

Life Has the Value We Give It

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Francis Wolff's inspiring essay on whether or not life has a value (*La vie a-t-elle une valeur?* Philosophie Magazine Éditeur, Paris, 2025) presents a series of arguments in favor of the idea that only for humanity does this meaning exist, both real and moral. This means that sacralizing or glorifying life - understood simultaneously as a phenomenon, principle, cause, and process of spontaneous creation, conservation, and reproduction, and as that which particularly characterizes living beings, those that are organically constituted and fight against their own destruction - would not only be questionable but unsustainable for factual and logical reasons. If the arguments in favor of the lack of value of life are reasonable, although partially convincing, can the conclusion be questioned? I believe there are good reasons for doing so.

Wolff's critique is directed primarily at biocentrists and anti-speciesists, for whom the living, the animate, has an intrinsic and absolute value in itself, and that such a conviction - where there is life, there is value - dominates current ecology.

Wolff's assumptions can be summarized as follows:

- 1 - the universe is subject to natural laws (p. 32) and, through them, beings appear and disappear, living species adapt, transform and become extinct. In his words: "Things are, everything becomes, nothing is worth anything. Where do you see value in that? Life is this indefinite process that transcends organisms and species; it doesn't give a damn about the living beings it uses to maintain itself... It has no value" (pp. 32 and 38).

In other words, we are talking here about the blind Will (*der Wille*), the "thing-in-itself," without goals or limits, which, according to Schopenhauer, makes and dominates the world because it is the premise of all others: "Not only in phenomena quite similar to itself, in men and animals, will you find, as an intimate essence, this same will; but a little more reflection will lead you to recognize that

the universality of phenomena, so diverse for representation, have the same essence, the same one that is intimate to it, immediate and better than any other known, which, in its most apparent manifestation, bears the name of will." (The World as Will and Representation, second book, paragraph 21);

- 2 - it follows that life in beings manifests itself primarily as a dynamic power by which copies of genetic material are transmitted to other similar individuals, which leads us to the conclusion that the particular individual (microbe, plant, animal) has no intrinsic value for the vital principle;

- 3 - In fact, there would be no individuals, because mammals are a coexistence of different beings. Human beings, for example, carry about 30 billion bacteria of thousands of different species, distributed throughout our intestines, skin, mouth, and other organs, which makes us an undeniable "ecosystem." Therefore, the idea of an independent living being, an individual, would be, at the very least, dubious. Also as an example, the author states: "...some insects, which were previously considered social (ants and bees, for example), live only in colonies, sometimes called 'superorganisms.' Where is the living being? In the ant or in the anthill?" (p. 45).

Here, two observations are pertinent: although human beings (or any other animal considered superior) carry billions of microorganisms within them, we possess the psychological awareness, through cognitive action and memory (or even through a reasonably developed sensitivity, in the case of other animals), that we are something unique, indivisible in time. *Les jours s'en vont je demeure* (Apollinaire, *Le Pont Mirabeau*), "the days pass, I remain" because the spirit cannot be separated from duration or continuity (except in pathologies, of course). Furthermore, if ants and bees only survive in community, the same is true for human beings, because otherwise, this natural (which can be observed in the entire order of primates) and simultaneously cultural condition would not have given rise to societies, cities (πόλις), civilizations, and political philosophy, debated incessantly since Plato and Aristotle;

- 4 - For there to be value, and not just beings, there must be a creature that thinks and makes a judgment about what is good or bad, true or false, deserving or condemnable, and then adopts behavior consistent with that awareness; in other words, evaluation is necessarily an anthropocentric act or, in his words,

“outside of anthropocentric myths, life, the living, the world have no end, no meaning, no value. And this contributes nothing to morality” (p. 48).

