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Marissa Silverman

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A Conception of “Meaningfulness” in/for Life and Music Education

Marissa Silverman

John J. Cali School of Music, Montclair State University



Philosophers have an infuriating habit of analysing questions rather than answering them, and this is how I want to begin. Is “What is the meaning of life?” a genuine question, or does it just look like one?... “What is the meaning of life?” looks at first glance like the same kind of question as “What is the capital of Albania?”, or “What is the colour of ivory?” But is it really? Could it be more like “What is the taste of geometry?” (Terry Eagleton 2007, *The Meaning of Life*)

“Meaning” fascinates me. This is partly because the question “What is the meaning of ‘meaning’?” is conceptually challenging, but also because a reasonable answer would be enormously helpful to me in my pursuit of “a good” personal and professional life. So, in probing “meaning,” I’m not only engaging in philosophical reflection for the enjoyment of the process itself, but for pragmatic reasons. I believe a conceptual examination of meaning and meaningfulness has the potential to deepen my personal and professional understanding of myself and others, as well as providing insights into why people find music so personally and socially meaningful, and how we can improve the processes of educating people through and in music.

Before I begin my discussion, I wish to acknowledge Susan Wolf’s examinations (1982, 2010) of meaningfulness, which have been especially helpful in preparing this article.

Meaning and Life

What is the meaning of life? This question holds a central place in Western philosophy past and present. While it’s not always framed so simply, it appears and reappears in the writings of various philosophers, all of whom ask and answer this question from numerous perspectives, including human functioning and flourishing (e.g., Aristotle), moral “goodness” (e.g., Kant 1785), virtue and self-fulfillment (e.g., St. Augustine [AD 397—AD 398] 1981 and St. Thomas Aquinas [1225?] 1951), and pleasure and happiness (e.g., Jeremy Bentham 1789 and John Stuart Mill 1863). Interestingly, Wolf distinguishes meaningfulness from happiness. She argues that

while happiness may be an outcome of pursuing a meaningful life, happiness is neither an indicator of nor a sufficient condition for meaningfulness. I'll examine connections between meaningfulness and happiness later in this paper.

In contrast to the philosophers named above, Wolf (2010) points out that some scholars dismiss examinations of meaningfulness altogether because, to them, it's not a legitimate philosophical topic and/or because they believe "meaningfulness" is more appropriate in the contexts of theology and therapy, or in relation to people who are dissatisfied with their lives but "unable to pin down why" (7).

From a philosophical perspective, however, it could be argued that meaningfulness is either too intangible or too challenging for the methodologies that some philosophers choose to apply to difficult concepts. Indeed, as Bernard Williams (2012/1993) points out, philosophers should expect issues of moral philosophy to be especially challenging because when we investigate concepts in this realm we risk "revealing the limitations and inadequacies" of our own perceptions, not to mention "misleading people about matters of importance" (xvii). Either way, philosophers can easily forfeit readers' confidence in philosophical reasoning and philosophers' ability "to write about anything of importance" (xvii).

Williams (1983) points to an additional issue when he argues that the problem with concepts like meaning and meaningfulness is that "some people have a bit of ready-made philosophical theory, and they whiz in, a bit like hospital auxiliary personnel who aren't actually doctors" (48).

John Cottingham (2010) highlights a broader problem facing examinations of meaningfulness:

[W]hen I was an undergraduate, we were told that philosophy doesn't deal with such questions. One of the exciting things about philosophy today is that it has become a much broader and richer subject than it was when I was a student, and the traditional grand questions are now back on the agenda. (201)

Indeed, as Thaddeus Metz (2007) notes, many analytic philosophers now acknowledge that "the meaning of life" ought to be counted as a distinct field of philosophical investigation.

In my view, philosophical considerations of why and how some people manage to build meaningful lives, or seek ways of doing so, are central to being human and integral to who we

are and who we wish to become. One difficulty, of course, is that many people get bogged down in the toils of life, distracted by all sorts of busy-ness, so “why-issues” are neglected or ignored completely. Periodically, though, our lives are “disrupted” by profound moments, by highpoints and lowpoints: the death of a loved one; the birth of a child; the overwhelming challenges of a new job; a marital crisis; a moving celebration (e.g., a birthday or anniversary). Sometimes, these “interruptions” cause us to stop and think about the “whys” of life.

