comments. As Burms points out, objective value is often identified with the value that would be identified as such by 'an ideal observer', or 'an impartial spectator', or from 'a God's eye point of view'. But if we think of such a perspective as stripped of all partial or personal interests, of all temperaments, of all contingent features of character, Burms asks, 'could the distinction between lives that are meaningful or not make sense from such a neutral point of view'? To put it another way, we might ask whether from such a perspective there could be anything of value at all. It is a good question. But as Burms seems to suggest, and I agree, that is not necessarily the sort of objectivity we are hoping for when we hope that our lives are meaningful, or that our activities are worthwhile.

Burms' own response to this problem, if I understand it properly, is that we want the value of our activities to be confirmed by judgments that are correct (and so in this sense objective) but not neutral or subject-independent. We want to be recognized, he says, by specific others, even as we want their recognition to meet some standards of accuracy. This idea fits well with the suggestion in my paper that the intensity of our interest in meaningfulness is connected not just to an interest in objectivity but to our social natures and our wish not to be alone. Still, I am not sure that approval of specific others is either necessary or sufficient to satisfy the conditions of meaningfulness for all persons. Some artists, philosophers, and scientists, for example, may be more interested in vindication from 'posterity' than from anyone living they can identify and name; and some environmentalists may think that the value of their work

that matters is not to be specifically tied to what humans would recognize and treasure at all. Thus, though I find promising Burms' suggestion that we approach the concept of objectivity in a way that does not identify it with neutrality or impersonalism, many difficulties to the idea remain.

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