



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

Philosopher Susan Wolf on Meaningfulness as a Dimension of a Good Life

The moral philosopher ponders why being happy and acting morally may not be enough to satisfy us. She believes we need a vocabulary of meaning in public discourse, and suggests we strive for vitality—not joy—in the face of uncertainty and suffering.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. On this podcast, we welcome leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists who shape our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters. Many of them are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars, who travel the country for us, visiting campuses and presenting free lectures that we invite you to attend. For the Visiting Scholars schedule, please visit pbk.org.

Today, it's my great pleasure to welcome Dr. Susan R. Wolf, the Edna J. Koury Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Professor Wolf's interests range widely over moral psychology, value theory, and normative ethics. In particular, her research focuses on the relation between moral and nonmoral values, the nature and conditions of responsibility, and the idea that as humans, we seek to live not only good and happy lives, but also lives that are meaningful. Welcome, Professor Wolf.

Susan Wolf: Thank you. Glad to be here.

Lawrence: You know, we like to think of you as really one of ours in Phi Beta Kappa. You were inducted into Phi Beta Kappa at the Alpha chapter of Connecticut at Yale College in the early 1970s. You held the Romanell Phi Beta Kappa Professorship 2009-2010. Now you're

a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar, so I think you've kind of run the table on being a member of Phi Beta Kappa.

Wolf: Well, it's an organization I like to be associated with.

Lawrence: I want to talk a little bit about your path to becoming a philosopher. You were originally going to be a math major in college, right?

Wolf: Right.

Lawrence: So, what was it like being a math major at Yale College in the early 1970s? It had just gone coed. Math is not thought of, at least in those days, as a heavily populated women's subject, and I wonder whether at Yale College that was an easy transition or a hard transition?

Wolf: Well, it was certainly noticeable. I was one of maybe two people in my classes most of the time. I was the second class of women to be admitted to Yale, so only half of the classes had any women in it, and at the time they were only admitting women on a ratio of one to three or four. So, there were very few women in the entire university, and almost none in math, and philosophy wasn't much more populated by women for that matter.

Lawrence: So, let's talk a little bit about how you decided to double major in philosophy. You came to Yale to be a math major, and it's a strong math department, but something piqued your interest to broaden your interest and widen the lens a little bit.

Wolf: Right. Well, I don't think I had ever heard of philosophy before I got to college, but I went in as a math major specifically because I love mathematical logic, and so my advisor, he knew logic was the area of math I wanted to go into, and Robinson, my advisor, had created this major, and encouraged me to consider it. And so, that got me to take my first philosophy course, and my second philosophy course, and it was a great way to combine what I loved in mathematics and my other interests, which are basically humanistic interests and particularly just stories about people.

So, it was a way of kind of you could take literature courses, and math courses, and in some ways they both fed into the same discipline.

Lawrence: So, you went on to Princeton and studied with the great Thomas Nagel. What was that like?

Wolf: Thomas Nagel was just... He was a wonderful teacher of philosophy and a wonderful advisor and mentor, in part because he was so selfless. I think he just cared about philosophical questions, about getting the truth, and it was very liberating. He just thought with you rather than sort of stood above you.

Lawrence: Thought with you rather than stand above you. Boy, that sounds like a pretty good aspiration for a professor, to help the student think and to think with the student. Can you tell us a good Nagel story that sort of captures the character of him as a thinker, and as a scholar, and as a teacher?

Wolf: Well, these probably say more about me than about him. One is that as I said, he was very selfless about philosophy. He never assigned his own work, for example. And being not an especially energetic scholar myself, I didn't read much of his work while I was in graduate school taking courses and writing my dissertation, and so it wasn't until after I had handed in my dissertation. I had been meeting with him every week for about two years, showing him what I had written that week, talking it through, throwing it out, trying again and so on. And then I handed it in, and it was in the hands of the readers, and for the first time in graduate school I felt I had free time and could do whatever I wanted. So, I finally decided to read one of his famous early books, *The Possibility of Altruism*. And then when I read it, I realized it must have been obvious to him over these last two years that I had never read it, and he had never mentioned, "You might be interested in looking at this." Because it was so relevant to everything I was talking about.

