

If meaningfulness is not always fulfilling, why then does it matter?

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Abstract

We start from a quandary in the field of meaningfulness introduced by Susan Wolf, who attempts to make clear why meaning in life would matter. In common sense terms, fulfilment is considered to play a main role in the conceptualisation of meaningfulness. While initially taking this also for granted Wolf gradually comprehends that fulfilment is not the overall reason why meaning in life matters. She leaves however open the paramount question of what would make it then so particular. In this article, we explore this query to a fuller extent, and maintain that a promising road to an answer lays in the understanding that meaning in life is directive in an ineffable way. In order to fathom what this entails, a distinction between meaningfulness' and 'meaning in life' will prove helpful. Both have often been considered synonyms, but we argue that they are quite distinct, yet intrinsically related. Starting from a subject that is mainly discussed in analytic philosophy, we build a bridge to phenomenological praxis, indicating that we can only understand its core function - its ineffable way of being directive - through phenomenology.

Keywords: proneness to being moved, directiveness, meaningfulness, meaning in life

I. Introduction

Starting point for this article is a difficulty Susan Wolf is confronted with in her book *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (2010)¹ when claiming that meaning in life matters because it creates fulfilment.² This inherent link between meaningfulness

and fulfilment is questioned by one of the commentators, Robert Adams, whom Wolf invited to contribute to the book and who illustrates the thesis that a life can be meaningful even if this cannot be expressed in terms of fulfilment. Wolf agrees with his comments, and in one of the concluding chapters of the book she resolves the issue by pointing to several reasons for a life to be meaningful, including fulfilment as only one of them. Yet, she regrets having to leave behind fulfilment as the overall reason. She has an important intuition in that there is an element prevailing when discussing meaningfulness, and we might lose sight of this leading element when introducing a diversity of reasons.

In this article, I take Wolf's intuition seriously and investigate whether it is possible to come any further in resolving the issue that something predominates when talking about meaning in life, something that ultimately matters.

II. The Case

Let us first formulate the problem more extensively, drawing on an interesting dialogue between Wolf and Adams, in order to analyse how meaning in life is understood in terms of fulfilling.

To build her account of meaning in life, Wolf gives meaningfulness a place as a dimension of the good, a 'sort of value' (2010, 3) distinct from two other models offering people valid reasons to act. These models are, on the one hand, morality as duty, an impartial concern urging people to do what is best for human well-being from a universal point of view, and, on the other, happiness as rational egoism, steering people to follow what is in their self-interest. Next, she uses the method of taking seriously what common people say about the subject. She combines two general views, defining the first as the Fulfilment View, and the second as the 'The Larger-than-Oneself View'. The Fulfilment View holds that it is meaningful to do what one loves doing, and that being involved in activities or projects that matter to one provides a kind of fulfilment. Wolf remarks that fulfilment is no doubt a positive or good feeling, next to other good feelings such as pleasure, even intense

pleasure. Yet fulfilment to her is distinct from pleasure. She argues that one can imagine a person engaging in rewarding opportunities, and still having the impression that something is lacking in their life.

So the term fulfilment in relation to meaningfulness has a connotation that is distinct from its conventional interpretation. A fulfilling life does not necessarily mean a life of mere happiness, for the things that move, grip or engage us can make us susceptible to tension, disappointment, suffering. Yet, in general one can consider fulfilment a 'distinctive good in life' (Wolf 2010, 15) for most of us would readily put up with some of these consequences in order to follow our passions.

To Wolf, in the Fulfilment View, emphasis is nevertheless on the subjective quality of one's life, and as such, on positive experiences. She interprets this as a form of hedonism. What matters is to achieve and preserve the feeling of fulfilment (2010, 16). What kind of activities give rise to these feelings is of less importance? To her this is not acceptable and that is why she combines subjective fulfilment with another popular view on meaning in life, the Larger-than-Oneself View. She redefines Larger-than-Oneself as Other-than-Oneself, a value that has its source outside oneself. So a meaningful life is a life that is both fulfilling for the subject and a life with engagements in an activity or project that is independently valuable. To Wolf, both are intrinsically related in what she calls the Fitting Fulfilment View. The rationale for this is that if one gets involved in an activity or project, one will appreciate it, partly on subjective grounds and partly on the ground that the project or activity has independent value.

