



1. *Babble On: Language and the Ivory Tower*
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Babble On: Language and the Ivory Tower

By ANTIGONE
GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

What is the Meaning in Life?

By TAICHENG JIN
GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

I didn't think stone could scream until I saw an image of *Laocoön and His Sons*, a sculpture depicting a scene from Virgil's *Aeneid*. Troy's priest of Neptune had implored his countrymen to refuse the Greek gift of a wooden horse, believing it was full of armed men. The Trojans dismissed Laocoön's warning and hauled the horse within their walls.

As Laocoön attempted to sacrifice a bull to Neptune for the city's protection, twin serpents, eyes suffused with blood and fire, emerged from Neptune's chaotic sea and coiled around the throats of him and his sons. From Laocoön's lungs came a "bellowing like some wounded bull struggling to shrug loose from his neck an axe that's struck awry." His own throat uttering the very cry of the animal he sought to slaughter, Laocoön becomes the sacrifice for a god less concerned with truth than with power, for a kingdom less concerned with prudence than with greed.

Logos -- the reasoning word -- is dying, and we are killing it.

On the postmodern campus, words are often Trojan horses that drain discourse of its lifeblood. Today, students at most colleges seem to learn to obfuscate, equivocate, and manipulate language more than to communicate. Language, once considered the most inspired means of pursuing mutual improvement between human beings, becomes a means of deception and compulsion. Educational conversation once bound students together toward the pursuit of truth. Now, with the dissolution of belief in absolute truth, verbal expression by the deconstructionists on our campuses has increasingly aimed at conquest, at seizing and maintaining ideological control. Here questions warp into "questionings," interactions into interrogations, articulations into accusations, and sentences into sentencings.

We are virtually willed into compliance under the grand narrative that no grand narratives are true, and the absolute truth that there is no absolute truth. No longer believing our breath is carried on the wind of divine consciousness, we feel only the Nietzschean breath of empty space. With the entire horizon wiped away, we drown

in our own air. Our tongues reduced to mere muscle, we learn not the art of argument but the homogeneous, droning, artless regurgitation of accusations that brand us with a perpetually redefined sense of "virtue." Together, yet utterly alone, we recite these empty prayers to the reigning cultural authorities, sacrificing intellectual dissidents on the altars of our own egos. Logos -- the reasoning word -- is dying, and we are killing it.

Our destruction of objective definition grows from the underlying belief that no one can adequately convey a reality to another through speech, that no one can truly reach another's mind or heart. This amounts to a disbelief in the very definition of education, and if education is lost, what knowledge are we to acquire? That we are all "lords of our own tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation," as David Foster Wallace says in his address to a graduating class of Kenyon College on the value of a liberal arts education. A bit of Hebrew wisdom once warned that from such a pursuit of knowledge, rooted in pride and power, stems every ripe horror of the human experience. Do we not taste some of that horror? Do we not feel exiled from each other? Are we not out of breath?

The attempted elevation of our souls to infinite capacities for new definition and creation has proved to be dehumanizing, not deifying. The endless deconstruction of language generates disbelief in the ability of conversation and debate to sharpen a fellow human being. We have lost too much of our faith in mutual improvement and refinement, in good will and therefore friendship,

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in our capacity to gain strength through challenge. The extreme erosion of language illustrates a dying love for the human spirit. Losing this reverence strips us of our very humanity by blinding us to the humanity of others.

In our attempts to attain and advertise the heights of our own perceived virtue, we increasingly reduce our interactions to

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Before we discuss the meaning of life, perhaps we should ask why grappling with its meaning even matters. Existential angst -- is it useful? In a chaotic world where iconoclasm vies with conformism, metanarrative is frequently sought after and persecuted. Globalism has added so much mobility in the market of ideas that it has replaced stable dominant *teloses* -- ultimate values and goals -- with anarchy. We cannot help but scurry aimlessly, hunted by the tide that is time, jumping over hurdles one after another without even a partially formulated *telos*. What chaos! (i.e., the Greek *khaos*, meaning abyss). We fear and ponder at this abyss of the unknown, ponder and yet fear more.

In *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, Susan Wolf believes she has found the exit to this cosmic treadmill, or as Nietzsche called it, "eternal return." She entreats us to ponder the meaning *in* life rather than the meaning *of* life. Because only then, fueled by pragmatism, can we tease out the practical from the superfluous. In scrutinizing the motivations behind our actions, we grow and improve. Wolf speaks of two core conditions, subjectivity and objectivity, that are both necessary to human fulfillment. She neatly captures the complementary relationship between them when she explains: "meaning in life arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness."

Rejecting both "rational egoism" and consequentialism, Wolf sharpens our understanding of worth and justification while steering us away from agonizing misconceptions about value. Her "fitting fulfillment" view clarifies the role of self-interest in our actions without relying exclusively on its explanatory power. But her view doesn't sufficiently address (although she recognizes) a major point about objective worth, and it doesn't provide a solution to the lack of an independent arbitrator or relatively impartial judge.