Another difficulty is that while Socrates argued that the unexamined life is not worth living, Wolf points out that some people live very meaningful lives without giving much thought to the concept of meaning. Still, and unfortunately, there are those whose lives have very little meaning and who have little hope of improving their situations due to their daily burdens, which erase hopes of considering and working toward the achievement of meaning for themselves and others in their lives.

In terms of education, it is especially important for teachers to engage in considerations of meaning and meaningfulness and to consider what promotes meaning in one’s own life and the lives of one’s students. If we do, we might increase our awareness of people’s interest in “getting and sustaining meaning in their lives” (Wolf 2010, 61) and whether or how active music making and listening may contribute to deepening the meaningfulness of their lives.

Even if the concepts of meaningfulness we develop are incomplete, as they likely will be, the act of facing squarely the meaning of “meaning” and its role(s) in our lives may bring us closer to reasonable insights, and, perhaps, develop our dispositions to continue the search. More emphatically, omitting to consider what makes life, music, and music education meaningful will surely limit music educators’ perceptions of the nature and values of our work.

Beginning and Proceeding Toward Meaning

I will not attempt to answer the question, What is the meaning of life? Instead, following Wolf, I will consider the question, What is meaning *in* life?

Philosophers who emphasize the centrality of meaning in human life usually do so in relation to what “a good life” actually means or amounts to. But because philosophers offer so many interpretations and ways of unpacking “a good life” (e.g., Klemke and Cahn 2007) I will

not do so here. Rather, as Wolf advises, we need to consider the roles played by personal subjectivity and personal achievement. She begins with subjectivity:

When thinking about one's own life, for example, a person's worry or complaint that his life lacks meaning is apt to be an expression of dissatisfaction with the subjective quality of that life. Some subjective good is felt to be missing. One's life feels empty. One longs to find something to do that will fill this gap and make one feel, as it were, fulfilled. (11)

Wolf then asks us to engage in a brief exercise. She asks us to consider people past and present whom we believe have led meaningful lives. What are your personal choices? Wolf suggests Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Einstein, and Cezanne. In my own case, I would add my parents, Miss Carol Lounsberry (my elementary school music teacher, who I still write to twice a month), and Paula Robison, and extraordinary flautist I have always turned to as an exceptional model of personhood and musical virtuosity.

What connects the choices you, Wolf, and I have made? Upon reflection, the connection does not seem to lie in the subjective quality of these people's lives, but rather in the "value. . . we take people's activities to have" (11). In other words, we do not evaluate these people's lives as meaningful according to their own subjective opinions of their lives. How could we know what they feel about themselves? Instead, it's more likely that we view these people's lives as meaningful because of *what they do or have done*, regardless of their own self-assessments. Because of this, Wolf distinguishes between the two key questions: "What is the meaning of life" and "*Whether my life has meaning.*" This goes to the heart of the concept of meaningfulness.

Wolf discusses the nature of meaningfulness by comparing and contrasting two viewpoints: the Fulfillment View and the Larger-than-oneself View. The first view suggests that meaning is found in that which a person finds fulfilling. The second view explains that meaning is found in being dedicated to something or someone larger than or apart from oneself. Both viewpoints are essential in developing an understanding of what seems to motivate how people decide to do the things they do and why they make those decisions.

According to Wolf (2010), philosophers tend to categorize human motivation in one of two ways: egoistic and self-interested or altruistic and moral. However, says Wolf, "these models of motivation and practical reason . . . leave out many of the motives and reasons that shape our

lives” (2). For example, is it likely that we experience motivations that do not fall neatly into one of these categories?

Yes. Egoism and altruism are not as distinct or oppositional as we may be tempted to think. This dualism stems mistakenly from the implicit assumption that one’s “project of becoming” always begins with the self (that is, with character building) and then expands outward. I am not suggesting that we should omit to consider “character building.” But sometimes the reasons we do things do not stem from character but from some other motivation. For example, perhaps we should consider a perspective advanced by Pettersen (2011): “With an alternative moral ontology, where the starting point is human connectedness and interdependency as it is in an ethics of care, the welfare and growth of one individual is seen as intertwined with the flourishing of others” (5). Indeed, as Pettersen (2011) suggests, from a “care perspective” both “self-sacrifice” (or altruism) and “selfishness” (or egoism) are exaggerations. Pettersen argues for “mature care” (a term coined by Carol Gilligan in 1982): “Mature care seems to highlight the relational aspect of the persons involved in the caring relationships of which each of them partakes” (11). And it’s within this sense of self-and-other that we begin to grasp the nature of “meaningfulness.”