We know that basing morality on nature, whether out of private interest or constantly changing feelings, is to deny the specificity of moral principles, reducing values, or even their non-existence, to the empirical reality of human biological facts and tendencies, that is, to their physical and material environment. If we let ourselves be guided by Kantian analysis (*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*), the moral requirement presents itself humanly (and not divinely) to consciousness as a duty to be, as an obligation that transcends it, but which is freely established by personal will (and not by external authorities or powers). Or, in Kant's terms, every rational being must act as if it were always, through its maxims, a legislative member of the universal kingdom of ends. In his words: “Now I say: man, and indeed every rational being, exists as an end in itself, not merely as a means to be used arbitrarily by this or that will, but must in all its actions, whether directed toward itself or toward other rational beings, always be regarded at the same time as an end... Now it follows from this, indisputably, that every rational being, as an end in itself, must be able to regard itself, with respect to all laws to which it may be subject, at the same time as universal legislator, because precisely this suitability of its maxims for universal legislation distinguishes it as an end in itself; likewise, that this dignity (prerogative) of itss above all mere natural beings entails the necessity of always taking its maxim from the point of view of itself, but also of every other rational being as legislator (who are therefore also called persons)” [pgs. 52 e 64].¹

¹ Nun sage ich: der Mensch und überhaupt jedes vernünftige Wesen existiert als Zweck an sich selbst, nicht bloß als Mittel zum beliebigen Gebrauche für diesen oder jenen Willen, sondern muß in allen seinen sowohl an sich selbst als auch auf andere vernünftige Wesen gerichteten Handlungen jederzeit zugleich als Zweck betrachtet werden... Nun folgt hieraus unstreitig, daß jedes vernünftige Wesen als Zweck an sich selbst sich in Ansehung aller Gesetze, denen es nur immer unterworfen sein mag, zugleich als allgemeines gesetzgebendes Wesen ansehen können, weil eben diese Schicklichkeit seiner Maximen zur allgemeinen Gesetzgebung es als Zweck an sich selbst auszeichnet, imgleichen, daß dieses seine Würde (Prärogativ) vor allen bloßen Naturwesen es mit sich bringe, seine Maxime jederzeit aus dem Gesichtspunkte seiner selbst, zugleich aber auch jedes anderen vernünftigen als gesetzgebenden Wesens (die darum auch Personen heißen), nehmen zu müssen. (pgs. 52 64) (*Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, Verlag von Felix Meiner in Leipzig, sixth edition, no page number indicated).

Thus, the categorical imperative contained in ethics is based not only on personal or collective reward, which obviously should not be entirely eliminated, but above all on rational rectitude or correctness, since this is the condition of its impersonality and universality. The moral requirement is, therefore, essentially and exclusively anthropocentric (a word not used in Kant's time) and derived from pure reason. At the same time, the moral obligation must be independent of subjective psychological motivations and personal axiological affections.

Assigning a value to anything is, therefore, a purely human act. But not only value as a general equivalent or price, but also as "dignity" (Würde, eine Sache durch sich selbst geschätzt - Dignity, a thing valued for itself). Again, in Kant's terms: "Reason thus relates each of the maxims of the will conceived as universal legislator to each of the other wills, and even to each of the actions towards oneself, and this not for any other practical reason or for any future advantage, but by virtue of the idea of the dignity of a rational being that obeys no other law than that which it itself institutes at the same time. In the kingdom of ends, everything has a price or a dignity. What has a price can easily be replaced by something else, as an equivalent; on the contrary, what is superior to any price, what consequently admits of no equivalent, is what has dignity" (p. 47). We will return to this point later, due to the sequence of Wolff's analysis;

- 5 - If we ask: what has value for a living being?, the answer is clear and immediate: to live; what is good for a living being? The answer remains the same: to live; and what is bad? Not to live. Thus, from the point of view of concrete living beings (whatever they may be), the dynamics of life seem to be an absolute good. Therefore, there will be an intrinsic value of life, not only for humanity, but everywhere, at all times and for all living beings, as biocentrists affirm.