Wolf formulates the combination of the two views as follows: 'Meaning arises from loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way' (2010, 8). She also redefines this in more abstract terms, claiming that 'meaning in life arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness, and one is able to do something about it or with it' (2010, 26). Whereas subjective attraction is definitely related to fulfilment, her query is how to understand objective attractiveness, activities and projects that 'are at least also fitting to fulfilment' (2010, 37).

Wolf invited four scholars to respond to her account. Of interest to our discussion is the issue raised by Robert Adams, who pondered why Wolf thought it necessary to add feelings of fulfilment to meaningfulness. Adams doubts whether we need this extra requirement. He agrees that it is plausible to think that one sort of fulfilment is the success of a person's major projects, this making a difference to the meaning of a life. Yet, he believes a life can also contain meaning in the case of a failed project that is valuable, and even derive meaning from it. He illustrates this with the example of the German officer Claus von Stauffenberg's attempt to assassinate Hitler. His project to liberate Germany from the fate of Nazism failed, and he was executed. Adams wonders whether this made Von Stauffenberg's life meaningless, saying he believes that Stauffenberg did not think so, even despite the failure of the project. Of course, it is very likely that he felt devastated the evening the project failed, not only because of his imminent death, but also because of the expected consequences for Germany. Yet, as Adams continues, he might have found consolation in the thought that he had no reason to despise himself, having done what was within the reach of his capacities. Consolation is different from fulfilment, and here Adam can make his point. He concludes, "This is terribly important. For one of the great things about positive meaning in life is that one can have it even when one's hopes and projects are not fulfilled and one does not feel good." (2010, 79).

Wolf's response to this recommendation is very nuanced and carefully thought through. She acknowledges that Adams is right in denoting the inadequacy of her characterisation of the subjective dimension of meaningfulness, due to the unwanted association with success and feelings of pleasure. She admits that the term fulfilment is misleading but adds that singling out the term 'love', as Adams suggests, will not resolve the problem, because, conceptually, love is less closely connected to meaningfulness than fulfilment. One can imagine people doing something out of love for their country, for example defending their country, yet if considering the task a duty, this will not be paradigmatically meaningful to them. So Wolf concludes that, in a sense, it might be more realistic to

give up the idea that there is a single subjective quality of experience. Instead of looking for a ‘catch-all term’ (2010, 112) to denote the subjective side of meaningful activity, ‘it might be wiser, if less satisfyingly determinate, simply to acknowledge that there is a range of such attitudes and conditions, which includes love and fulfilment (...) that an agent must have in order for engagement with it to contribute to the meaningfulness of his life.’ (2010, 114). So whereas Adams does not challenge her principal account, Wolf concludes with some regret that she has to abandon her search for a single important structural feature to characterise the subjective side of her account.

The question that arises is whether it is really true that Wolf should discard the idea of trying to find a single catch-all term. No doubt the discussion between Wolf and Adams nicely illustrates that fulfilment is important though not paramount. Yet Wolf’s regret about having to give up this conception may point to her intuition that ‘something’ prevails in the discussion about meaning in life. Could it be that her intuition is right, but that she did not find the adequate wording to bring into light this initial feeling? If her impression is right, it should, however, be a concept that leaves associative space to include both acts of fulfilment and acts that are of the utmost importance even if they are not fulfilling. Whereas it may be very unlikely for such a notion to be found, if we read Wolf’s book more closely, we can see that she actually points to such a vocabulary herself though due to the conceptual structure she uses – her account is structured around the concept of fulfilment – it only can appear in the margins of her thought.

In answering a question raised by John Koethe about the importance of success, Wolf further explains her reasoning, and it is here that the notion of guidance transpires. Wolf elucidates the thesis that in bringing up the idea of meaningfulness, she wanted to argue that there is a dimension along which a life may be considered valuable, distinct both from morality as duty and pleasure or happiness. She believes that thoughts of meaningfulness play a role in directing our lives and in guiding the lives of one’s children, even in shaping social institutions and in formulating political goals. She also

