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ENTREPRENEURS' DEEP ASPIRATIONS AND MEANINGFUL WORK

Running head: Entrepreneurs' deep aspirations

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Abstract

To address the question of how the fulfillment of deepest desires can help entrepreneurs to give meaning to their activity, we examined fifty-five semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs. We show that the achievement of their deep aspirations can prove to be a resource or, on the contrary, a hindrance to the construction of meaning. Our study thus reveals that, to avoid a desire turning into an *idealistic*, *naive*, *exhausting*, or *constraining* quest, the entrepreneurs can seek a balance between objectivization and subjectivization of meaningful work.

Keywords

Aspirations, entrepreneurship, eudemonia, meaningful work, meaningfulness.

Résumé

Afin de savoir comment l'accomplissement des désirs les plus profonds peut aider les entrepreneurs à donner du sens à leur activité, nous avons examiné cinquante-cinq entretiens semi-structurés avec des entrepreneurs. Nous montrons que la réalisation de leurs aspirations profondes peut s'avérer être une ressource ou, au contraire, un frein à la construction du sens. Notre étude révèle ainsi que pour éviter qu'un désir ne se transforme en une quête idéaliste, naïve, épuisante ou contraignante, les entrepreneurs peuvent rechercher un équilibre entre objectivation et subjectivation du sens au travail.

Mots clés

Aspirations, entrepreneuriat, eudémonie, sens au travail, sens.

ENTREPRENEURS' DEEP ASPIRATIONS AND MEANINGFUL WORK

To survive in a context of globalized hypercompetition, organizations have developed monitoring tools and a scientization of work that can lead them to focus on the objective dimension of work. That commitment to achieving prescribed results (Annosi, Magnusson, Martini & Francesco, 2016) can cause organizations to lose sight of the workers' subjective experiences (Michaelson, Pratt, Grant & Dunn, 2014). A growing number of academics are questioning the experience of meaning (Bailey & Madden, 2016; May, Li, Mencl & Huang, 2014; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Yeoman, Bailey, Madden & Thompson, 2019) by considering "the value of a work goal or purpose, judged in relation to an individual's own ideals or standards" (May, Gilson & Harter, 2004, p. 14) or "an authentic connection between their work and a broader transcendent life purpose beyond the self" (Bailey & Madden, 2016, p. 2).

That experience of meaning, which is the expression of freedom to welcome the lessons of experience (Palmer, 2000), is distinct from the objective conditions of work. Although there is no doubt that the objective and subjective dimensions are interrelated, "this is not to say in every case that a subjective perception of one's work as meaningful requires that objective conditions of meaningful work be met, nor is it to say that meeting those conditions guarantees the experience of meaningful work" (Michaelson et al., 2014, p. 85). Some studies have proposed a multi-level review of dimensions or factors of meaning (Bailey, Yeoman, Madden, Thompson & Kerridge, 2019; Lysova, Allan, Dik, Duffy & Steger, 2019), but we agree with the idea put forward by Bailey and Madden (2016) and Mitra and Buzzanell (2017) that academics should also examine the processes by which individuals give meaning to their work or the deep reasons why individuals strive to make sense of their work. A dynamic and unfixed vision of meaning can emerge from an introspective and reflective process whereby individuals become aware of who they are (Todd, 2019).

Indeed, since "there is often an implicit logic in this literature that meaningfulness involves a sort of 'fit' or alignment between the individual and the tasks, job or work he or she performs" (Michaelson et al., 2014, p. 79), the process of meaning making assumes that the individual has a knowledge of self. Although the individual has universally shared human qualities, each has unique identity traits that can remain stable despite changing circumstances. This permanent identity background constitutes an "already there" that is not

incompatible with freedom and refers to the needs, values, and beliefs of individuals, but also to their deeper aspirations (Ricoeur, 1966).

Deep aspirations as foundations of meaning have been evoked by philosophers of action whose works are part of the tradition of Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics and focus on the nature of action, motivations, and intentionality (Blondel, 1893; Ricoeur, 1966, 1992). Deep aspiration as a basis for meaning can be defined as an intimate and lasting desire, as opposed to apparent and superficial desire. Deep aspirations are potential sources of *eudemonic* well-being, which occurs when individuals give meaning to their life. That is different from *hedonic* well-being, which results exclusively from the greater weight of positive effects over negative ones (Chalofsky & Cavallaro, 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2001). If we consider that meaningful work is linked to the realization of the workers' aspirations (Bowie, 1999; Tablan, 2015), we can ask ourselves how workers can act in accordance with their own desires.

