

# Practice of Philosophical Dialogue and the Quest for Meaning: An Indispensable Duo

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*We all have moments where we hear or tell ourselves, "This makes no sense!". But what does it mean for a project, activity, or interest to be meaningful? What are the conditions for the emergence of a significant relationship between a subject and a particular object? Moreover, how can we approach the quest for meaning in a pedagogical context? This article will focus on three different aspects covered by the concept of meaning in normative ethics, which will be closely related to the necessary conditions for a meaningful life according to American philosopher Susan Wolf, and with the cognitive and social skills solicited by the practice of philosophical dialogue. We will argue that not only does this practice greatly contribute to creating the conditions for a life rich in meaning throughout life, but it also constitutes a pedagogical method that respects the autonomy of individuals in addition to valuing the democratic ideal.*

## Introduction

We all have moments where we hear or tell ourselves, "This makes no sense!". But what does it mean for a project, an activity, or an interest to be meaningful? What are the conditions for the emergence of a significant relationship between a subject and a particular object? Moreover, how can the quest for meaning be approached in a pedagogical context? This article will focus on three different aspects that the concept of meaning encompasses in normative ethics. These aspects will be closely related to the necessary conditions for a meaningful life according to American philosopher Susan Wolf<sup>[1]</sup>, as well as to the epistemic and social skills solicited by the practice of philosophical dialogue. We will defend the thesis that this practice not only contributes significantly to creating the conditions for a life rich in meaning throughout life, but also constitutes a pedagogical method that respects the autonomy of individuals and values the democratic ideal.

## 1. The concept of Meaning: Definition, Conditions, Criteria

Susan Wolf's inquiry originates from two classic responses to the question of what brings meaning to life: "Do what you love, find your passion" and "Engage in something larger than oneself." But what do these adages tell us? In investigating the strengths and limitations of these maxims, Wolf neither excludes nor diminishes them, so her thesis reconciles the subjective and objective elements related to the quest for meaning in an inseparable way: "To have a life that not only seems meaningful but is meaningful, the objective aspect is as important as the subjective." (Wolf, 2010, 32-33) Her thesis on the *Fitting Fulfillment View* which could be explained as the integrated approach to meaning<sup>[2]</sup>, thus combines the discovery of personal interest with the realization of activities whose value is independent of oneself, without necessarily being larger than oneself: "(...) meaningfulness in life came from loving something (or a number of things) worthy of love, and being able to engage with it

(or them) in some positive way. As I have put it on other occasions, meaning in life consists in and arises from actively engaging in projects of worth.” (Wolf, 2010, 26) Thus, Wolf integrates the pursuit of what is dear to us and that of doing something that is not centered only on ourselves, often interpreted as "larger than oneself." Contrary to popular belief, she argues that meaning is not simply the satisfaction of a preference, nor something only important, let alone a narrow personal interest. Meaning would rather imply "a value": “*Meaning is what is desirable or worthy of being desired for us and for those we care about*<sup>[3]</sup>.” (Wolf, 2010)

To fully grasp the stakes of this definition, we will discuss different meanings of the word '*meaning*' as outlined by Thaddeus Metz in his book *Meaning of Life* (2014), and we will delve deeper into them using Wolf's hybrid thesis. Metz points out that the concepts generally associated with meaning do not denote properties of it, but rather express what would make meaningful activities or projects have a 'family resemblance'. He selects three elements: *appropriate emotions*, *transcendence*, and *purposiveness*.