evokes this idea of meaningfulness somehow providing some kind of direction when she refers to the reverse case. Wolf states that ‘without the concept of meaningfulness and a vocabulary with which to discuss and explore it, we are apt to accept distorted conceptions of happiness and morality, to seek the wrong things, and to be at a loss to understand what is going wrong’ (2010, 109). Wolf understands that next to engendering a certain fulfilment, meaning in life has a directive force, one that is implicitly inserted in our personal lives as well as directive in our collective societal life.³ She suspects that it also becomes visible the moments we think meaningfulness is absent. If so, this directive force has a rather profound function. The challenge to take up is how to reach a more adequate understanding of this kind of directiveness as an important singled-out feature of meaningfulness, both in subjective and in objective terms. The challenge is larger than can be imagined at this stage, for as I hope to make clear in the following part, the directive force plays a role in an ineffable way. Wolf does not recognise the guiding function of meaning in life from such a perspective, at least not explicitly, yet one could argue that implicitly she provides it a place in her account when using the notion of ‘proneness to being moved’. Proneness to being moved in a general way alludes to this directive force since it refers to a certain condition of the person. It alludes to a passivity, a receptivity to the world outside. Something crosses our path and we are susceptible to it, regardless of what sort of plan, project or activities we have, and this happens irrespective of our will. So expressed in this way, the notion is even quite central to her, for Wolf claims that ‘proneness to being moved [by reasons of love] is at the core of our ability to live meaningful lives’ (2010, 7). Even so, in the remainder of her account Wolf disregards the notion of proneness to being moved and turns her attention almost exclusively to the reasons of love by which we are moved, for she conjectures that these may sustain her in objectifying the notion of fulfilment. Yet, to achieve a subtler understanding of why meaning in life would matter, it might be worth exploring proneness to being moved to its full extent.

III. The Directive Force of Meaning in Life

In the following, I will examine three cases of proneness to being moved (by reasons of love). The first case is a theoretical elaboration of the sewing case Wolf refers to and enables us to understand, in an introductory way, how to conceive of proneness to being moved as a directive force. As will become clear, to understand its depth, we will recur to a continental approach. To highlight the peculiarity in which it is guiding, I will contrast it with a more common-sense frame of morality as duty guiding us. Subsequently, two lived experiences will be dealt with, bridging analytic thought and continental thought, in order to designate the ineffable as a core aspect of meaning in life.

The sewing case

Let us have a closer look at Susan Wolf's example of a mother who stays up all night to sew her daughter a Halloween costume. To Wolf, this example is meant to illustrate our proneness to being moved by reasons of love, but since my aim is to contrast the way proneness to being moved is directive with the way morality as duty guides us, we will first consider it as an illustration of moral duty. We thus figure the mother carefully listening to her daughter's implorations to make her a Halloween dress for the next morning but instead of acting right away, she reflects on how to react to this according to a morality-as-duty account. Taking this in a strict sense, her answer then entirely depends on the referential frame in which she is embedded. We can thus imagine her going over the different aspects involved to reach a decision. She wonders whether sewing a costume is part of a mother's role, whether it is fair of her daughter to request this at such a late hour, and so on. The referential frame will inspire her decision in that it provides meaning and guidance. It enables her to make the right choices, as they follow from existing ideas and ideals about motherhood, fairness or justice. Whether the outcome is a yes or a no, in both cases it is well-balanced decision. To make

our case work, we will assume that she ultimately decided not to grant her daughter's request.

Turning now to a continental approach in order to grasp a deeper layer of proneness to being moved, we can further imagine that, as a result of the mother's refusal, the girl is disappointed, but does not say so. Yet, the disappointment shines through, and the mother becomes touched by it. She becomes prone to being moved by the love for her daughter. Through a particular gesture or something she said, the mother grasped the depth of her need for a fancy costume. The mother cannot be but receptive to it. She is receptive the very moment she is prone to being moved by love. Being prone is this involuntary 'welcoming' of the other's particular gesture, words or look. It is involuntary, because it is not steered by will or representation. We could say that the duty frame of reference is interrupted. While being moved, the mother intuitively grasps that this experience matters to her - it moves her regardless of her rational considerations. In that sense it is directive. Hence, both the morality-as-duty frame and the interruption of this frame by being moved make sense and are as such directive. A phenomenological approach can illustrate how proneness to being moved can be directive in a genuine distinctive way.

To further deepen our understanding of why proneness to being moved would be ineffable and at the same time directive, two lived experiences will be brought in, Rudy's case and the family case, each illuminating slightly different aspects of such an experience. Rudy's case will also illustrate that proneness to being moved forces us to make a distinction between meaning in life and meaningfulness, due to the way being moved comes about, while the family case serves to further clarify this distinction.