Suffice it to say now that the reasons and motives that challenge the simplistic dualism of egoism versus altruism, including the reasons and motives above, are among the most important we experience in our daily lives, and they’re among the most important motives that affect our decisions and feelings about the actions we engage in to achieve personal meaning.

Before elaborating on the theme of self-and-other, it’s important to make a distinction between meaningfulness and happiness.

Meaningfulness and Happiness

According to Wolf, meaningfulness is not synonymous with “happiness,” eudaimonia (in the multilayered sense of “human flourishing” advanced by Aristotle), or virtue, even though happiness, flourishing, and virtue may result from one’s sense of meaningfulness. From an alternative perspective, some traditional philosophers argue that meaningfulness results from a personal sense of happiness or an impersonal sense of duty. Wolf criticizes both viewpoints by

arguing for a third kind of value (which is built on the works of Bernard Williams and Charles Taylor) that shifts our understandings of happiness and morality.

Williams (1981) suggests that meaningfulness involves an attachment to something that permeates our existence and gives us a reason to live. He writes that a person often develops or has, for all or part of his or her life, “a ground project or set of projects which are closely related to his life” (12). Indeed, Williams (2011) writes that an activity “has to appeal to” a person “in terms of something about himself, how and what he will be if he is a person with that sort of character” who engages in specific actions (36). A person must desire or have a desire to pursue activities or projects that share certain things in common. In other words, who we are and what we do are bound together existentially, and desire is a key component in developing a life of meaning. Without desire, says Williams, it’s difficult to understand why one would choose to engage in this or that activity as something that might or might not count as important, let alone meaningful.

To illustrate, Williams discusses the life of Elina Makropulos. Elina is the subject of a play by Karel Capek, which Janacek turned into an opera. In the play and opera, Elina takes an elixir that changes her from a 42 year-old woman to woman of 342 with the same personal identity of her 42 year-old self. Not surprisingly, says Williams (1973), Elina’s extended life reaches “a state of boredom, indifference and coldness. Everything is joyless: ‘in the end it is the same’ . . . She refuses to take the elixir again; she dies; and the formula is deliberately destroyed” (82). Among other considerations, including the issues of immortality, death, and life, Williams advances the thesis that desire gives us our bearings; our lives, says Williams, can only be meaningful if we are propelled into the future by desire. From this perspective, desire is an inner force that orients and drives us toward engaging in that which is meaningful or important.

Wolf does not mention Charles Taylor, though his work is important in her reflections. Taylor (1989) believes that in order for something to possess or someone to achieve “meaning,” the meaning needs to exist outside one’s own subjective perspective—the meaning needs to possess objective value. Taylor (1985) begins to explain:

[O]ur self-understanding essentially incorporates our seeing ourselves against a background of what I have called ‘strong evaluations’. I mean by that a background of distinctions between things which are recognized as of categoric or unconditioned or higher importance or worth, and things which lack this or are lesser value. (3)

Taylor invokes his “best account” principle to argue that our “qualitative distinctions” are the foundations of “meaningfulness,” as we assess them via objective means. He argues that there are certain “ends or goods” that are not simply desirable, but which contain a greater desirability for each individual due to their “special status” against a background of distinctions each of us makes, consciously or unconsciously (1989, 20). Taylor adds that the Aristotelian question of “what is it good to be” does not address some of the most meaningful dimensions of our lives because we need to find a proper balance between Aristotelian ethics—“what is it good to be?”—and duty—“what is right to do?” It’s in this balance that we find a space to pursue a meaningful life.

Although I have only sketched selected aspects of the work of Williams and Taylor, these sketches provide a springboard for an examination of another aspect of Wolf’s concept of meaningfulness.

Love

Wolf (2010) maintains that meaningfulness may arise from loving people, objects, and/or activities that are worthy of love. “The most obvious examples of what I have in mind occur when we act out of love for individuals about whom we deeply and especially care” (4). She refers to instances of visiting her brother in the hospital, helping a friend move from one house to another, and staying up all night sewing her daughter’s Halloween costume. In each case, she does not act for egoistic reasons, nor for moral ones. Neither is she duty-bound to do them, or foolishly thinking she’s improving the world. “I act neither out of self-interest nor out of duty or any other sort of impersonal or impartial reason. Rather, I act out of love” (4).