## 2. The subjective dimension: The Subject's Affinity Towards the Meaning-Granting Object

Meaning implies a certain type of appropriate *emotional reactions* felt by a person positively and actively engaged in a meaningful activity, such as pride (towards oneself) and admiration (towards others). These emotions connote the relationship of a subject to a particular object of their attention, worthy of value in their eyes. Negatively perceived, the meaning-granting object should be able to distance us from boredom, feelings of uselessness and alienation, and the impression of the futility of our action. Following Metz, Wolf considers the emergence of a certain range of emotions to which she adds self-esteem, a sense of accomplishment, but also the feeling of being excited, enchanted, or even exhilarated by the activity itself, by the "loved" object. For Wolf, what is done for reasons of love is a privileged indicator to "track" what has intrinsic, non-instrumental value for us, and thereby motivates action in favor of this significant relationship with this object, creating the desire to honor, promote, and protect it. While Wolf initially designates this object as the "loved object," we will add the idea of a feeling of responsibility towards it, like The Little Prince with his rose.

Thus, the variety of the mental states prevents reducing meaning to a single specific emotion that would be common to all experiences of meaning. Wolf clarifies that the psychological qualities that are manifest in this type of relationships are neither synonymous, permanent, nor reducible to pleasure. However, they share the commonality of being states or attitudes that are positive and desirable *in themselves*.

Although Wolf excludes clerical activities, we believe that when these activities can be part of a meaningful pursuit, even the smallest, less exhilarating gestures contribute to the quest for meaning and benefit from the attraction towards an end that encompasses them. This is why we suggest an inclusive criterion such as the “agents’ disposition to be touched and motivated” by certain types of

objects, rather than limiting ourselves to a few specific emotions, in order to account for the diversity of subjective states (including those negatively connoted like indignation) associated with meaningful experiences<sup>[4]</sup>.

### 3. Is this condition sufficient?

For subjectivists, the object that elicits meaning is of no importance, and what matters is the state of the subject, or more specifically, the coherence between their first and second-order desires according to Harry Frankfurt. Although attractive, Wolf raises two criticisms against this theory. First, she disagrees with Richard Taylor, who believes that meaning rests solely on the subjectivity of individuals, going so far as to argue that to achieve this state of meaning, an agent could live in illusion. However, no one likes to be fooled or deceived. What does this say about us? Wolf argues against Taylor by claiming Taylor by arguing that the loss of autonomy or the alteration of one's perception constitutes a depletion of the intrinsic need for truth and therefore cannot be desirable. Indeed, either self-deception creates a state that leads to perceiving what does not exist, or it reduces cognitive faculties in such a way that the subject cannot exercise informed judgment on the value of the task they are accomplishing (by comparing it with others, for example). Yet, none of these options is compatible with the self-determination of individuals, a value inherent to democratic societies.

As for Frankfurt, he argues that what really matters is caring about something other than ourselves, no matter what it is<sup>[5]</sup>. But what place does he give to the distinctions that the will itself makes between good and bad reasons for considering anything important? Wolf finds regrettable that nowhere does Frankfurt develop on this point, which is problematic from a normative perspective. Indeed, the tools of critical thinking are necessary to discriminate among the possible options: one can misjudge a commitment, or care too little about another, and in both cases, an informed judgment requires the ability to question and critique oneself, without accepting everything, leaning towards relativism.

Moreover, Wolf argues that the objectivity of values required the transition to a form of intersubjectivity. This is the argument of the *human condition*: because from the universe's point of view, we are an insignificant particle among other particles, considering only our subjective point of view is equivalent to giving ourselves a privileged status<sup>[6]</sup>. Isn't it disproportionate to give importance *only* to our desires when deciding on actions and projects worthy of value? To live is to *live-in-the-world-with-others*, to use an existentialist formulation. Others also try to find meaning in their actions and coherence between different levels of existence, and this is part of my objective situation. Therefore, if our position is part of our objective situation, which includes the other as also bearing meaning, not including them would be to deny this fundamental aspect of the human condition.