Rudy's case

The first lived experience was told me during one of the in-depth interviews performed as part of a research project about Meaningfulness, Volunteering and Citizenship,⁴ In the interview I asked Rudy, one of the interviewees, to recall a situation that moved him considerably. Interestingly, Rudy

does not refer to a loving situation worthy of love, such as Wolf has in mind, but to a range of situations all of which cause him to suffer. In other words, he equates being moved with suffering.

This is what he says:

“To see a park with no apple trees? That hurts, because [the park] does not live. Or when I visit a business and see its unsightly green areas. Nobody takes any notice and it is a contractor that comes to water them, [to me] these [plants and areas] are not living. That’s suffering; I suffer from that. I go around with a sense of suffering. [...] Take a car tearing past a biker; [it] makes me suffer, and feel for the biker. A mother that communicates badly with her child on the street, and behaves aggressively, I suffer with the child. And the fact that biodiversity in the world is crumbling, and that children suffer from particles in the air (...) This annoys me, makes me sad. What is it I suffer from? From the inhumane, the ugly, the simplistic, the stupid.”⁵

What does this fragment of the interview tell us? On different occasions, Rudy is prone to being moved, and susceptible to what he comes across, irrespective of what he is doing at the moment. Something from the outside interrupts him. Being moved befalls on him.

Distinct from Wolf’s example, the sewing case, where the mother got moved in a subtle way, Rudy tells us how he was moved by situations that appealed to him because he found them appalling. They left an imprint on him. Some time after the interview had taken place, I sent him an email message asking him if he could recall what happened at the instants he felt moved. Rudy’s answer contained the following meticulous clarification: “... there is a sense and intuitive grasping of what deeply matters [in life]. [When being moved by these situations], there is more than sensing a kind of absurdity. In the experience that something is not right, there is the presupposition that it can be different.” (*italics mine*). Rudy grasps that something is not right, not because of the idea that it is not right the way it is supposed to be or should be, but because he feels something is lacking, without this lack already having signification. This lack is apprehended as an absence of something that deeply matters. Rudy is moved because he

experiences non-sense, an absence of what matters. He is moved by this very absence. This non-sense makes sense to him as absence of what matters.

It is revealing that absence of what matters, matters to him, and even more revealing is the observation that it matters without this already having explicitness, strictly speaking. A singular feature of situations that move us and fall outside our signification is that they are directive in non-normative terms. In Rudy's case, they guide him in his life prior to any articulation in terms of right or wrong. Maybe we could go even further, for seemingly the peculiarity of this 'happening' is that it does not pertain to any referential category at all. In that sense it is ineffable. The moment matters and makes sense (as absence of what matters) and in that way adds meaning to life. Rudy's case is illustrative in that it shows how proneness to being moved is directive in an ineffable way. Yet it poses a problem as well, for can we still denote proneness to being moved in terms of meaningfulness? Meaningfulness, I believe, cannot be detected at this particular moment of being moved where there is absence of what matters. So although there appears to be something that adds meaning to life, expressing this in terms of meaningfulness would be awkward, to say the least. How to understand this? We may come to comprehend this tension more adequately if, as in the sewing case, we turn toward the action that follows. Indeed, in the interview Rudy did not only express his being moved, but explained how he acted subsequently. He reveals that he first reflected on it, and as a response to one of the cases that moved him, the sterile green zone in the park called 'nature', he went to the mayor of his town and proposed to organise an apple tree planting activity in the park, within the context of the Local Exchange Trading System (LETS) of which he is a member. Actually planting trees together with other members of the LETS is a feast to him, not so much for the socialising aspect, but because it enables him to change the situation he suffers from. Rudy's reaction thus comprises various stages. Firstly, there is the verbalisation of his being moved in terms of suffering. This implies that his being moved is brought into signification and thus given meaning. Subsequently, drawing

on the meaning it receives within his illuminating horizon, Rudy starts thinking on how to turn ‘absence of what matters’ into ‘that which really matters’ again. So absence of what matters, making sense, does not only preoccupy his mind, he literally takes action in order to set things in motion and change the situation, while involving others in it. If we now analyse this action from Wolf’s perspective of meaningfulness, we can comprehend that this part of the account satisfies hers; Rudy is positively engaged in a project that is worthwhile both from a subjective perspective (there is a restoring of absence in the way Rudy thinks it has to be restored) and from an objective perspective (the LETS members share his idea on this). And this is fulfilling to him. Wolf’s approach makes no allowance for the processes happening prior to action.