So, I was just hugely embarrassed and humiliated. I'm not even sure he noticed that, but it seemed to me an amazing thing that he just kept that back completely.

Lawrence: Now, when I think of Nagel, and I'm coming at it from the point of view of legal theory and legal philosophy, but I think about him and his major impact on law and the use of non-consequentialist thinking, the ontological argument in legal theory. But I think of Roherty, I think of Roherty as a pragmatist. So, how are these two the choices that you come down to making who you're going to work with?

Wolf: They were both obviously just big thinkers. They thought about the biggest questions that there were and that was really what I was most attracted to doing.

Lawrence: Well, let's talk about some of those big questions. It seems to me, I'm sure you'll agree with this, that the relevance of philosophy if anything is more obvious than ever, because we're living in such a fraught time, where people are looking for answers to questions that maybe are a little bigger than we're even used to thinking about most of the time. So, the one I want to jump into and start with you, one of the public lectures that you're gonna give as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar has the intriguing title of *Meaningfulness: A Third Dimension of the Good Life*, where you talk about not only self-interest and morality, but meaningfulness as a dimension of a good life. Tell us a little bit about what you mean by meaningfulness and how does it deserve this ranking in the definition of a good life?

Wolf: Well, first and foremost, one wants to be happy. And for some people things end there, but especially if you're a moral philosopher, one will recognize, well, thinking only about your own happiness leaves out moral reasons for doing anything, and many of us want both for ourselves and for the people we care about to be moral, as well. So, there are kind of two dimensions of a life well lived or a life that you want your children to live, that they be happy and that they be ethically good or morally decent, or something like that.

But I realized at a certain point in my life that a lot of the things that I directed my life towards weren't really well explained as being directed on the basis of my own

happiness or on the basis of the desire to be moral. So, for example, things we do for the people we love, or for the activities we love, or the interests that we have passions about, we might do them even when they're not so great for us. It takes sacrifice of resources, time, pleasure, but neither are they morally particularly impressive, so the thought was—the normal dimensions that are used to evaluate a good life don't really account for this.

And then the second thought was, these things that we do that aren't accommodated by morality or happiness, are actually the things that make our lives most meaningful. So, that's where I get this idea that there is a third dimension and that it is meaning. And then the question is well, what is it for something to be meaningful? And the view I eventually came to is that meaning arises when you are actively engaged in projects of worth. Or to spell that out a little bit more, when you're doing something that you love doing, or something that's connected to something you love and are passionate about, and that thing or person is worthy of your love, when those things come together your life gets meaning.

Lawrence: Let me ask you to lay this alongside the work of the great Viktor Frankl, who of course is not a philosopher, he's a psychologist, but he certainly was a psychologist who wrote like a philosopher in many ways.

Wolf: Right.

Lawrence: And talks about that the very act of the search for meaning in our lives is what gives our lives meaning. Is that an element of what you're talking about? Or do you think there's a difference between your work and what Frankl writes in *Man's Search for Meaning*?

Wolf: Well, I think they complement each other, but they're emphasizing different aspects. One thing they have in common is this idea that a concern to live a meaningful life, which insofar as you search for it, and the satisfaction you get from the feedback that you are living a meaningful life, or the absence of that if you don't... if you're feeling that you're not living a meaningful life, that's a deep feature of what it is to be human. So, that's something that I think we're both acting on.

I'm spending more time thinking about, "Well, what kinds of things give you meaning?" And what I'm emphasizing is this subjective-objective distinction that is less explicit, I think, in Frankl.

Lawrence: Yeah. Frankl's looking at it more in terms of the human drives, right? And he says that the account of human drives has been the drive for power or the drive for sexual gratification is an incomplete account. It leaves out this entire piece of our lives, of this drive, this will to find meaning in our time on this planet.

Wolf: Exactly. And I love that.

