

Summary

In "The Meanings of Lives," Susan Wolf explores the philosophical concept of meaningfulness, distinguishing between the "meaning of life" and the "meaning in life." She argues that while the former may be unattainable without a specific religious framework, the latter is a legitimate and achievable pursuit. Wolf proposes that a meaningful life involves active and successful engagement in projects of positive value, emphasizing the importance of objective worth over subjective satisfaction. She draws a parallel between the desire for meaning and the recognition of one's place in the universe, suggesting that pursuing objective value is an appropriate response to the realization of one's cosmic insignificance.

Section Summaries

Introduction: Wolf observes the philosophical shift away from the question of the "meaning of life" and highlights the distinction between the "meaning of life" and the "meaning in life."

What is it to live a meaningful life? Wolf explores the concept of meaningfulness by examining paradigms of meaningless lives. She introduces "**The Blob**," a hypothetical individual who passively exists, consuming media and alcohol without purpose or connection. This thought experiment serves as a stark illustration of a life devoid of meaning, prompting the reader to consider what elements are missing. By contrasting this with other examples like "The Useless" (lives filled with pointless activities) and "The Bankrupt" (lives dedicated to failed projects), Wolf extracts key elements crucial for a meaningful life:

- Active engagement: In contrast to the passivity of "The Blob," a meaningful life requires active participation in the world.
- Positive value: The pursuits and projects one engages in must have genuine, objective worth, not just fleeting subjective pleasure as seen in "The Useless."
- A degree of success: While acknowledging that setbacks and failures are inevitable, a meaningful life necessitates some level of accomplishment or progress, distinguishing it from "The Bankrupt."

Synthesizing these elements, Wolf proposes that a meaningful life is one that is *actively and at least somewhat successfully engaged in a project (or projects) of positive value*. She emphasizes that "projects" should be interpreted broadly, encompassing not just goal-oriented tasks but also relationships and ongoing activities. She stresses the importance of genuine engagement, where individuals identify with and embrace their pursuits. Finally, she underscores that the projects must have *objective* value, not merely subjective satisfaction. The contrast with "The Blob" serves as a touchstone throughout this section, highlighting how a meaningful life necessitates active engagement with the world and the pursuit of something beyond oneself.

Why should one care about living a meaningful life? Wolf argues that the desire for meaning is not merely a personal preference but is rooted in a deeper understanding of one's place in the universe. She contends that a life solely focused on subjective fulfillment is "practically solipsistic," ignoring the vastness and objective value inherent in the world. By engaging in projects of objective worth, individuals acknowledge their position in the universe and harmonize their lives with a reality that extends beyond their subjective experiences. Wolf draws a parallel with Thomas Nagel's concept of practical solipsism, suggesting that a lack of concern for meaning reflects a failure to acknowledge objective value in the world. She proposes that the desire for meaning and the pursuit of objective value are appropriate responses to the realization of one's cosmic insignificance. The image of "The Blob" lingers in the background, a cautionary tale of a life lived in isolation from the broader context of a value-filled universe.

Conclusion: Wolf reiterates that even in the absence of a defined "meaning of life," individuals can cultivate meaning in their lives by actively engaging in projects of genuine worth. She highlights the interconnectedness of the two concepts, both stemming from a recognition of one's place in the universe. Wolf concludes that while philosophers might not offer new insights into the "meaning of life," understanding the different facets of meaning and how they relate to the human condition remains a valuable philosophical endeavor. The specter of "The Blob" serves as a final reminder of the emptiness of a life lived without purpose or connection to the greater world.