The continuation of the story in terms of reflection and action seems to indicate that meaningfulness comes in only at this very moment. In other words, the notion of meaningfulness starts making sense once we refer to Rudy’s reflecting on his being moved, or to his engagement in an activity. The fact that his proneness to being moved makes sense to him cannot be expressed in these terms because they are simply not appropriate to capture what is at stake.

So if we interpret the lived experience in this way, we unveil two ‘separate’ moments. First there is Rudy’s proneness to being moved which ineffably provides sense, adding meaning to his life, and second there are his reflections and actions, which make sense in terms of meaningfulness.

That the two are distinct can be illustrated in yet another way. We can, for the sake of the argument, imagine that, due to his being moved so often by the absence of what matters, Rudy’s grief has led him to an opposite reaction: he closes himself up in his house, so as not to have to be confronted with all the non-sense and suffering around. This would render any step towards action and engagement impossible. If Rudy thought and acted like this, we would no longer call this meaningful but rather associate it with a loss of this meaning and thus with meaninglessness. Rudy would no longer be able to partake of activities or projects that make his life worth living. So, more concretely, in this case, whether his being

moved by the absence of what matters is to be considered in terms of either meaningfulness or loss of meaning seems to depend on the significance, the meaning given to what has moved him. Rudy was prone to being moved by the absence of what matters. This made sense to him and was as such directive, but it is the way he interprets this and subsequently responds to this in terms of action, that is crucial in determining whether or not this experience became meaningful to him. Formulated in yet another way, being moved (in this case by the absence of what matters) can incline towards either meaningfulness or meaninglessness and what is decisive for this is not his proneness to being moved, but the way Rudy interprets his being moved, i.e. the kind of significance he gives to it with regard to a larger frame of reference.

We can take the distinction between the two one step further. If we are prone to being moved, we will never doubt or question that it matters when we are moved. In contrast, we may have doubts about the significance to be attributed to it, or the amount of energy to be put into subsequent action. Reflection on what moved us can make it turn either way. That we are moved and that our being moved matters, is of an enduring nature, even in hindsight, but the way we interpret it, in terms of meaningfulness or meaninglessness, is to some extent contingent.⁶

So, Rudy's case provides us a privileged view of how to grasp the distinction between meaningfulness in terms of signification and the associated action on the one hand, and proneness to being moved providing sense as direction, on the other. The subtle difference between the two moments in this particular experience is easier to grasp than in the sewing case, because of a dissociation between the two parts. Logically speaking, we would expect something that matters to turn into meaningfulness and something that matters through the absence of what matters, to turn into meaninglessness. For instance, in the sewing case, the mother can be prone to being moved by her daughter's question, this making sense to her in an ineffable way, with the subsequent sewing becoming a meaningful activity. Vice versa, we are almost naturally inclined to associate the absence of what matters with

meaninglessness. Being moved by the absence of what matters and this leading to meaningfulness somehow creates a logical dissociation, and it is here we can become more attentive to what is at play.⁷

The family case

Let us now turn to the second lived experience. This serves as yet another example to show how meaning in life can be directive in an ineffable way, because it illustrates that proneness to being moved can be directive even without any signification given to it by the person involved in terms of meaningfulness. The example is based on a personal experience of mine and goes as follows.

On our way to our vacation house and after several hours' driving, my husband, my children and I were looking for a place to have a quick dinner. It was very late and we ended up in a cheap hotel where food was still being served. To our children (at that time very critical teenagers), the waitress was not dressed according to the current standards among their peers. Each time the waitress came in, in a too overtly way they looked at each other, pulling faces. I manifested my embarrassment and tried to point out their moral duty to treat all people with respect, but to no avail. My husband, on his part, did not participate in these instructive attempts of mine. He did not judge the children, did not address them directly. When the waitress came, he was very respectful towards her (as he usually is), and at one moment he said, as if he had not even noticed our discussion, "She looks very tired, poor soul". After this, the laughing stopped. When my youngest daughter got ready to carry on, the oldest simply ignored here.

My research work has made me particularly alert to such moments, so afterwards I asked my husband if he had said so on purpose, but this was not the case. His tiredness that day had made him absent-minded and unaware of what was going on at the table. Something in the behaviour of the waitress had told him she was very tired.