Lawrence: So, what conclusions regarding morality and meaning do you think we should be taking from this period of time in particular? And I'm thinking about the fact that you will be a Visiting Scholar during what's become such a cliché to say a year like none other, but it

got to be a cliché for a reason, because it's really true. And you will be engaged, at least the beginning, through virtual conversations. Hopefully at some point, in-person conversations. But I'm imagining students listening to this and saying, "What does this tell us about the moment that we're living in? The moment that I'm going through," a student says.

Wolf: My view is a schematic view that in some sense is intended for any possible time and circumstance. The idea is to get meaning in your life, you find something you're passionate about that you also regard as worth being passionate about and get in there and do something that will increase, promote, create, protect, whatever it is that is the object of this passion or love. And part of the point of going on about this philosophically is just to get the vocabulary of meaning and of looking for things worthy of love that you can engage with into public consciousness, so that when you're trying to figure out what should I do with my life, you don't just think what will make me happy, or what will make me rich, or what will my parents like, but you think what will make my life meaningful, and you can identify that as an issue to care about.

So, in these times that can be especially relevant, in part because a lot of people are feeling depressed, anxious, wondering what can I do with myself to make my life go better? And I think connecting it to the vocabulary of meaning can be helpful. And if you sort of take it apart to say, "Well, what can I do that will be objectively worthwhile?" Actually, I mean different people will have different challenges there, and finding things they love that will be objectively worthwhile will be easier for some people than others during a period of social isolation and social distancing in general.

I mean, for academics it's not so hard, you know. I think for many people, the harder part of the formula for meaning isn't finding something objectively worthwhile to do, but keeping engaged subjectively, keeping yourself passionate about things. So, I mean a part of me thinks my first bit of advice is take care of yourself. Keep yourself engaged with anything. I mean, and worry about the objective value later. But in fact, I think most of the things that we can get passionate about, and especially things that we can get passionate about that can help us during these times where there's so much to be anxious about, both individually, and for our families, and for our country, and for the world, most of the things that will occur to us are things that are going to be valuable.

If you find a way to somehow make some small contribution to easing the problems, that makes life better rather than worse for you, as well as for the community.

Lawrence: There is not surprisingly something very Phi Beta Kappa-ish about all that. We like to say that a liberal education prepares us for a meaningful life, a productive life, and an engaged life as members of our local, national, and maybe even international communities. And at different points in our lives, it will do that in different ways, but that those are the tools that you're being given. And I think that idea of laying down that it's not just a way to make a living, it's also a way to help build a life and it's also a way to help build a community is precisely designed to raise one's sights above just

self-protection and self-interest. Or maybe put differently, that to understand that the deepest form of self-protection and self-interest actually is broader than this.

This goes back to your friend Nagel and altruism.

Wolf: Right.

Lawrence: So, another issue of great relevance, it seems to me, that we're living with today, maybe more than we would want to, is the challenge of how can we be happy in a world that has so much suffering in it? You've analyzed *The Book of Joy*, which is a five day conversation between Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama, discussing the question of how can one find joy in the face of life's inevitable suffering. So, how do you think about their approach and how do their ideas fare under the intellectual and empirical standards of philosophical thought that you bring to bear on them?

Wolf: Well, I came to read this book because I'm in a book group that selected this book. In some ways I think their messages are ones that are pretty predictable, and in some ways a little too sweet and rosy for my more cynical temperament. But I have to say, and this is part of why I decided to try to think about this in a more disciplined way, I also found it somewhat inspiring, because these individual human beings are incredibly inspiring. I mean, they are spiritual leaders who have gone through tremendous suffering and empathized with tremendous suffering for their entire peoples.

That said, what I wanted to do was just say, "Well, what is it that I like about what they have to say and what is it that I don't like?" And maybe the biggest difference between us is that, as you point out, the big question that the book was supposed to answer and did offer an answer to is how do we find joy in the face of the world's inevitable suffering?

Lawrence: Right.