That question becomes even more pertinent in the field of entrepreneurship, which is an activity often chosen to realize a personal project. Indeed, although recent works in the entrepreneurship literature have addressed the themes of well-being at work and work meaningfulness (Brieger, De Clerq & Meynhardt, 2021; Pathak, 2021), almost no study has focused on entrepreneurs' aspirations and proposed a typology of the deepest desires expressed by them. Following on from that reflection on deep desires and meaning, the question that then arises is: How does the fulfillment of entrepreneurs' deepest aspirations contribute to constructing meaningful work?

To answer that question, we analyzed fifty-five semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs, all graduates of prestigious engineering and business schools, who have chosen to become entrepreneurs rather than be employees of an organization. They justify their choice and the meaning they give to their entrepreneurial activity by authentic, deep, and real desires, of which they are aware and wish to fulfill.

We contribute to the entrepreneurship literature, particularly that on the prosocial (Brieger, De Clercq & Meynhardt, 2021) and intrinsic (Brdar, Rijavec & Miljković, 2009) motivations of entrepreneurs, by documenting four types of desires reported by entrepreneurs, the fulfillment of which provides meaning to their activity. The four types of aspirations referred to by the entrepreneurs are quests for good, for perfection, for adventure, and for a passion-activity. We observe that each of those desires constitutes a resource and entails a risk in terms of constructing meaning, and thus we show that there is a danger in considering the satisfaction of deep desires as the only way to find meaning in one's work.

The article is structured as follows. We first provide a literature review on the concept of deep aspiration in entrepreneurship thinking. We then present the methodology of our empirical study and explain how the data were collected and analyzed. In the results section, we highlight the different desires reported by the entrepreneurs, with particular attention paid to how those desires can constitute a resource or, on the contrary, a risk in the construction of meaning. We conclude by discussing the theoretical contributions of our study and presenting some avenues for future research.

1. The concept of aspiration in entrepreneurship thinking

The notion of intrinsic aspirations or deep aspirations has received little attention in the entrepreneurship literature. However, it emerges in disparate works as a factor of eudemonic well-being or work meaningfulness.

1.1. The denial of the notion of deep aspirations in the entrepreneurship literature

Recent studies in entrepreneurship have addressed the issue of well-being at work and work meaningfulness by highlighting the central role of prosocial motivations or social value creation, but they neglect the notion of deep aspirations.

1.1.1. Deep aspiration—a forgotten concept in the literature on entrepreneurs' well-being at work

Research on entrepreneurial well-being remains rather scarce (Stephan, 2018) despite some recent studies attempting to address that gap, most notably with a 2019 special issue of *Journal of Business Venturing* entitled "Entrepreneurship and well-being." Entrepreneurial well-being is examined through a variety of perspectives: culture, education, innovation, sustainable development, psychology, social entrepreneurship, women, self-employment, and business administration (for a bibliometric review of entrepreneurs' well-being: Sanchez-Garcia et al., 2018). However, most of the studies are based on organizational psychology

research and quantitative methods (Stephan, 2018) showing that entrepreneurs who enjoy high levels of autonomy, job control, and time flexibility can experience higher levels of well-being than other entrepreneurs (Schjoedt, 2013; Stephan, 2018). Similarly, entrepreneurs enjoy higher levels of well-being than employees by taking advantage of the benefits of work independence, task variety, and a lower need to coordinate work routines with others (Hytti, Kautonen & Akola, 2013). Lastly, Nguyen and Sawang (2016) refer to the support received from family and peers to explain entrepreneurs' work-related well-being.

Only some academics studying this theme have investigated the link between entrepreneurs' prosocial motivations, i.e., the desire to help others with their business endeavors, and work-related well-being, which includes job satisfaction and work engagement (Brieger, De Clercq & Meynhardt, 2021).

1.1.2. Deep aspiration—a forgotten concept in the literature on entrepreneurs' work meaningfulness

Studies on entrepreneurs' work meaningfulness are also scarce, but a few studies have considered work meaningfulness as a factor in entrepreneurs' well-being (Stephan, 2018) to show the link between work meaningfulness and job satisfaction (Hytti, Kautonen & Akola, 2013).

Work meaningfulness can constitute a mediating factor not only between ethical leadership and work engagement (Demirtas, Hannah, Gok, Arslan & Capar, 2017) but also between entrepreneurs' social value creation beliefs and their work-related well-being (Brieger & De Clercq, 2019; Brieger, De Clercq & Meynhardt, 2021; Sanchez-Garcia, Vargas-Morúa & Hernández-Sánchez, 2018). Entrepreneurs who have a positive impact on societal environments give a particular meaning to their work and experience higher levels of work-related well-being. One possible explanation for that link is that entrepreneurs who believe they create social value "ruminate less on their choice to run their own business" (Brieger, De Clercq & Meynhardt, 2021, p. 711). A further possible explanation is that those entrepreneurs are more satisfied with their jobs, feel more engaged with their work, and suffer less from work burnout. Therefore, although social entrepreneurs are likely to overload themselves with

too many responsibilities, they tend to experience higher levels of happiness than their commercial counterparts (Pathak, 2021).