What does this lived experience reveal? We can see here how signification is meaningful and guiding, how it is

interrupted by being moved, and how the latter is directive in an ineffable way. Indeed, we can observe that the existing expectations with regard to dress code was guiding my daughters' behaviour. They conceptually 'locked up' the waitress in this signification. In my attempts to make them stop, I likewise resorted to standards from an illuminating horizon, trying to make them sound persuasive and thus guiding.

Next, my husband's words moved us, which interrupted my daughters' and my opposing intentions. I could not prevent this from happening. It interrupted my attempts at getting our children back on a decent track. I assume that, in a subliminal way, my eldest daughter was also moved (though we never spoke about it), for she no longer continued this game. The interruption made sense, directing or "redirecting" us.⁸ To repeat, while I first went purposefully against my daughters laughing about the waitress's outfit, and while the laughing of my daughters was also a deliberate act, these two clashing intentions were interrupted by my husband's words, and directed away from it.

Interestingly, my husband had no intention to intervene, and as can be expected, this is not just a detail but crucial for being moved to be directive. No moral intention was involved; there was no attempt to make an exemplary claim. What was produced at that moment just happened, making sense without anyone being able to grasp it in terms of signification. It seemingly just made sense as something that mattered in an ineffable way.

The last sentence is not so innocent as it seems, for it points to a relation between the two terms ('sense' and 'mattered') that is at the heart of the matter. If we look at it closely we can see that there is no causal relation between both. What was produced at that moment does not make sense and thus matters, or vice versa, what was produced does not matter and thus makes sense. In this very case, both are in such an intrinsic way related that they are at the point of becoming a tautology, for what was produced can only make sense as something that matters.

Whereas so far the case is relatively analogous to the two former ones in that we can trace a distinction between the way in which significance (in relation to a referential frame) can be guiding and the proneness to being moved mattering in an ineffable way, it differs in that it has no continuation, there having been no follow-up action in terms of sewing or planting. What does this tell us about meaningfulness?

Two outcomes seem possible. As for myself, I considered the moment meaningful, and in hindsight this is because by reflecting on it I grasped in depth what it had done to the relationships involved. In other words, the moment became meaningful once I started reflecting on it and placed the experience in a meaningful horizon. Through reflection, it was brought into the realm of signification or a referential frame. Here, once again signification and meaningfulness are linked (I am not sure whether we can express this also in terms of fulfilment). In the case of my eldest daughter, it may be assumed that she did not reflect on what happened. Even so, the moment was orienting likewise as a breaking point (interruption) and as a leading point (directing or redirecting), thanks to something making sense or, as, one could prudently say, a sense circulating unwittingly and unintentionally among those present, leaving no more than a dim trace, but leaving a trace nevertheless, even if not in terms of meaningfulness. So this example seems to suggest that some context can be subtly guiding and as such contribute to meaning in life, without this being expressed or sensed as meaningful.

IV. How Both Relate

So far we have suggested that to understand the issue of meaning in life it may be beneficial to make a distinction between on the one hand proneness to being moved, this mattering or guiding in an ineffable way, and on the other hand meaningfulness or meaninglessness as being related to the way being moved is given significance. I will now further concentrate on the less discernible distinction between being moved and reflection (not the action), this turning the situation into meaningfulness or meaninglessness. While it was

emphasised that they are separate, it is also clear that they are intrinsically interrelated. The question is how. The three cases can help us a little further. When I asked Rudy if “being moved keeps him going, in the sense of setting him in motion”, Rudy wholeheartedly agreed. He probably took this very literally, grasping how his being moved by a situation leads to meaningful action. The intention of my question was subtler, however, namely that each time we are moved we are put on track again, even if this is not followed by action, as the family case shows. This track directs or redirects us because it reveals what deeply matters, without this already having signification. Rudy's case and the family case also showed that reflection on being moved is what made it turn in to meaningfulness (or meaninglessness). It is in this sense that it appears as if the possibility for meaningfulness and meaninglessness to come about is contingent on the proneness to being moved. Whether proneness to being moved turns into meaningfulness or meaninglessness depends on different reasons, but in order for us to speak in terms of one of both, we have to be oriented by our being moved by something. Meaningfulness or meaninglessness can arise only if we are moved in an ineffable way.