No, says Wolff, this is a deplorable line of reasoning, an obvious fallacy. For it is impossible to deduce a valuable harmony from life and living beings, given that reality is competition, struggle, predation by the fittest or strongest, the deprivation of the existence of another living being. "The fox can only live by preventing the rabbit from living, and the rabbit can only live by eating lettuce... Life is not a moral community, because the biotic community can only exist on

the condition of not being moral... Respect for life is, therefore, a contradictory expression... It is the price to pay to maintain life" (pp. 61 and 62).

The reasons are clear and well-known, but Wolff omits or ignores an evident fact of exclusively human history (because, for the author, human life, having developed its own ethics, acquires its own particular and exclusive value): human life is also made up of competition, struggle, depredation, unparalleled cruelty, or the deliberate choice of evil, not only against another species but also against oneself. When it comes to human coexistence, moral prescriptions are often an ineffective antidote against the endemic evil we commit. It is fitting to invite Kant into this exchange of ideas: "The disposition towards animality in man can be classified under the general heading of physical and merely mechanical self-love, that is, that which does not involve reason. It comprises three kinds which lead us, firstly, to our personal preservation; secondly, to the propagation of our species, by the sexual instinct, and to the preservation of what is reproduced by the mating of the sexes; thirdly, to the maintenance of relations with other men, which is the social instinct. Vices of all kinds can take root in this disposition (but they do not spring from it as from a root from which they are descended). They can be called vices of the grossness of nature and, when they deviate to the maximum from the natural end, they are called bestial vices... The wickedness (*vitiositas*, *pravitas*) or, if you prefer, the corruption (*corruptio*) of the human heart is the inclination of free will towards maxims that subordinate the motives derived from the moral law to other motives (which are not moral. It can also be called the perversity (*perversitas*) of the human heart, because it perverts the moral order in relation to the motives of a free will, and if, despite this, it is still possible to perform (legal) actions, good in the eyes of the law (*gesetzlich gule*), it is no less true that the way of thinking is thus corrupted at its root (with regard to moral intention) and that man is thus marked as perverse. ... we can call it, in human nature, a radical and innate evil (of which, however, we ourselves are the cause)" (*La religion dans les limites de la raison*, Felix Alcan, 1913, pp. 31-34, translated by André Tremesaygues).

Consequently, Wolff continues, life in itself, raw and unadulterated life, has no value; it does not include morality nor its opposite, which would be immorality. Life has value for the living being, and only for it, but not for the vital process or dynamic or, in his words, "living now appears as an end in itself and an absolute

good from the point of view of living beings in particular... there is value where there is life. Living is, therefore, an intrinsic value for living beings" (pp. 51 and 69);

- 6 - Without antibiotics (against life) or vaccines, millions of people would have died or suffered serious consequences as a result of the proliferation of viruses, bacteria, and fungi. Therefore, the question is: "Who deserves to live? The soil fungus or the beet it attacks? The coronavirus or humanity?" (pp. 65 and 66). If all living beings aspire to the continuity of life, this equality is not moral, and "nothing is less moral than respect for life as such or equal respect for all living beings" (p. 66).

If the struggle for life is constant and characterizes it, whether through confrontation or cooperation, the question "who deserves to live?" is fundamentally moral, for it indicates what is worthy of reward or sanction, of prize and praise or, conversely, of guilt or punishment. But if there is no place for moral judgment in the nature and dynamics of life, the question arises exclusively in terms of the particular interests of those (humans) who have the power to act consciously or unconsciously on the environment and on other beings, for good or for evil. Perhaps we should remember Spinoza, for example, when he meditated: "all the prejudices that I propose to point out here depend on a single one, namely: that men commonly suppose that all natural things act, as they themselves do, with a view to an end... It is, therefore, this single prejudice that I will consider first, investigating why most men like this prejudice and why everyone is naturally inclined to embrace it; then I will show its falsity, and finally, I will show how prejudices concerning good and evil, merit and fault, praise and blame, order and confusion, beauty and ugliness, and other things of the same kind derive from it" (Ethics, Appendix to Part One).