The above authors have shown the positive relationship between work meaningfulness and entrepreneurs' well-being. They suggest that this positive relationship is related to the possibility conferred by entrepreneurial activity to align the entrepreneurs' personal preferences and concerns with the orientation of their organization. Only a few studies have examined the aspirations of entrepreneurs by focusing on social entrepreneurs who have founded and sustained fair trade businesses aspiring to have direct relationships with producers, support social causes, aid the preservation of artisanship, and share aesthetic products (Cater, Collins & Beal, 2017). Therefore, although the notion of aspiration is mentioned in the entrepreneurial literature implicitly (Brieger, De Clercq & Meynhardt, 2021; Pathak, 2021) or exceptionally (Cater, Collins & Beal, 2017; Hessels, Van Gelderen & Thurik, 2008), it has not been the focus of further investigation in those various works.

1.2. A greater consideration of the notion of deep aspirations

The notion of deep aspiration is mobilized in research outside the field of entrepreneurship to address questions related to eudemonic well-being and meaningful work (Allan, Duffy & Collisson, 2018; Brdar, Madja & Dubravka, 2009). This research could inspire the construction of a typology of entrepreneurial aspirations to complement existing entrepreneur typologies, which tend to focus on economic opportunities, power, and autonomy.

1.2.1. Lessons from the literature on eudemonic well-being

From Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics, eudemonia is activity in accordance with virtue or excellence and is translated as happiness or flourishing. Undoubtedly, use of the concept of eudemonia is not intended to suggest the subjective state of feeling happy, but rather the human good which involves actions whose essential end point is to achieve the best that is within us and the full development of our potential, which involves knowing our own

disposition and talent, but also our true and best nature (Ryff & Singer, 2008). Ryan and Deci (2001) have distinguished two conceptions of well-being: eudemonia and hedonia. Eudemonia focuses on activity reflecting the best within us, while hedonia means happiness as pleasure and absence of discomfort. These studies have tried to better understand how eudemonia can be operationalized, examining motives and aspirations (Huta & Ryan, 2010; Waterman, 2008). Indeed, based on a distinction between extrinsic aspirations and intrinsic aspirations, some scholars have shown that extrinsic life goals, as opposed to intrinsic ones, are related to poorer well-being (Brdar, Majda & Dubravka, 2009; Kasser & Ryan, 2001). Extrinsic aspirations include financial success, social recognition or popularity, whereas intrinsic aspirations are those involving personal growth, emotional intimacy and community service. The main idea is that individuals who seek to achieve transcendental or higher desires are more likely to contribute to their eudemonic well-being. One of the reasons for this phenomenon is that individuals with stronger intrinsic aspirations invest more effort into satisfactory relationships. Therefore, it may be that eudemonic well-being is the result of the fulfillment of one's intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, aspirations.

It may be that people who pursue intrinsic goals strive to act in accordance with their deeper nature and are more resistant to social pressures due to their focus on meaning and virtue. In other words, individuals who take a eudemonic approach to well-being could be more inclined to make their work meaningful; it may even be that meaningful work is correlated with the deepest intrinsic aspirations (Brdar, Rijavec & Miljković, 2009).

1.2.2. Lessons from the literature on meaningful work

Existing studies of meaningful work tends to focus on the factors and features of meaningful work through a "components lens" (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017, p. 596) and ignores the deeper reasons why people find their work meaningful (Ahn, Dik & Hornback, 2017; Bailey, Lips-Wiersma, Madden, Yeoman, Thompson & Chalofsky, 2019; Bailey & Madden, 2016; Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015).

The sensemaking perspective concentrates more on how entrepreneurs interpret and reconstruct the reality they live in than on initial aspirations (Weick, 1995; Maitlis &

Christianson, 2014; Maitlis, 2022). In Weick's (1995) view, action is the primary focus, allowing for cognitive and narrative activity aimed at making sense of it. The construction of meaning, from this perspective, is nourished by an oscillation between action and cognition, i.e., by a retrospective analysis of the action, which is then embellished. The sensegiving perspective does not seem to devote much attention to deep aspirations, as it advocates deliberate actions intended to "create meanings for a target audience" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 416; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). The objective of these actions is then less to respond to particular aspirations than to persuade others to adopt particular meanings. We believe that the dynamics of meaning can be approached by concentrating on the moments when individuals experience meaning. This view of experience or "experienced meaningfulness" (Bailey & Madden, 2016, p. 2) is not new (Bailey, Yeoman et al., 2019; Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009), but authors increasingly feel the need, in the context of the scientization of work, to recall that experience is central to the meaningful work concept (Lips-Wiersma, Haar & Wright, 2020). For example, Frémeaux and Pavageau (2020) show that individuals can—through an introspective analysis of past and present relationships—identify the deep reasons why they attach importance to certain ethical dimensions of meaning. From that perspective, meaning is not a disembodied, constructed, and ordered idea, but rather emerges from human experience: In other words, giving meaning to one's work presupposes the prior and specific act of receiving meaning from one's experience. The above studies avoid the trap of a predetermined definition of meaning disconnected from the reality experienced by workers, and contribute to the development of a dynamic and non-fixed, relational and non-individualistic perspective on meaning.