To be sure, this is a bold assumption indeed, for if meaningfulness and meaninglessness are contingent on our proneness to being moved, this means that situations considered meaningful or meaningless - always - presuppose a being moved. Could this be true? It would take us too far to examine this thoroughly here, but using the sewing case again, we will attempt to show that it is plausible that being moved is a prerequisite for meaningfulness to come about.

In the sewing case we concluded that, for the mother, morality as duty had significance as a referential frame and that as such it was meaningful and guiding. Words make sense against a horizon of meaning. We can now wonder if it could be that the frame was meaningful to her, not only because of a strict Kantian rationale, but also because the significance springs from a myriad of situations that have moved her on different occasions, prior to this rationale, and on which she then starts reflecting. An answer to this question, and its

plausibility, depends partly on how this frame is conceived of. From my point of view, a referential horizon is not only considered as a static conceptual frame but as something dynamic, influenced by the embodied praxis of daily life. If this makes sense we may well imagine that in the case referred to, the mother's first decision not to grant her daughter's request likewise sprouted from her having been moved by a certain situation. Indeed, it is very likely that in the praxis of life, the mother has been moved by specific events, for instance a news item on the fact that in certain places in the world, mothers are obliged to devote their entire life to their husband and children, which means they have no time left for their personal development. This may have struck her as 'unfair' and inspired her to make sure to keep a balance between the two. Yet, as we saw, the insistence of her daughter after the initial refusal, a certain look, or a certain movement moved the mother. We can conjecture that the latter situation of being moved makes her dubious. Thus, whereas she first did not grant her daughter's request due to specific understanding of fairness (drawn on being moved by a particular situation in the past), after being moved by the disappointment of the look of her daughter, the decision is suspended again, leaving open all possibilities. While this example shows the dynamic aspect of a moral view, more importantly for our case, it indicates that in both cases it is proneness to being moved by the situation that engenders, that sets in motion. Proneness to being moved by the situation could thus be conditional for a meaningful decision to come about 'next'.

Before concluding, we need to take one final turn, even if only briefly. While the cases discussed above suggest that meaningfulness (and meaninglessness) appear to be contingent on proneness to being moved, they also reveal a paradox. If what was claimed makes sense, an understanding of proneness to being moved seems itself to 'depend' on significance for it to have meaning. We can see this in two ways. Firstly, we can only recognise that there is such a thing as something that matters in an ineffable way, and fathom it, the moment we reflect on it, thus bringing it into signification or representation. This was illustrated by the family case, where we ascertained that the

eldest daughter did not reflect or attach significance to what had moved her. While there was something that directed her prior to her comprehension, she was not aware of it, and so, in that sense, it had no significance to her. Secondly, and even more paradoxically, we can only become aware of a certain sense that deeply matters in a way that is 'detached' from signification, because it interrupts signification. Without referential frame, nothing can be interrupted. So something can reveal itself as something that deeply matters, unless there is already a referential frame or significance.

The examples given suggest that there is a relation between an ineffable sense that matters, and meaningfulness (or meaninglessness) that comes about the moment this sense is made significant through signification. This relation can probably best be expressed in terms of an inherent interplay and we can prudently assume that this is what meaning in life is all about.

V. Ending Note

In order to achieve a fuller understanding of what is at stake, it may be helpful to reconsider a few of the conceptual distinctions made so far, or more accurately, to refine and deepen these distinctions. Like some other scholars, Wolf focuses on activities that are meaningful. An account of meaningfulness is spun around and limited to involvement in worthwhile activities and projects. Positive engagement then is further linked to fulfilment. Wolf also alludes to the guiding function of meaningfulness, but cannot ground this in an optimal way within her frame of reference.

In this article an extra dimension was brought in, one that we called our proneness to being moved. We saw how this makes sense, how it matters, and how this can be directive without already having explicitness. These elements are not mere features of our proneness to being moved; rather the aspect of making sense, mattering and being directive are one and the same. Referring to them is a sheer repetition, coming close to a tautology. Proneness to being moved presupposes all three of them, for at the moment of being moves something

makes sense, matters (at times as absence of what matters) and directs in the same instant. In this way being moved adds meaning to our lives.