Again, Wolf does not limit love to doing things for people. “Reasons of love” (Wolf uses Harry Frankfurt’s words) move us to engage in all sorts of activities and interests that we are dedicated to and passionate about.

In saying this, Wolf is not saying that we should necessarily eliminate enjoyable or moral pursuits. The question is whether or not an enjoyable activity is likely to provide the foundation for a continuously meaningful life. For example, while some people enjoy playing Tetris on their hand-held devices for many hours at a time, we could argue that it’s unlikely that anyone could

create a meaningful life around constant Tetris-playing. And what about morality? Wolf (2010) argues that

[f]ew people are likely to get meaning in their lives from the abstract project of ‘being moral’—a passion for morality would be a peculiar and puzzling thing—many if not most people get meaning from more specific projects and relationships that morality should applaud: from being good and doing good in their roles as parent, daughter, lover, friend, and from furthering or trying to further social and political goals. (61)

In other words, if we pay more attention to meaningfulness than morality, people might lead more rewarding lives. For, as Wolf states, when acting from projects of love, rather than out of a sense of duty or obedience, we can reach a space of meaningfulness (61-62).

On a personal level, many activities in my life—being an active professional flautist in New York City, building and maintaining a website for a dear, old friend, corresponding regularly with my seventy-year old elementary music teacher, playing golf with my husband—take more time and attention than I can manage easily in the context of my university teaching duties, my overall well-being, and my need for my own “private time.”

For example, when I am called to perform a premiere of a difficult piece of “new music,” I spend far too much time practicing-to-perfection than I need to do. I always “over prepare.” Something similar happens when I try too hard to “perform” well (and “fail”) during a game of golf with my husband, or when I plant and weed the flowers on the balcony of my apartment (even though I’m afraid of heights). Just as Wolf spent hours making her daughter’s Halloween costume, what motives me to practice, garden, and tag along with my golfing husband are the values that lie *outside* myself. As Wolf argues, what draws me to practice, or spend lots of time tweaking my friend’s website (even though many aspects of doing so are annoying because I have to read pages upon pages of *Wordpress for dummies*) is love. It’s not for my own sake that I engage in these pursuits. I do not know or care whether these activities are “good for me.” You might be tempted to say I practice for “music’s sake.” But this is pretentious because even though it sounds lovely, “doing something for its own sake” hides many illogical and unwarranted assumptions, as Noël Carroll (2010, 86) makes clear. Instead, I am motivated by “reasons of love” and because these activities are worthy of love for and by others.

It follows from the above that there are subjective, intersubjective, and objective dimensions to the concept of meaningful actions and activities. Subjective, intersubjective, and

objective elements are fused together when the “subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness” (Wolf 2010, 9). Additionally, says Wolf, one cannot passively recognize an object’s (or activity’s) value in order for it to possess and bring forward meaningfulness. One has to actively engage with the worthy object (or activity) in order to bring about meaningfulness. What Wolf is challenging is the commonplace notion that “[i]t doesn’t matter what you do as long as you love doing it.” This way of thinking, doing, and living is good as far as it goes, but it doesn’t go far enough. Wolf also finds fault with the idea that one must be committed to something “larger than oneself.” This idea is problematic because we can be engaged in an activity that is beneficial to others, but we may not be fulfilled: “If one’s involvement brings no such reward, . . . it is unclear that it contributes to meaning in one’s life at all” (22). In other words, both of the aforementioned views are problematic because each one is missing essential qualities.

The first view, the Fulfillment View, for Wolf, is a form of hedonism. She questions the point of pursuing one’s passions simply to obtain and maintain feelings of fulfillment, because doing so would mean that it simply doesn’t matter what objects or activities people pursued in an attempt to fulfill their lives. Think of all the trivial objects and activities that often keep people “busy,” occupied, or “entertained,” but fail to yield a sense of real meaningfulness. For Wolf, such objects and activities are subjectively fulfilling to a degree, but something is missing. That missing “link” lies in the second idea stated above.

What the Fulfillment View lacks, says Wolf, is the understanding that in obtaining meaningfulness, somebody has to be involved with something or someone that has value *independent of and outside of oneself*. This “objective” factor should align with the subjective and intersubjective so that the fusion of all three becomes what I call (following from Wolf’s original premise), the Tripartite View or the Fitting Fulfillment View, which states that meaningfulness arises when people find fulfillment and can connect positively with something beyond themselves. Wolf emphasizes that it is not enough that one is busy doing things that one loves, but that these acts must be good in some independent way.

