

‘Meaning’ Can’t Mean What Wielenberg Means

“If then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake ... clearly this must be the good and the chief good.”

Aristotle (1094a17-23)

1 Introduction

When contemplating a world without GOD, many (if not most) theists seem to think along these lines: a life is meaningful because GOD created it for a reason; therefore, if there is no GOD, such a life is meaningless. Yet, Erik Wielenberg and Richard Taylor have given reasons on behalf of the atheist to question this understanding of meaning. In short, they have argued that a person can give her own life meaning apart from GOD; a meaningful life has no need for the GOD hypothesis. However, their accounts have important differences. Taylor contentedly argues that a person’s will and idiosyncratic interests are all that matter for meaning (Taylor 148).

Wielenberg, however, seeks to qualify this view.

This essay will focus on Wielenberg’s critique of Taylor’s account in relation to Wielenberg’s own view of meaning. I will argue that Wielenberg’s account – unlike Taylor’s – is incoherent because it implicitly relies upon the very premise which Wielenberg explicitly denies. The premise is this: meaning must accord with certain goods that are external to an agent, thus meaning is not determined by the agent. Taylor straightforwardly rejects this premise, but Wielenberg equivocates. When critiquing Taylor, Wielenberg retreats to this premise. When expounding his own view of meaning, he denies it. I conclude with some implications of my critique.

2 Wielenberg on Internal and External Meaning

In his book, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*, Erik Wielenberg posits three types of meaning: *supernatural*, *external*, and *internal*. However, because his main concern is to show how an atheist may find meaning without GOD, he does not consider supernatural meaning. Thus, it will not feature in my discussion. Instead, at issue for Wielenberg is the distinction between external and internal meaning.

Wielenberg says that for a human life to have *external meaning* is “for it to bring goodness into the universe” (14). A life with external meaning makes the universe better. For a life to have *internal meaning* is “[1] for it to be good for the person who lives it and [2] for it to include activity that is worthwhile.” A life with internal meaning “has a point” (15). The remainder of my essay will consider two questions: What is the point? Where does it come from? To address these questions, it will be important to note that Wielenberg explicitly points out that a life can have external meaning without internal meaning, or it may have internal meaning without external meaning.

Taking Wielenberg on his own terms, I assume it is relatively uncontroversial that a life can have external meaning without internal meaning. Wielenberg uses the example of someone who pursues the happiness of others at the expense of his own. Such a person’s life may not be good for him (condition #1 of internal meaning), but still he engages in activity which brings good to others (condition #2 of internal meaning). Thus, the person’s life has not met both of the conditions for internal meaning. But by fulfilling condition #2, it seems evident that he increases the net good of the universe. Thus, the person’s life has external but not internal meaning.

But can Wielenberg consistently maintain that a life can have internal meaning without external meaning? In the section four of this paper, I argue that Wielenberg cannot consistently

assert this. Positively stated: if a life has Wielenberg's internal meaning, it also has external meaning. To see why this is the case, we must first understand what Wielenberg means by "worthwhile."

3 Wielenberg's 'Worthwhile Activity'

Wielenberg says that a life with internal meaning "has a point." Returning to my questions above: What is the point of an internally meaningful life? For Wielenberg, the point seems to be engagement in worthwhile activity situated in a life that is good for the person who lives it. Who (or what) determines whether an activity is worthwhile? Presumably, Wielenberg doesn't want to say that the answer is *internally subjective*, i.e. purely up to the person whose life is in question; otherwise, he would have specified that an internally meaningful life "must include activity that the person living it regards as worthwhile." In fact, Wielenberg gives strong reasons for thinking he doesn't mean this when he critiques Richard Taylor's essay, "The Meaning of Life."

Before turning to Wielenberg's critique, let us briefly look at Taylor. Taylor unpacks his understanding of internal meaning by using the myth of Sisyphus, who is sentenced by the gods to roll a stone up to the top of the hill, only to watch it roll back down, then to push it back up again...ad infinitum. Taylor believes we all share the intuition that such an existence is meaningless. However, Taylor thinks that our judgment will change if the gods rewire Sisyphus' brain so that he desires and enjoys pushing the stone to the top of the hill. We might then acknowledge the activity is meaningful – but only for Sisyphus. Why? Although the activity remains "objectively"¹ pointless and repetitive, for Sisyphus rewired, the activity now has a point – pleasure. Thus, the activity gains meaning for Sisyphus. Taylor concludes from this example

¹ Taylor's word, not mine. By 'objective,' Taylor probably means "pointless to all parties not engaged in the activity."