In this paper we subsequently assumed that the term meaningfulness, as used by Wolf, only makes sense the moment we start reflecting on being moved, (considering here reflection in its broadest possible sense) and acting. Being moved would then be conditional for meaningfulness (and meaninglessness) to come about. Yet as was shortly hinted at, what matters as making sense in an ineffable way can only be fathomed when brought into signification or a referential frame. Both are interrelated.

Our statement has implications for an understanding of the issue at stake, an issue we will now denote as meaning in life, while we will no longer use meaningfulness as a synonym for meaning in life, as Wolf implicitly does. Indeed, any study of the idea of meaningfulness, based on positive engagement in activities considered worthwhile both subjectively and objectively (such as undertaken by Wolf) basically covers only one dimension of what provides meaning to our lives. This also implies that the terminology developed to clarify this dimension is not suitable to grasp what is at stake in this other dimension, nor is it able to grasp the interaction between both. There is a built-in conceptual restriction. So conceptually, for the topic at stake a concrete suggestion could be to use 'meaning in life' as the overall term for, on the one hand, the study of proneness to being moved and, on the other, the subject in terms of meaningfulness (or meaninglessness) and the role of fulfilment in it. We can admit that both dimensions can develop their own vocabulary, without, however, losing sight of the intrinsic relatedness of both. The aim of this article was merely to point to one of them, proneness to being moved. How to understand this directiveness, and how exactly it relates to meaningfulness (and meaninglessness), requires much further reflection.

NOTES

¹ See also Wolf 1997a and 1997b.

² The topic of meaningfulness, meaning in life or meaning of life has been studied by various philosophers, and scholars in other disciplines. Interesting literature we can find in *The Meaning of Life* (Klemke and Cahn, 2008). This reader brings together several essays by 20th-century writers on this topic (Leo Tolstoy, Bertrand Russell, Albert Camus, Thomas Nagel, Robert Nozick) as well as by present-day authors. Also, issue n° 93/1 (2010) of the journal *The Monist* is dedicated to this subject, with contributions from analytically oriented authors. Most recent work is from Metz 2013. In the Dutch context, the works of Burms are important. See Burms and Dedijn 1986 and Burms 2012. Apart from Burms' and Wolf's perspectives, the mentioned perspectives are of little relevance to the statements I wish to make in this paper. Other authors likewise engage in this theme, more in particular Oakley 2010, Kekes 2008 and James 2010. Wolf's commitment to the topic is far less specific, which is why I have chosen to take her work as a point of departure.

³ Charles Taylor explores to its full extent the link between moral horizons that are guiding, meaningfulness and identity. To Jean Grondin the guiding aspect of meaning in life is central, and so it is for John Cottingham, though to the latter the link between meaningfulness and spirituality is inseparable. These outlooks, no matter how interesting they are, differ too considerably from the perspective I wish to bring forward to take their work into consideration.

⁴ The workshop 'Volunteers, Citizenship, Meaningfulness' was part of a research project on volunteering and victim-offender mediation set up by the Centre for Practice-based Research and Services (PRAGODI), Hogeschool-Universiteit Brussel. The Workshop was organised in collaboration with the Centre Leo Apostel for Interdisciplinary Studies (CLEA), and more particularly the Research Community 'Research on the Construction of an Integrated Worldview', Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

⁵ The interview with Rudy was in Dutch, and a similar quote was used by Erik Claes in his article 'Civic Meaningfulness', published in the special issue of *Foundations of Science, Meaningfulness, Volunteering, Citizenship*, forthcoming.

⁶ Thomas Nagel in an interesting way demonstrates how all meaningful activity can turn into meaninglessness, and that this ultimately depends on the perspective one adheres to, namely an inner or an outer perspective, neither of which we can escape. He adds that these viewpoints 'function independently enough so that each can come as something of a surprise to the other, like an identity that has been temporarily forgotten.' (Nagel 1986, 209).

⁷ Even though this example creates a logical dissociation enabling us to come closer to a distinction between two parts, Arnold Burms has convincingly demonstrated how a work of art can move us, and how this leads to meaningfulness. So even if something makes sense in an ineffable way, this leading to meaningfulness, a distinction between the two can be discerned (Burms 2012).

⁸ The youngest daughter's lack of proneness is equally revealing. As can be understood, proneness to being moved is not something one can control or predict, it just happens, regardless of our will. It is something that comes about by the other. One cannot steer openness to the other or proneness to being moved. Some will simply experience this at one particular moment while others are at other moments.

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