And in his Political Treatise (chapter II, 4-8), we read: "Every being naturally has as many rights as it has the power to exist and act. In truth, this power is none other than the very power of God (or of nature, let us remember), which is absolutely free... That man, like all other individuals in nature, does everything in his power to preserve his being, is something that no one can deny. If there were, in fact, any difference between beings, it could only arise from one cause, which is the fact that man has free will... Nature is not limited to the laws of human reason, which refer only to the true utility and preservation of men; but

encompasses an infinite number of other laws that concern the eternal order of all nature, of which man is but a part.”

- 7 - Following Wolff's lead, despite the amorality of nature and its lack of value, we have the power to express ourselves and act to establish the merits of life: thus, with certain domestic animals (cats and dogs, for example), we sign an "affective contract" of protection; when raising other animals that we eat or use according to our needs and desires (cows, pigs, chickens, horses, goats, etc.), we sign a "domestic contract" and must ensure their well-being while they are raised; finally, we have an "ecological contract" not only with wild animals, but with all living species and their ecosystems—water, food, water resources, etc. (pp. 92-95). If these "contracts" are "moral" (as Wolff says), why don't they constitute an animal ethic? It seems to me that his justification lies, once again, in the fact that there would be no absolute value in relation to living beings, but only in relation to ourselves (we attribute this dogmatic condition to ourselves). This is what can be inferred from the following passage: “How would global warming harm any of these species (which disappeared due to the reduction in biodiversity caused by human activity)? Not at all, because they will not exist. And even less so for new species... since they will exist thanks to climate change. The only for whom this will be tragic is the one whose survival we must absolutely guarantee (at any cost, we suppose)... our own humanity. Because we live in the future... Only the human species can be affected by climate change” (pp. 97 and 98). But how will climate change harm future generations not yet born if climate change worsens in a serious and unsustainable way? It will not, because they will not exist either. The argument clearly demonstrates the inevitable nature of contemporary anthropocentrism — the uncompromising defence of our species — but it also implies the oldest and best-known ‘intransigence’ of Callicles (Gorgias): ‘I see that nature itself proclaims that it is just for the better to have more than the worse, and the stronger than the weaker. It shows us with a thousand examples that this is so, and that not only in the animal world, but also among the human species, in entire cities and races, it has been judged that justice dictates that the stronger should rule over the weaker and be better provided for than the weaker (XXXIX) ... intemperance and freedom, when supported by strength, constitute virtue and happiness; the rest, all these fine

ideas, these conventions contrary to nature, are nothing but nonsense and futility” (XLVI);

- 8 - If today we are the undisputed protagonists of the sixth extinction of biodiversity (a term coined by Edward Wilson at the end of the last century, encompassing genetic structures, species, and ecosystems), it is evident that the vital process does not attribute any value to this set and variety of life forms, because many of them have already disappeared previously for simply blind and natural reasons. Tout casse, tout passe et le monde va de lui même (Everything breaks, everything passes, and the world goes on its own). This is true. Therefore, Wolff says, “an ethic that made biodiversity its principle and its end would be extravagant... this ethic would logically lead to the extermination of 90% of the superpredator species: the human species... biodiversity has no more value than that which humanity gives it... it is what it has for us, not what it would have in itself” (pp. 100-107-114). Most importantly, we are the victims, not the perpetrators, of this catastrophic situation, because ‘its causes lie in the history of industrial capitalism; and the perpetrators are those who benefit from it on a global scale’ (p. 109). This is an unusual justification, bordering on the absurd. It is an incomprehensible exoneration of all our actions which, as consumers of the benefits and profits or as employees and indirect dependants of industries (both legal and illegal), pollute and harm the planet in every way. I know the following comparison is inappropriate, but the excuse reminded me of the existence of the Sonderkommando, the special squad in the concentration camps comprising a group of Jewish prisoners tasked with escorting the condemned to the undressing room and, after their death by gassing in the gas chambers, removing the corpses and valuables (gold dentures and rings, for example) and burying them. Über alles muss man sich retten;