One might wonder: What it is that has objective value? How do we decide? Wolf doesn’t provide a theory of objective value; instead, she presents a phenomenology of objective value.

She argues that we can distinguish objective values by asking the following: what has value, not just for the subject, but also for other people, and for which the standard of judgment exists outside the subject?

Then when is one's life considered meaningful? It's when the self and other consider it as such:

Essentially the idea is that a person's life can be meaningful only if she cares fairly deeply about some thing or things, only if she is gripped, excited, interested, engaged or. . . if she loves something. Even a person who is so engaged, however, will not live a meaningful life if the objects or activities with which she is so occupied are worthless. (9).

Furthermore, "what gives meaning to our lives gives us reasons to live, even when we do not care much, for our own sake, whether we live or die" (56). As Camus (1955) points out:

I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living (what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying). (4)

To help us understand her argument more deeply, Wolf refers to Richard Taylor's discussion of Sisyphus. Consider Taylor's (1970) account of the Greek myth:

A perfect image of meaninglessness. . . Sisyphus. . . betrayed divine secrets to mortals, and for this he was condemned by the gods to roll a stone to the top of a hill, the stone then immediately to roll back down, again to be pushed to the top by Sisyphus, to roll down once more, and so on again and again forever. (320)

As Taylor points out, this life lacks meaning. Indeed, most of human activity, according to Taylor, lacks meaning for what we do today, what we did, more or less, yesterday, and what we will do, more or less, tomorrow. So, argues Taylor, if life has meaning, the meaning lies elsewhere and not in the actions themselves. In other words, this way of understanding yields no teleological value. Hence, Taylor asks us to imagine that the Gods were merciful and gave Sisyphus the desire to do what he was "destined" to do (even though he was punished). This desire, says Taylor, would have given Sisyphus's life meaning. In other words, this sense of fulfillment would have made his life seem valuable.

Wolf does not agree with Taylor on the latter point because who would find meaning in the pointlessness of this activity?

In light of this, many will feel that Sisyphus's situation remains far from enviable. Something desirable seems missing from his life despite his experience of fulfillment.

Since what is missing is not a subjective matter – from the inside, we may assume that Sisyphus’s life is as good as can be – we must look for an objective feature that characterizes what is lacking. (Wolf 2010, 18)

To use an example that is based in the here and now, I learned how to play golf. When I was younger, I couldn’t understand why anyone in her right mind would play this game. Why hit a ball, follow it in a motorized cart, only to hit the same ball again, get back in the cart to follow the ball some more? And worse still, people often pay a great deal of money to do this. It seemed very pointless to me. However, after my husband taught me how to play, I began to spend more and more hours either on the golf course or at the practice-range hitting golf balls into all sorts of unwanted directions, cursing at a small ball as it veered into the unknown. Or even worse, swinging my club with fierce levels of determination, but missing the ball completely.

I did not learn to play golf because I particularly enjoy golf (because I do not), so it was not out of self-interest that I learned to play and did my best; and I did not learn to play golf because it made golf a better game for me or for the game itself; and I did not play because I felt a moral duty, as a married woman, to “serve” my husband. I learned how to play golf because of my relationship with my husband and the fact that he taught me how to play. Having a loving relationship with my husband, playing golf with him, and, when I actually manage to hit the ball where I want it to go—all of these things, in combination, give one important dimension of meaning to my life.

Another example is writing this paper. I’ve written many drafts of this paper. And, doing so has been extremely difficult at times. It has even made me feel uneasy when I paused to imagine possible criticisms and objections readers would have to the ideas herein. I even lost sleep over this paper as I considered and reconsidered the arguments and points I wanted to make. However, it’s not a very long paper, and those who read it may read it quickly. So, will readers really know or care about how many multiple drafts I have made? Would the MayDay Group (or the music education profession) be better off if my paper had achieved tighter logic or more elegant writing? But I’ve worked hard on this paper to express the ideas as well as I can. I’ve done so because I have an attachment to the MayDay Group and to music education, to doing “good work,” and to the values of critically reasoned arguments.