## 4. The objective dimension: the value of the object worthy of desire

The notion of meaning also involves kind of *transcendence*, in the sense of surpassing our limits, striving towards something greater than oneself. But which limits are relevant to surpass? Those that are related to something valuable in itself, whether it be oneself or something else. To quote Metz: “The concept of meaning is the idea of relating positively to non-instrumental goods beyond one’s animal self is to say that while merely staying alive or feeling sensations logically cannot make one’s life meaningful, connecting with other internal goods, say, those involving rationality or spirituality, and with all sorts of external goods, can do so.” (Metz, 2014, 30) Wolf also recognizes the necessity of an objective dimension in designating what is desirable and worthy of desire (meaningful). Without defending a substantial thesis where objects have absolute value, she identifies common and universally shared conditions that confer a certain objectivity on them (because they are not closed in on themselves), and which are present in our relationship to a meaningful activity or project. Here are a few.

Wolf identifies what I would call *prominent traits* that appear in the phenomenological sense regarding what gives meaning to people's lives. Importantly: without relying solely on objects worthy of value, these traits are constitutive of *the meaningful relations of agents* (we will come back to this later). First, meaningful projects provide *reasons to live*, to *take an interest in the world*, because they predispose one to feel joy or well-being<sup>[7]</sup>. Second, they are not entirely chosen and emerge in people's lives with significant motivational force. This implies finding something that one can love enough to engage in actively and positively<sup>[8]</sup>. Third, they *can be revised and reevaluated* because our attention (even our love) can be misdirected: faced with new facts new perspective, a person may wonder if the projects they nurture “really” provide them with meaning or if their lives seem only significant. (E.g., a career-oriented person and the evaluation of the costs of their ambition). And fourth, they elicit certain appropriate emotions as presented above.

Then, Wolf identifies fundamental and universal needs that bind us to meaning. First, the *need for meaning*: existential questions arise from a young age and manifest themselves more particularly at different stages of life. But Wolf wonders: *what place do we give to these questions in a calm situation*? It goes without saying that the practice of philosophical dialogue proves to be a fruitful tool for everyone to value this questioning and develop the tools to respond to it to the best of their abilities and those of the people participating in the discussion<sup>[9]</sup>.

Then, there is the *need for truth*, mentioned in criticism of subjectivism. Wolf finds regrettable the acceptance of a fictitious meaning at the expense of the development of our cognitive faculties: the capacity to judge is part of our human nature. Because we naturally make value judgments stipulating that certain things are better or worse than others, intersubjective dialogue proves to be the preferred way to determine which objects are, to various degrees, worthy of value. Our social interactions constitute a primary source of acquiring and modifying our belief systems. Among the constructive experiences of our knowledge, collaborating with others towards a common goal allows the creation of a privileged space to question our assumptions and, if necessary, replace false or

dubious beliefs, or to become aware of our cognitive biases (Bouvier, 2007). Clarifying our ideas and validating our adherence to some over others thus involves cognitive processes greatly facilitated by the pooling of perspectives and experiences. This is why philosophical dialogues not only allow us to think together, but also to think *better* together<sup>[10]</sup>.

We might be inclined to think that *the need for self-esteem* requires only a recognition of one's personal value. But this would ignore the fact that we are not indifferent to others considering our action as having value. But what does this tell us? That our projects and commitments can have value for us, *but not only, and that this is important*. When others view our action positively or negatively (without being totally subject to the latter, which would then be totalizing) or question the foundation of the judgment supporting it, they question the value of my judgment. Therefore, the transition from subjectivity to intersubjectivity can be a path to a form of objectivity by considering various points of view (which presupposes the pluralism of viewpoints), and the philosophical facilitator can contribute significantly by rekindling dialogue through thought experiments, seeking alternative viewpoints, exploring different angles or contexts, etc.

Another indispensable need linked to the quest for meaning is the *need for socialization*. Here is how the argument unfolds: If we do not consider ourselves the center of the world (we recognize being *one* among *others*) and if we evaluate things more worthy of value than others (which we do constantly and naturally), then we can conceive the objective value of actions as what can emerge within our social relationships. Certainly, it is not enough to be 10, 100, or 100,000 people for an unquestionable value to emerge from the group. However, we will emphasize that Wolf categorically excludes the idea that a single person can claim to be the sole holder of the objective value of an action, in coherence with social epistemology in the attainment of knowledge and appropriate judgments. Are we irrational if we ignore this reality? Not necessarily, says Wolf. However, to deny this fact is to deny or even flout our interest in truth.