- 9 - Let's move on to the conclusion so we can put the main question to the test: according to Wolff, environmental ethics must be purely humanist, because nature doesn't care, living beings don't care, and bare life (la vie nue) doesn't care. The fight against climate change is, above all, a fight against injustices (social, sexual, generational), particularly those that persist in the Global South. Climate change can be corrected if the peoples of the Global South have access to the same modern technologies (low or high) and the same standard of living as the nations of the Global North. “When we think about the living world and

isolate ecological crises from the rest of the world's ills, it is tempting to denounce 'growth' in general, because it contributes to the overexploitation of resources and increases nuisances of all kinds. When we think about humanity, we must consider first and foremost the economic, political and social means to improve not GDP, but the Human Development Index (HDI) of the least developed countries... and this cannot be based on the principles of 'degrowth'" (pp. 120-121).

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Let us return to the crux of the initial question, which was not addressed: what do we mean by 'value'? Generally speaking, it refers to that which is worthy of being preferred or chosen, whether for its utility (instrumental value) or for its merit (intrinsic value – Greco-Roman and Kantian dignity). With the Stoics, the idea of value takes on a moral sense or meaning: 'Everything that contributes to a life in accordance with reason, the condition of all good' (Diogenes Laertius, Book VII, 105). Hence Cicero's interpretation in *De finibus*, III, 6: "That which in itself is in accordance with nature (life, certainly), or which produces something else that is, and which therefore deserves to be chosen (*selectione dignum*) for possessing a certain positive value ($\alpha\lambda\epsilon\gamma\alpha$, for the Stoics), they call precious (which is how we might translate it, I suppose); and, conversely, that which is contrary to the former, they call worthless". Kant, in turn, declares: "We call something good (the useful) that pleases only as a means; but we call something else good in itself that pleases for its own sake. In both cases, the concept of an end is always in view, consequently the relation of reason to a will (the least possible), a satisfaction derived from the existence of an object or an action, in other words, an interest of some kind... Each of us calls agreeable that which gives us pleasure; we call beautiful that which simply pleases us; we call good that which we esteem, that which we approve of, that is, to which we attribute an objective value... with regard to the good, it has a value for every rational being in general..." (*Critique of Judgment*, *Analysis of the Beautiful*, paragraphs 4 and 5).

These conceptions, both rational and secular, do not allow us to dismiss life as something without value, in all its forms. In particular, this applies to the process and dynamics of creation and reproduction, because the choice for being

(despite its tragic or irrational aspects) prevails over non-being, just as life prevails over death. In other words, life enriches the universe itself, allows us to appear in the world and, consequently, to admire it and marvel at it, especially if we take into account that the inorganic undeniably predominates everywhere.

Even today, it is debated whether there are absolute, metaphysical, consubstantial values, or only relative, historical values, the former being independent of man himself. One of them is fundamental: life itself and its conditions. Everything else depends on it: evolution, change, diversity, consciousness, society, the possibility of stipulating one's own human values, whether moral, economic, epistemological, or artistic.

For Windelband, for example, the distinction between the factual and the normative establishes the central point of his philosophy of values. In "Was ist Philosophie?", he tells us that there are two fundamental and irreducible types of cognitive operations: judgments and evaluations. While judgments relate representations in a synthesis and expand knowledge of an object, evaluations presuppose an object as given. They express a relationship between the "evaluative consciousness" and the object represented in a "feeling" of approval or disapproval (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1915, pp. 29-30). Although he characterizes evaluations in terms of the subjective feelings and attitudes of the evaluating consciousness, Windelband argues that some evaluations are "absolutely valid." Even if they are not accepted by everyone, they imply a normative requirement: in other words, they must be universally accepted according to an absolute value (p. 37). Absolute values correspond to the conception of a "normal consciousness," represented in the form of objects (the factual) and norms (the normative) — life, respect, dignity, for example — and which must be thought of in this way.