In the above examples, there are subjective, intersubjective, and objective values, unlike the case of Taylor's Sisyphus. Notably, Wolf does not offer a set of criteria that helps us discern objective values. Instead, she starts from a communal sense of intuitions concerning what is or isn't valuable and the "value" of whether something is or isn't considered "worthy." She (2010) writes:

There must be some objective condition on the kinds of projects or passions that could form the basis of a meaningful life. . . some projects, such as rolling a stone uselessly up a hill, making handwritten copies of *War and Peace*, solving Sudoku puzzles, or caring for one's pet goldfish. . . By noting what is lacking from such projects, we can form hypotheses about what make an activity more fitting as a grounding for meaning . . . it may not be right to say of the woman whose life revolves around her pet goldfish, or of the man who painstakingly copies *War and Peace* by hand, that their activities have *no* value independent of their own psychologies. Perhaps life and comfort of a goldfish is worth *something* independently, as is an extra copy of a literary masterpiece, easily available in libraries and bookstores though it may be. Even so the corresponding endeavors do not seem valuable *enough* to merit the kind of time, energy, and investment that these characters are imagined to devote to them, particularly in light of the wealth of other possible activities. (35-38)

So, who gets to decide what counts as meaningful? Wolf replies: "No one in particular." Anyone can answer this question. However, she argues that as long as one connects to people, objects, and/or activities that are valuable in themselves (aside from one's relationship to them), then we are on the path to meaningfulness.

Let us return to the example of making handwritten copies of *War and Peace*. What value does doing this hold for one outside the person engaging in this activity? What if we take a look at this activity from the perspective of history, for there was, in fact, a person who did make handwritten copies of Tolstoy's great novel: his wife. Leo and Sofia Tolstoy had an interesting and complex relationship. If we take Sofia's diary at face value, in many ways Sofia was unhappy. She writes:

I am left alone morning, afternoon and night. . . I am a piece of household furniture. I am a *woman*. I try to suppress all human feelings. . . But the moment I am alone and allow myself to think, everything seems insufferable. (Porter 2010, 20)

Despite this unhappiness, Sofia Tolstoy copied her husband's manuscripts by

hand, some manuscripts over and over again (she notes that she copied *War and Peace* seven times). She writes: “As I copy I experience a whole new world of emotions, thoughts and impressions. Nothing touches me so deeply as his ideas, his genius” (33). She continues:

I write very quickly, so I can follow the story and catch the mood, but slowly enough to be able to stop, reflect on each new idea and discuss it with him later. He and I often talk about the novel together, and for some reason he listens to what I have to say (which makes me very proud) and trusts my opinions. (33)

Their life was, to a large degree, an unhappy one, and for a number of reasons.

Sofia Tolstoy did not copy these manuscripts because doing so made her happy; nor did she do this because she had a moral obligation to do so. But doing this connected her to her husband in ways that nothing else could. As such, and I think Wolf would agree, this example of copying *War and Peace* is very different from the one she mentions in her book. Because here, Sofia Tolstoy is engaged in an activity and project of worth that is considered worthy beyond herself.

It must be noted, also, that in discussing the conditions for meaningfulness, Wolf is not giving us a guide-map of how to make our lives meaningful. She is attempting to create a foundation on which we might build an understanding of meaningfulness. So, rather than say, “find your passions and go for it,” Wolf is saying, yes, that’s partially true. But before you engage with this activity, or with this object, stop and think about whether this is worthwhile. And note that morality and altruism do not constitute necessary conditions. My playing golf or working on my MayDay paper do not contribute moral goods. Actions can be meaningful, even if they don’t contribute to our happiness or our sense of morality.

Like playing golf or writing my MayDay paper, Wolf uses the example of doing philosophy. Doing philosophy may not always bring Wolf pleasure, wealth, or well-being. Nonetheless, she does it because it gives meaning to her life. She may make significant sacrifices in relation to her own self-interest to pursue philosophy. Many people make all sorts of sacrifices to pursue dreams and goals. So, to describe such activities as self-interested is cynical or creating an understanding of self-interest that is not accurate.

Still, these goals and dreams—whether Wolf’s philosophy, or my learning golf or MayDay paper writing—need not be motivated by morality either. And there is nothing wrong with these activities despite the fact that they are not necessarily driven by a moral imperative.