“[m]eaninglessness is essentially endless *pointlessness*, and meaningfulness is therefore the opposite” (144, emphasis added). If Taylor is right – and Wielenberg seems to assume that he is – then what is necessary for a life to have meaning is for a life to have a point, even if that point seems “objectively meaningless” (144). Returning to our first question, Taylor would answer: the point of an internally meaningful life is to be alive and live “in the manner that it is [in our] nature to be living.” In Sisyphus rewired, the gods have given him a new nature, namely, deriving pleasure from rolling stones. When Sisyphus engages in this activity, he ‘gets the point,’ so to speak. In answer to my second question, Taylor believes the point of an activity comes “from within us, it is not bestowed from without” (150). Though Sisyphus doesn’t determine his own nature, he does get to determine whether he finds meaning in his activity. In this sense, the meaning is within Sisyphus.

But Wielenberg pushes back against these answers. Wielenberg points to Stephen Darwall’s account of a photo of David Golub, who is “positively grinning” while playing the piano during a performance. Such activity seems to have a point, but not simply because Golub is enjoying it. To see this, Wielenberg juxtaposes this account with that of the grinning excrement-eater, who grins every time he eats excrement. In fact, the excrement-eater’s true passion is to eat excrement. Wielenberg argues that if we accept Taylor’s account, we will be forced to conclude that both lives have internal meaning. In Taylor’s paradigm, both activities have a point that accord with the natures of the agents in question, and both activities are given meaning by their respective agents. But Wielenberg doubts that anyone would choose the life of the excrement-eater over Golub’s, so he concludes that the point of an internally meaningful life is not simply a matter of doing what one wants to do. Rather, one must engage in worthwhile activity. Moreover, it would seem that worthwhile activity is not purely up to the person doing it.

Thus, Wielenberg's critique of Taylor relies upon an understanding of "worthwhile activity" which is determined by someone or something *external* to the agent in question. Note, however, that this understanding does not yet commit Wielenberg to the position that a meaningful life must have *external meaning*, i.e. must make the universe better. Rather, it so far only means that worthwhile activity is not internally subjective, i.e. it is not purely up to the person in question.

There are two ways in which the worthwhileness of an activity might not be internally subjective. First, person p_1 who is external to the life of person p_2 might analyze the meaning of p_2 's life according to p_1 's own subjective standards of worthwhileness. For example, perhaps Jill thinks that raising children is a worthwhile activity, while Jim thinks it is not. (We are assuming there is no fact of the matter about raising children because we are being good subjectivists). So if Jill and Jim evaluate whether the childrearing of a man – give him the indexical m_1 – is worthwhile, they will come to different conclusions. Jill will claim that m_1 's raising of his children is worthwhile; Jim will claim it is not. But this leads to the absurd conclusion that m_1 both does and does not engage in worthwhile activity, and thus his life may be internally meaningful *and* not internally meaningful. Thus, we can reject this way of interpreting Wielenberg.

The second – and more plausible – way in which worthwhile activity is not simply up to the person in question is if that activity accords with some objective fact. For example, let us suppose there is an objective fact of the matter about the worthwhileness of m_1 raising children, or an objective fact of the matter about the reasons why m_1 should judge it worthwhile, given his experience, to raise children. Then by raising children, m_1 engages in worthwhile activity. This

notion of worthwhile activity has intuitive appeal, for it seems evident that by engaging in objectively worthwhile activity and having a good life, m_1 's life has meaning.

Indeed, this second interpretation is what Wielenberg endorses. Using Aristotle, he argues that by engaging in “intrinsically good activities,” one may bring internal meaning to her life. By “intrinsically good activities,” Wielenberg means “activities that are worth doing for their own sake” (31). That is, intrinsically good activities are worthwhile even if they have no consequences. Thus, for Wielenberg, a life has internal meaning if: 1) it is good for the person living it; 2) it includes intrinsically good activity.

4 What Wielenberg Means by ‘Meaning’

Given Wielenberg’s account of internal meaning, we might be tempted to posit the following maxim: all lives with internal meaning also have external meaning. By engaging in intrinsically good activity, m_1 makes the world better than it was before. The reason is simple: before m_1 engaged in intrinsically good activity, the world had some overall level of goodness. Now that m_1 has added some intrinsically good activity to that picture, the world has a higher level of goodness, even if only an infinitesimally small amount of goodness has been added. Thus, a life which includes intrinsically good activity makes the world better, confirming our maxim.

Nevertheless, as I have noted in section 1, Wielenberg rejects this reasoning. He does so by appeal to counterfactuals. He asks us to consider the case of a man – we have indexed him as m_1 – who meets the conditions for internal meaning and engages in activity that “accomplishes some meaningful goal” (15). Wielenberg stipulates that had the man never lived, the same goal would have been accomplished by someone else, call him m_2 . He concludes that the universe is no better off than it would have been if m_1 had never lived. With this argument, Wielenberg

believes he has given us a case where a life is internally meaningful, but not externally meaningful.

But such an appeal to counterfactuals will not do. Firstly, Wielenberg's argument fails to say anything about the meaning of m_1 's life in his actual world, w_1 . Indeed, in possible-world semantics, for Wielenberg to say that the universe "would have been just as good if he had never lived" is for Wielenberg to refer to a *different* world, w_2 , where m_1 does not exist. Instead, a second man, m_2 , makes w_2 just as good as w_1 by engaging in the stipulated intrinsically good activity. Thus, Wielenberg has not shown that it is *not* the case that m_1 's life in w_1 has made w_1 better. That is, Wielenberg can't use a counterfactual to negate the external meaning of m_1 's life without also negating the internal meaning of m_1 's life.