## 5. Is this condition sufficient?

Although necessary, Wolf argues that it is illusory to place meaning in exclusively objective criteria without taking into account the affinity that people may (or may not) have towards the object of their commitment. The argument would unfold as follows: Since there is a variety of projects, commitments, or interests worthy of value, and the same objects do not produce the same degree of attachment for everyone, then it would be inappropriate to impose the same meaningful objects on everyone.

Another argument is to question whether it would be reasonable to support self-sacrifice for the fulfillment of a third person or for an external cause because these would have an absolute objective value. Although there are cases that exhibit such sacrifices, we can legitimately wonder if they are consistent with the intrinsic value of each individual and the respect for their dignity. Would the price of the meaning of one's own existence and the value we accord it not be too high? In this line of thought, even Thaddeus Metz, who believes there are specific objective criteria such as beauty, truth,

and goodness, nonetheless maintains that one cannot completely withdraw from respecting minimal subjective conditions: “With respect to at least some objective goods, such as excellence, more meaning can come from exhibiting them oneself, rather than from enabling others to exhibit them, even somewhat more of them.” (Metz, 2014, 196)

## 6. Added is the value of the relationship itself

Even though it is difficult to dissociate the three acceptations of meaning, the strength of the *subjective and motivational* impetus (“*purposiveness*”) seems to be at the heart of what binds us (through appropriate emotions) to this meaningful object (transcendence). This aspect refers to being vigorously moved towards a goal, an end, or a project with intrinsic value. It alone integrates the dual meaning of the concept, that is, sense as direction and sense as significance.

Considering that the two essential and inseparable conditions of the subject's *affinity* for an object worthy of value and *the objective value of the object* can be subject to the whims of popularity and accepted standards, Wolf proposes a third criterion: *the value of the relationship itself*. This must inherently contain the possibility of creating or giving rise to experiences of value<sup>[11]</sup>.

Moreover, Wolf states that meaning comes more from sustained commitments and lasting relationships resulting from these privileged attachments than from the project itself that arises from them: “(...) value that lie not in the object considered in itself, but in the lover of the object or the relationship between them.” (Wolf, 2002a, 9) This term is reminiscent of the concept of flow developed by positive psychology. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt<sup>[12]</sup>, influenced by empirical studies on the optimal experience (*flow*) of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, identifies meaning with the triggering element that can lead to a lasting commitment, which in turn fosters the acquisition of enriching relationships that bind the person to themselves and to others. Contrary to some spiritualist conceptions such as Buddhism, Haidt asserts that, like happiness and vital engagement, meaning does not come solely from within oneself nor even from the simple combination of internal and external factors: “Vital engagement (flow) is not found in a person or in the environment, it comes from the relationship that exists *between* the two. (...) The network of meaning expands and becomes progressively denser.” (Haidt, 258) That's why he adds the concept of coherence when talking about meaning<sup>[13]</sup>: “*People feel a sense of meaning when they find coherence across the three levels of existence*”<sup>[14]</sup>. This combination of inter-level states (physical, psychological, and socio-cultural) is even crucial, according to him, for finding an answer to the question of meaning in life: “We are physical objects (bodies and brains) from which minds emerge; from these minds, societies and cultures emerge. To achieve a complete understanding of ourselves, we must study all three levels.” (Haidt, 260)<sup>[15]</sup>