They may involve self-sacrifice, but not in the service of morality, but to find fulfillment. As Wolf (1982) famously points out:

There is something odd about the idea of morality itself, or moral goodness, serving as the object of a dominant passion in the way that a more concrete and specific vision of a goal (even a concrete *moral* goal) might be imagined to serve. Morality itself does not seem a suitable object of passion. Thus, when one reflects, for example, on the loving Saint easily and gladly giving up his fishing trip or his stereo or his hot fudge sundae at the drop of the moral hat, one is apt to wonder not at how much he loves morality, but at how little he loves these other things. (424)

Thus, Wolf's concept of meaningfulness has value in that it allows us to better describe a range of human activity that can traditionally be misunderstood.

It's necessary to emphasize that meaningfulness is not devoid of virtue (as conceived by Plato and Aristotle). For example, my golf playing and MayDay-paper writing includes a number of "virtues": hard work, discipline, being part of a community of people that shares my interest in reflecting on and writing about similar issues, and so forth. Hence, it's not my game of golf or my essay writing or my flute playing that is valuable, but the whole activity I'm engaged in is meaningful because of the social practices involved. In other words, such activities immerse me in a rich and diverse web of intersubjective relationships that are valuable and therefore meaningful.

Is it possible for anyone to have a meaningful life? Are some people unable to pursue or maintain meaningful lives? According to Wolf, the answer to this question is unfortunate. Some have to work so hard to put food on the table and clothe their children that they have neither the time nor the energy, to be "engaged." Still "[o]thers may have temperaments that make it difficult to love anything in the right sort of way. One cannot find something engaging at will" (Wolf, 49). So, to a certain degree meaningfulness is a luxury and, therefore, an opportunity that some people are unable to pursue, unless they can find meaning in the tasks they have no choice but to undertake to survive, care for their children, their parents, and so forth—all of which are worthy pursuits. And then there are people who actually have opportunities to flourish and pursue meaning but who do not take advantage of them; or, like Sisyphus, they waste their time by engaging in trivial, repetitive, and mindless "busy work" or self-centered games.

From a philosophical perspective, meaningfulness includes the quest for living a good life. When we reflect on the meaning and values of meaningfulness, we are closer to our

understanding of this continuous quest. Yet, when one endeavors to live a good life for oneself and others, it's a mistake to constantly wonder, "Is this or that activity adding meaning to my life?" Because it's only in reflection after the fact that we can decide whether something adds meaning to our lives. Indeed, as Williams (1981) notes, life is meaningful when the quest for meaning is not directly pursued.

Music Education and Meaningfulness

So, how does music education align with this examination of meaning and meaningfulness? Wolf's philosophical perspectives provide an insightful, resilient, and sustainable foundation for understanding the values of music and music education from a perspective that's seldom found in the literature of music education and community music.

As Wolf (2010) explains, "when people get deeply interested in something and come to care about it"—such as making and listening to music related to one or more specific musical-style communities, which involve subjective, intersubjective, and objective dimensions—"they focus their attention on it, build activities around it, exercise and sharpen their skills in advancing, protecting, and celebrating it" (128). Additionally, people engaged in activities they care about "share their enthusiasm" for said activity with others; they create "new relationships and belong to social groups"; they make personal, social, emotional, sometimes spiritual connections with people, either new or old, through shared activity and the "shared appreciation" of the activity (or object) (128).

David Elliott (2012) echoes Wolf's themes when he argues that, on the surface, there doesn't seem to be anything worthwhile or valuable about a group of people coming together to make "musical" sounds of some sort or other. He writes: "making and listening to a special category of 'musical' sounds is rather unusual (if not downright odd)" (63). Yet, says Elliott, people everywhere "*do* music" with great passion, dedication, and joy and "music pervades all societies" (63). It is rather strange when you think about it because musical sounds are "just" sounds. Yes? No. Praxial music education philosophers (Bowman 2000; Elliott 1995; and Regelski 1998), the vast majority of "new musicologists" (e.g., Kramer 2002; Leppert 1993; McClary 2000; and Taruskin 1995), and ethnomusicologists (e.g., Turino 2008 and DeNora

2001) are adamant about the fact that music cannot be reduced to sounds alone, or “works” of music, as aesthetic philosophers often insist, and as traditional musicologists and theorists have believed. Music, conceived as “musics,” in the sense of social-ethical practices, is much, much more.