But secondly, supposing Wielenberg means to evaluate m_1 's life from the standpoint of w_2 , there are two ways his argument fails. One, because m_1 does not exist in w_2 , not only does m_1 's life fail to have *external* meaning in w_2 – m_1 's life does not make w_2 better – m_1 's life also fails to have *internal* meaning in w_2 , for m_1 does not engage in worthwhile activity in w_2 . So if we assume that a life does not have external meaning in a possible world, that very assumption commits us to the conclusion that such a life does not have internal meaning in that same possible world. Two, even if, from the perspective of w_2 , we can sensibly acknowledge the internal meaning of m_1 's life in w_1 without acknowledging that his life is externally meaningful in w_2 , this does not commit us to the position that m_1 's life is externally meaningless across all possible worlds. For as I argued above, any participation in intrinsically good activities entails that the universe now has more good than it had before such activity. Thus, if m_1 were to engage in worthwhile activity, he would do something externally meaningful in his own possible world. Indeed, we can generalize and say that in any world, w_n , where m_n 's life meets Wielenberg's

criteria for internal meaning, w_n will be a better world. Moreover, when analyzing across possible worlds (assuming such analysis is possible), it seems the sum total of good across *all* possible worlds will be higher insofar as those possible worlds have more intrinsically good activity taking place. Thus, Wielenberg has failed to show how internal meaning can exist without external meaning.²

It is precisely here that the incoherence of Wielenberg's thought comes to the fore. As I have argued, Wielenberg wants to critique Taylor on external grounds. In doing so, he commits himself to a picture of worthwhile activity that requires intrinsic goods. But this picture entails that those who engage in worthwhile activity make their world better, i.e. their lives have internal meaning only by being externally meaningful. If a life cannot have internal meaning without external meaning, then in a very real sense, external meaning determines what can make a life internally meaningful. So external meaning limits the ways we can find meaning – we cannot eat excrement and have meaningful lives, no matter how much we enjoy it. The upshot for Wielenberg's view is that *if there is no external meaning, there is no internal meaning*. Yet, Wielenberg has been at pains to show that the only meaning that matters is internal meaning. “There is honey all around you; you have but to reach out and lick it. You do not need GOD to give your life internal meaning” (37). Perhaps he is right about GOD. But you do need honey. Without external, intrinsic goods, one cannot find internal meaning.

It might be suggested that my argument does not properly distinguish between something which is ‘good for’ person A and something which is ‘good,’ period. In Wielenberg's terms, this objection relies upon the distinction between non-intrinsically good activities (activities which

² But supposing that Wielenberg wants to reject the semantics of possible world theory, it is unclear what his example proves. In that case, all that we can consider is the actual world, and in that world, our man's life has actual external meaning whenever it has internal meaning.

are good for someone, but not for their own sake) and intrinsically good activities (activities which are good for their own sake). But in this case, my argument still works. In other words, this objection boils down to affirming condition #1 of ‘internal meaning’ while denying condition #2. For example, suppose that listening to music is ‘good for’ A, but not ‘good’ simpliciter. Specifically, suppose the act of listening to pop music is ‘good for’ A in that it makes A feel better, but pop music is not ‘good’ in itself. Thus, it seems possible that lives filled with non-intrinsically good activities do not make the world a better place, though they can be good for the person living it. Wielenberg and Taylor can both agree on this last point. They disagree on how to interpret such activity vis-à-vis meaning. Taylor consistently asserts that such activity makes a life meaningful for person A, because he puts no external constraints on worthwhile activity. But Wielenberg claims that though life may be ‘good for’ A, it is not meaningful. It is not meaningful because it is filled with activities which are not intrinsically good activities. Because it has no intrinsically good activities, it does not make the universe better. Thus, it does not have internal meaning precisely because it does not have external meaning. So insofar as Wielenberg makes intrinsically good activity pivotal for his account of internal meaning, he relies upon external meaning as well.

5 Conclusion

I have argued that Erik Wielenberg has failed to give a coherent picture of internal meaning. Instead, his notion of worthwhile activity and intrinsic goods implicitly relies upon externals which, when partaken in, make the universe better. This idea was illumined by examining his critique of Richard Taylor’s account of internal meaning. While critiquing Taylor’s account, he relies upon intrinsic goods to show that internal meaning is not purely subjective. But in asserting that external meaning is not necessary for internal meaning, Wielenberg equivocates on

his notion of “worthwhile activity.” The upshot of my critique is that if one finds Taylor’s account implausible due to cases like Wielenberg’s grinning excrement-eater, one will need to affirm the importance of external meaning for making a life meaningful.

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