Wolf: And my own response to that question, made even more emphatic in this strange time, is do we really want to find joy in the face of the world's inevitable suffering? It's very hard, actually, to think of joy and facing the inevitable suffering in the same breath, at the same time. And it seemed, well, if you're really facing it, joy might not be the most natural emotion. So, I would actually prefer thinking, how do we live well in the face of the world's inevitable suffering? Facing it and not looking away from it. And my own answer is it's not really joy that one should be looking for. It's vitality. It's engagement with the world. A kind of a greeting with energy, the opportunity to do something with it, and for it, and connecting to it.

And you know, not looking for joy. Looking for engagement. Looking for life. So, a lust for life I suppose is to me the more sensible thing to be looking for.

Lawrence: To what extent do you think issues you're dealing with are fundamentally changed by the COVID-19 pandemic and to what extent do they really continue? Is it more continuity or more discontinuity from this cataclysmic set of events since the spring of 2020?

Wolf: In terms of the interest in these issues, I expect that they are greater than ever. I mean, I do think people have said to me over the last decade that there are... Some people think there's a crisis in meaning and that our society, our world is finding it harder and harder to find meaning in life and feeling consciously or unconsciously with mental health problems that are put in different language a lack of meaning. I think that's exacerbated during this time, and at least one segment of the population is therefore as hungry for thinking about these issues, and talking through them, working through their own solutions as ever before.

Of course, I would think that, since it's the issues that I care about anyway. But yeah, no, it doesn't seem to me that there's any reason for them to become less important.

Lawrence: Yeah. Yeah. Who would have thought you went into a growth industry?

Wolf: Yeah. Right.

Lawrence: But I do think the struggle to find meaning in a world that feels so uncertain, so unmoored, is profound, and it's not just on the level of deep academic thinkers. I think this is a very common thing you hear if you listen to call-in shows, if you read letters to the editor, if you just chat with people on the street at a socially distanced, safe distance. You very quickly fall into a kind of conversation even with strangers that you really wouldn't have before this, I think.

Wolf: No, I think that's right. I mean, what I would like and what I hope develops is something in between a certain kind of very simplistic self-help language about these things and the very esoteric language that academic journals are looking for. I mean, meaning is everybody's problem, and in some ways this is not unconnected to my engagement with *The Book of Joy*. There's a way in which I feel like oh yes, the language that we should forgive everybody, and have compassion, and seek joy in the face of the world's inevitable suffering, they seem too pat as answers, but they're on a right track and somehow it seems to me if one could get more nuanced and more self-critical about those things without moving into an academic or technical language, that would be good for all of us.

Lawrence: Einstein said something along the lines of if you don't understand it simply, you don't understand it. But I don't understand him to mean that dumb it down.

Wolf: Right.

Lawrence: Quite the contrary. He just means that if you can only explain it to somebody who already has the same jargon you do, then you don't really have it. You have to be able to explain it to a serious person who wants to think through these things with you.

Wolf: Exactly.

Lawrence: This is Phi Beta Kappa. We do a lot with book lists. Our readers and listeners love to get book recommendations, so I want to give you a chance to add two kinds of books to that syllabus we've been building on Key Conversations. One is if you have in mind a couple of the sort of basic building block books that someone who did not study philosophy in

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college ought to take on, and then the other is is there something recent that we should pay attention to?

Wolf: I mean, when it comes to philosophy, I encourage people to start with Plato. For one thing, it's fun to read. Or at least for me it's fun to read. I care a lot about love, so the Symposium seems like a good one. For me, some of my greatest influences are Iris Murdoch, who is also a novelist. She has a little collection of three essays called *The Sovereignty of Good* that changed my philosophical life and worldview. Perhaps connected to that is Bernard Williams is another of my major influences. I think the collection of essays called *Moral Luck* would be the one I would mention.

Lawrence: Yes.

Wolf: Yeah, so I would put that on my list too for people who want the challenge.

Lawrence: Well, I'm delighted that we have you with us this year as a Visiting Scholar to help this process with so many students and faculty you'll be engaging with. Thanks so much for joining us today in Key Conversations.

Wolf: Thanks for me, too. This was fun.

Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. Cedric Wilson is lead producer. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. Michael Castaneda mixed this episode. Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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