## 7. The Quest for Meaning and the Practice of Philosophical Dialogue

According to Wolf, what gives meaning to life admits a gradation and is therefore not a matter of all or nothing: “One’s life is meaningful in proportion to the degree to which one can see oneself as bound up with things, people, activities or projects of worth in a deep and positive way.” (Wolf, 1997a, 304). As it is not a matter of all or nothing, the nature of the activities matters little, even if some have greater potential. That is why Wolf’s demarcation of the fields of activities or interests specific to meaning will lead to a generous interpretation: indeed, each person must be willing to perceive whether their actions are meaningful *for them, but not only for them*. Therefore, it is important for everyone to be able to orient their “perception” (a term used by Wolf) towards objects worthy of desire, particularly by evaluating the value of options with others. That is why she will repeatedly emphasize the need to discuss the value of our actions, projects, and interests, and thus verify our intuitions and presuppositions. The basic idea is simple: it is easier to avoid errors when we test our hypotheses with others or when evaluating the right means for the intended ends, and this is precisely one of the functions of philosophical dialogues.

## 8. The Importance of the Agents’ Epistemic Skills

Considering that what grounds meaning is partly dependent on the intrinsic value of the object for the person who actively and positively engages in a worthwhile project, how could one possibly impose it from the outside? If we add to this our interest in truth, then we have every reason to develop our discernment. But discern what? What is worthy of value. How? That is the question! Again, do we not risk falling into cultural imperialism, dogmatism, and being subject to other irrelevant cognitive biases when we discriminate? And, additionally, in the field of education: how do we guide students in this quest without being paternalistic or falling into ideology? Wolf insists that there is no legitimate authority to dictate to anyone what should be meaningful for that person: “I believe that the question of what projects and activities are objectively worthwhile is open to anyone and everyone to ask and try to answer, and we are likely to make the most progress toward an answer if we pool our information and experience.” (Wolf, 2010, 124)<sup>[16]</sup> Therefore, her non-substantive doctrine requires valuing the development of rational, epistemic, and dialogic skills of agents, which has the collateral benefit of promoting civic and democratic competencies:

*Our initial pretheoretical or intuitive judgments about what is valuable and what is a waste of time are formed in childhood, as a variety of lessons, experiences, and other cultural influences. Being challenged to justify our judgements, being exposed to different ones, broadening our range of experience, and learning about other cultures and ways of life will lead us to revise, and, if all goes well, improve our judgements. (Wolf, 2010, 40)*

This seems perfectly consistent with the growing interest in Quebec, Europe, and elsewhere in the world in teaching and practicing philosophy for children. The American approach developed by Mathiew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp, Michel Tozzi’s DVDP, and other practices with their

respective interests<sup>[17]</sup> propose an inclusive practice of philosophical dialogue where 'research communities' tend to develop concrete thinking skills such as the formulation of hypotheses, arguments to justify our ideas, their evaluation, the search for criteria, self-correction, and social skills such as listening and co-construction, allowing a shift in perspective and a form of objectivity<sup>[18]</sup>. This practice thus meets a need for expression and affirmation, while nourishing self-esteem through a welcoming attitude from peers, enabling children to move from a muddled gathering of opinions to the creation of reasoning:

*A philosophical discussion should not merely promote the emergence of opinions. It should also promote reasoning. It must enable the discovery of the meaning of what is being said. To do this, a philosophical methodology is necessary. This aims to research what is under discussion, what is implied, the coherence of discourse, definitions, presuppositions, sophisms, reasons, the ways in which knowledge is approached, and finally alternatives. (Sasseville, 2009, 119)*

The educational project implicit in Wolf's thesis on the conditions of a meaningful life merits attention to these innovative pedagogical practices, especially with the social polarization and issues of radicalization leading to violence that we are experiencing. We believe that a regular practice of the philosophical stance constitutes an important bulwark that would protect against external manipulation as much as possible, while allowing everyone to perceive and evaluate what gives meaning in everyone's life, including their own.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, "If there is nothing we love or if what we love is worthless, then our life lacks meaning. However, all other things being equal, it is better to have a meaningful life than one devoid of meaning." (Wolf, 2002a, 11) However, this feeling must not come at the expense of one's cognitive qualities and thus respect our fundamental interest in truth. Even if at first glance, the majority of people care about things that are truly important and do so at an appropriate level, it is fundamental to equip oneself with critical thinking, as it is necessary to discriminate among possible options.