Wolf succeeds in eliminating the false dichotomy between rational egoism and consequentialism. Rational egoists believe that every sound justification for our actions, or the policies we advocate, is a maximization of self-interest. Wolf rejects this school of thought, citing moral duty and "reasons of love." She later notes situations of apparent selflessness or altruism, such as dedicating time to something we take a passionate interest in or caring for a friend. (Of course, her examples of unexplained

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BABBLE ON . . . cont.

mere force. When persuasion is erased, only compulsion remains. Denying the existence of common ground, we stand in utter isolation. Our elimination of absolutes has wrenched away from us any true aspiration, while shrinking our sense of moral obligation to each other. Without a standard of meaning outside

our own teetering mental constructions, we rob our pasts of redemption, our presents of hope, and our futures of achievement. With such a dismal interpretation of the nature of man, conversation regresses into a barbaric cacophony baying for sacrificial blood.

I fear that when at last we realize that our tyrannous butchery of dictionaries has

caused our own kingdoms to crumble, we will look at the bleeding ink on our hands and wonder who will wipe it off us. We will not have the language to construct an answer. We will babble on. Only the rocks will be left to cry out.

"Antigone" was recently a student at Hamilton College.

MEANING IN LIFE . . . cont.

"altruisms" can still be morphed into acts of self-interest, if the rational egoist claims such an act includes an expectation of self-benefit.) Wolf offers a conception of meaningfulness that is "neither subsumable under or reducible to either happiness or morality." In her model, the person "loves" the activity, or is subjectively "gripped, excited, interested, engaged" by and in it. For example, if an emergency room surgeon goes to work every day feeling beat and distraught because she resents the exacting standards of her job and is tired of the crunching pressure -- even though her work is objectively valuable to society, bringing people back from the brink of traumatic death -- her life is not meaningful by Wolf's standard because the "subjective condition" of meaningfulness, her happiness, is not met.

On the other hand, Wolf's "objective condition" requires that an activity which

wisdom is not sufficient for deterrence.

Wolf addresses two main objections to her analysis -- elitism and "metaphysics of value." Elitism involves authority. Who has the legitimate authority to dictate to the rest of us what is valuable? Wolf is keenly aware that she, like others, operates on biases. She admits that her bourgeois or middle-class American values cannot be a certificate of genuine authority, since these are far from universal moral attitudes. But nonetheless, she affirms that we can largely overcome this difficulty if we keep our "fallibility" in mind and regard our judgments as tentative, "pool our information, our experience, and our thoughts," and test our intellect when we are challenged to justify our judgments. If we remain self-aware and critical of our beliefs, such vigilance acts to a certain extent as a guard against prejudices and partiality. Wolf also clarifies that her endoxic approach should not be

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a person enjoys must also engage entities independent of him or her, and that it is also recognized as objectively valuable. (For the second of these conditions she uses the term "endoxic," based on *endoxa* from Aristotle: commonly accepted by everyone, or at least by the wise.) If someone is an alcoholic who rapturously downs bottles of vodka and has little time or concern for anything else, Wolf considers that a meaningless life. Although he fulfills the condition of "subjective attraction" because he loves what he's doing, his actions lack even a paltry worth that others would recognize.

Wolf also adds a third requirement: a real connection between the subjective and objective conditions. An action cannot be meaningful, she says, if the link between self-enjoyment and objective worth is accidental. If an alcoholic, in his unstable state, happens to utter words of wisdom that deter another person from committing suicide, he only happens to accomplish this result, saving the individual's life only passively, without active intention. If that alcoholic did not utter words of wisdom, the person would not have been deterred from committing suicide. But the simple act of uttering words of

misunderstood to mean readily submitting to the judgment of the majority. She admits that adopting John Stuart Mill's view of "a competent judge" who is "sufficiently rational, perceptive, sensitive, and knowledgeable" doesn't resolve the issue.

Wolf rightly notes that many people would criticize her "endorsement of the idea of non-subjective value," and that many more would be "frustrated or annoyed" by her "reluctance to make substantive judgments." But her argument falters when she claims that a truly valuable and thus meaningful act must always engage beyond one's self. If someone likes to drink coffee, for example, Wolf would regard that as benefiting only one's self and thus not meaningful. Yet really, the network resulting from this taste or passion runs far and wide, all the way to the farmer whose livelihood depends on our purchases and so on, in a sort of infinite causal regression. In this case, Wolf's view marginalizes the connectivity of global markets. From the truck driver who delivers the coffee to your doorstep to the manufacturer that made your container, from its lumber supplier to your waste collection service, a supply chain links manufacturers and consumers,

which aren't obviously consequential for others are therefore too internal, disconnected from anything else? Wolf's analysis and arguments take little account of the complexity of our interactions.

Finally, a few comments on what might in philosophical language be called her "preemptions." Overall, Wolf's acknowledgement of her elitist framing regrettably does little to absolve it of this criticism. Since she has decided to retain her values, and implicitly disbelieves in the wholly objective person, she fails to set up any concrete safeguards against prejudice. Since people are often unaware of their fallacies, just reminding them to mind their fallacies isn't sufficient.

In summary, readers of this useful book are ultimately left disappointed. As with many such works, readers will see pearls of wisdom in it, and may feel a fuzzy warmth in their hearts. But Wolf's account is inadequate in answering the question she aims to solve: the meaning in life, a question that provokes some of our dearest existential crises. Her meta-awareness of her potential bias, and her optimism about the benefit of pondering, are nonetheless laudable. But the main bulk of the argument, regrettably, is overly simplistic.

ENQUIRY

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CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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#WhatIsTheMeaningInLife?