We find a similar relationship in Max Scheler (Formalism in Ethics and the Material Ethics of Values), for whom value is the link between an 'intentional object and a feeling', such as that of life and health, since man, unlike other living beings, is an *ens amans*. Subjective spiritual acts are intentionally directed towards objective values and realise them. In the West, however, utilitarian values have supplanted those that are vital and worthy of abstract spiritual reverence, bringing with them an empty life, with no other direction than immediate pleasure

or comfort (and today we see that these values have spread throughout the world, as part of the globalisation of production and customs).

A third and final example. For Frédéric Rauh, unlike Scheler, the moral ideal is not an immediate fact of feeling or emotional spontaneity. On the contrary, our freedom must subordinate sensitivity to reason, and to this end, we must test our moral beliefs and spontaneous values through action and life experience. According to him, "Like the scientist, like the geometer, the honest man, before reflecting on the nature of his activity, thinks, acts, works... In all his activities, he rises from active, militant thought—which works in direct contact with things—to speculative, reflective thought... the honest man establishes a hierarchy, a certain ideal order among his desires, his habits, his actions... The honest man is active. But what is a tendency, a desire, a habit? It is an indefinite possibility of images that lead to action... The person who acts, even without thinking, in some way makes explicit an a priori formula. Furthermore, the honest man establishes a hierarchy among these different tendencies, asserting that there must be a certain order in these natural a priori principles. To act morally is, therefore, to rise two levels above experience, both natural and rational. Moral emotion is nothing more than a sign of this dual action... Therefore, it is true to say that a belief becomes properly and essentially moral only from the day it resists all reason, when it has become a principle (in other words, what is evident is not what is proposed at the beginning, but what resists doubt and persists). To every moral deduction must be added... the verification of life... Morality is the science of ends, the science of what reason invincibly desires, the science of the ideal order of life" (*L'expérience moral*, Félix Alcan, 1903, pp. 7-13). Finally, moral belief is the affirmation of a preference, a choice of values, which becomes, through judgment and experience, an ideal.

Thus, we can understand value as 1) a preference determined epistemologically and morally, or what would be preferable and desirable; 2) a guide or norm for our judgments and choices; 3) an intelligent discipline of choice with a claim to universality. Similarly, we can accept what John Dewey understands by value: he points out that value is not limited to a "particular class of things. Everything under the sun can come to possess what the adjective value denotes" (*The Field of Value*, Columbia University Press, chapter 3, pp. 66-67). Likewise, all "deliberate, planned, personal and collective human conduct seems

to be influenced, if not controlled, by estimates of the value or worth of the objectives to be achieved". This refers primarily to activities, but, as a broadly applicable term, it can include all things or objects, actions, situations, as well as different types of goods.

To conclude, let us engage in an exercise of the imagination that could very well happen in reality and which, therefore, falls within the realm of rational thought: a crew of astronauts has landed on a barren, atmosphere-less planet, with gravitational conditions very different from those on Earth and with extreme temperature variations on the surface. The spacecraft has broken down and cannot return. There is no water, no vegetation, no animals, no life whatsoever. How long might the 'absolute values' of this humanity endure in the face of our absolute dependence on living beings and on the specific conditions of life on Earth, and only on Earth? Wolff seems not to recognise the close dependence of our singular life on all the complex environmental factors that precede and are indispensable to it. If we were to use language here akin to that of Levinas, we might say that Wolff blindly disregards the Other, the otherness that is indispensable to him—because it is complementary—in order to remain attached to the domineering selfishness of the Same.