Since we are fallible and change over time, this process will be endless, but it must be done with respect for our faculty of judgment, hence the necessity of establishing appropriate criteria for evaluating actions worthy of value and acquiring the philosophical skills to distinguish them. Consequently, the practice of philosophical dialogue constitutes a wise basis for building an educational project that promotes the quest for meaning, the autonomy of individuals, and the pursuit of the democratic ideal.

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## Notes

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1. For more details on each of the conditions, see: <https://papyrus.bib.umontreal.ca/xmlui/handle/1866/20223> ↩
2. Free translation by the author. ↩
3. Idem. ↩
4. On this particular point, see Nicole Note (2014). ↩
5. On a related note, the title of his famous book is *The importance of what we care about* (1982). ↩
6. For a summary of Thomas Nagel's approach and his “view from nowhere”, see *Qu'est-ce que tout cela veut dire ?*, Éditions L'Éclat, 1993, p.113-120. ↩
7. To be linked with the “flow” in positive psychology and the hierarchy of goals. ↩
8. This can be a real challenge for many people, especially with the “social acceleration” which is abundantly discussed in this issue of *Raison Publique* on philosophy with children: <https://raison-publique.fr/3068/> ↩
9. For a detailed directory of these thought tools: Mathieu Gagnon and Sébastien Yergeau (2017) and Michel Sasseville and Mathieu Gagnon (2020). ↩
10. The connections between these philosophical practices and the prevention of violence and radicalization could be the subject of further development. To mention just a few resources: <https://sherpa-recherche.com/sherpa/equipes-recherche/raps/>, <https://philoenfant.org/tag/dialogue-et-radicalisation/>, <https://philojeunes.org/a-propos>. ↩
11. In asking what it would be best or «most suitable» for a person to care about or love, we are apt to take into account at least three sorts of consideration: whether (and how much) the object in question is itself worth caring about, whether (and how much) the person has an affinity for the object in question, and whether (and how much) the relation between the person and the object has the potential to create or bring forth experiences, acts, or objects of further values. (Wolf, 2002a, 9) ↩
12. See also J. Haidt, 2006/2010, chap.10 “Le bonheur vient de la relation”, p.245-275. In English, this chapter is titled “Meaning comes from between”. ↩

13. We believe this concept should be an additional characteristic of meaning in life, complementing transcendence, appropriate emotions, and purposiveness. Distinct from the terms proposed, the characteristic emotion of coherence is a state of harmony. ↩
14. In italics in the text. ↩
15. Haidt mentions that unbeknown to us, our knowledge has become anchored within us alongside hundreds or even thousands of physical sensations. These embodied sensations often take root in rituals which, by virtue of our beliefs, adaptation, and history, seemed consistent with ourselves: “These sensations have extended your psychological understanding to a physical embodiment, and when the visceral and conceptual levels are linked, you *feel* that the ritual is right.” (Haidt, 262) Conversely, if the activity or ritual seems “meaningless” to us, no identification will occur. ↩
16. In the same vein, John Koethe emphasizes in his commentary on Wolf that for epistemic and phenomenological reasons, there is an objective inability to put oneself in someone else's place and therefore to judge the significance of an action for another person. At the same time, one cannot rule out the risks of madness or self-deception (See Wolf, 2010, 72). ↩
17. For instance, see “PhiloCité”, *Philosopher par le dialogue : quatre méthodes*, Paris, Vrin, 2021 ↩
18. For a detailed directory of these thought tools: Mathieu Gagnon and Sébastien Yergeau (2017) and Michel Sasseville and Mathieu Gagnon (2020). ↩