Wolf (2010) would agree and argue that music “provides an opportunity for the cultivation and exercise of skill and virtue, for the building of relationships, and for the communion that comes from enthusiasm for an immersion in a shared activity” (129). Part of this value comes from the interests and commitment of people who are attracted to music. “As an activity or practice gains recognition and popularity, as traditions develop and groups organize around it, the opportunities for valuable activities involving it multiply” (129). Think of all the musical activities one can pursue in the contexts of one or more musical-social practices; performing, improvising, composing, arranging, conducting, music recording and production, musicing and moving, musicing and dancing, musicing and worshipping, and so forth. Also, one can coach and or teach one or more musics to others, formally or informally. And one can write historical, philosophical, psychological and other discussions of music. As a listener, one can maintain “the fabric that connects one to others, supplying a ready topic of conversation or just knowing that a bond exists and links one to one’s neighbors or one’s community” (130).

What about Wolf’s argument regarding the integration of subjective, objective, and intersubjective dimensions that occur during and help us discern the presence of personal and interpersonal meaning and meaningfulness after engaging in a musical pursuit? How are these dimensions applicable to music education? More specifically, who decides what musics are capable or integrating these dimensions and what musics deserve of the opportunity to contribute to meaningfulness in students’ lives?

Wolf replies:

I am inclined to think that almost anything to which a significant number of people have shown themselves to be deeply attached over a significant length of time, has or relates to some positive value—that almost anything people *find* valuable (stably and in significant numbers), *is* valuable. . . If people find an object or activity or project engaging. . . there is apt to be something about it that makes it so. (128)

If a specific kind of music and music education is conceived as valuable, practiced ethically, and viewed as a pursuit that’s likely to provide learners with opportunities to pursue

and find meaning in the context of a moral-educational community, there's no reason to reject any kind of music. If one or more musics bring people together in positive-ethical ways and contribute to collective joy, then by all means, consider them worthy of inclusion in school and community music programs. Conversely, if a style of music or a type of music teaching fails to meet these criteria, it should be rejected as a pathway to meaningfulness.

These thoughts relate to Dewey's (1938[1963]) concern that schooling be focused on guiding students to find ways to meaningfully explore subjects and develop curricula with and for students and teachers together. For Dewey, one of the main purposes of education in a democratic society is to provide people with the means necessary to construct meaningful lives. Dewey maintains that meaningfulness emerges in the intersubjective interactions of shared and fulfilling activities. Moreover, Dewey viewed education and the purposes of schooling as inextricably connected to the immediate, real-world lives of students, teachers, and parents. If music educators are to be effective and reflective practitioners, then understanding the concept and ramifications of meaningfulness is essential.

Carl Sandburg (1916) writes here about people who seem to have an intuitive awareness of what a good life should be and how to pursue it. He writes about honest "poets" of experience who perceive the world as a space that is pulsating with wonder and opportunities for meaning. Sometimes, says Sandberg, we find we are in the midst of meaningfulness when we least expect it, or when it manifests itself in seemingly everyday situations. Sandburg explains what he means in the following poem, called "Happiness":

I asked the professors who teach the meaning of life to tell me what is happiness.
And I went to famous executives who boss the work of thousands of men.
They all shook their heads and gave me a smile as though I was trying to fool with them
And then one Sunday afternoon I wandered out along the Desplaines river
And I saw a crowd of Hungarians under the trees with their women and children
and a keg of beer and an accordion.

From Wolf's perspective, music educators are contributing to the significant possibility that students and teachers will feel fulfilled by engaging in musical actions and interactions and that ethical music educators do, in fact, contribute to students' development of ethical-moral goodness. As MacIntyre (1981) points out, the internal goods of practices are sources of ethical living, and therefore "goodness" may be experienced. Music educators can create many

opportunities for students (and themselves) to find and pursue meaningful lives because engaging in musical practices are projects of worth that connect “us to our world in a positive way” (Wolf, 58).

What are the aims of music education? Surely meaning and meaningfulness are among the most important, worthy, and valuable aims and “goods” of music teaching and learning.

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About the Author

Marissa Silverman is Assistant Professor and Coordinator of Undergraduate Music Education at the John J. Cali School of Music of Montclair State University. A Fulbright Scholar, her research interests include urban music education, music and social justice, interdisciplinary education, community music, secondary general music, and topics in the philosophy of music and music education. In addition to articles in *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*, *The International Journal of Music Education*, *Music Education Research*, *Research Studies in Music Education*, and *The International Journal of Community Music*, she has published invited book chapters in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Education Philosophy; Music, Health and Wellbeing*; and *The Oxford Handbook of Music Education*.