It may be that the best way to understand why individuals strive to make sense of their work is to deepen analysis of the notion of intrinsic aspiration, rather than focus on the notion of intrinsic motivation, and in particular on the essential human needs of autonomy, competence, and affiliation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Indeed, the recent theorization of motivation as "ontologically rooted in the conceptualization of desire-as-lack" (Linstead & Brewis, 2007, p. 356) may even have the effect of making us forget the question of meaning, or even the experience of meaning: "Motivation only became an issue—for management and organisation theories as well as for the organisation of work itself—when meaning was either lost or disappeared from work ... motivation theories have become surrogates for the search for meaning" (Sievers, 1986, p. 338-339). On the contrary, the notion of desire is double-sided, encompassing both the notion of lack and a free-flowing creative force (Linstead & Brewis,

2007), making it possible to understand the underlying reasons why workers can make sense of what they do. By accepting to learn from experience (Palmer, 2000), members of an organization can become aware of meaning that they have already received and do not need to create it. Such meaning then lies not in the meeting of objective conditions, but in the attention paid to experience and to the deeper ethical desires that emerge from it.

While the deepest desires tend to be neglected in the literature on motivation (Moynihan, DeLeire & Kohei Enami, 2015), they are not entirely absent from the literature on meaning, which, for example, has examined the link between prosocial desire and meaningful work. Allan, Duffy and Collisson (2018) show that people who work to benefit someone else, rather than themselves, reported greater work meaningfulness. The desire to help others is meaningful in that it lies in the middle of the continuum between a purely sacrificial desire and a desire for reciprocal cooperation. As such, it may reflect both a selfless pursuit of the other's well-being and an increase in self-esteem. Unlike purely altruistic desire, the desire to help others can be explained both by a sincere concern for others and the need to obtain a concrete or social reward, or to reduce an unpleasant internal state. It may then be that the fulfillment of sincere desires, including the desire to help others, proves to be all the more effective in the construction of meaning because it constitutes an attention both to others and oneself.

The notion of deep aspiration as studied by the philosophers of action in the Aristotelian tradition (Blondel, 1893; Ricoeur, 1992) covers a reality close to that to which the notion of prosocial desire refers. The notion of deep aspiration refers to a profound and sincere desire, which is turned toward others and a source of joy. In Blondel's *Action* (1893), the author distinguishes between sincere and profound aspiration, and the apparent desires that he calls nothingness. Humans should learn to want what they yearn for deeply, reconciling "what they want" and "what they do," and accomplishing action in accordance with their deep aspirations. Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another* (1992) which is also part of the continuity of the Aristotelian perspective states that individuals give meaning to their life or work by opting for the choices that best respond to their deep desires. Meaning is the result of a narrative, by which prudent people learn to rectify their choices and thereby to act in accordance with their deepest aspirations.

1.2.3. Toward a typology of entrepreneurial aspirations

Several entrepreneur typologies have been developed based on their reasons for engaging in entrepreneurial activity. Some academics suggest that opportunity entrepreneurs exhibit a higher level of societal well-being than necessity entrepreneurs (Larsson & Thulin, 2019). Others agree that the strict dichotomy of necessity versus opportunity motivation is simplistic and hides the entanglement of categories or even the different types of necessity and opportunity entrepreneurs (Bayad, El Fenne & Ferry, 2016; Giacomin, Janssen & Guyot, 2016; Williams, 2008; Williams & Williams, 2014). Other studies focus on the more or less favorable entrepreneurial intentions in creating a business to distinguish the realists from the enthusiasts. Although both profiles desire to create a business, have responsibilities, be their own boss, use their creativity, and realize their dreams, the realists are conscious that entrepreneurship entails a lot of work and responsibility, whereas the enthusiasts believe that creating a business allows them to have a simple job with few responsibilities, less stress, and a high fixed income (Branchet, Boissin & Hikkerova, 2017). Older typologies of entrepreneurs relied on an analysis of desires for growth, power, and autonomy. Some of those identify the innovative entrepreneur, the owner entrepreneur, the efficient entrepreneur, and the artisan entrepreneur (Laufer, 1975). Others distinguish between the artisan, the family entrepreneur, the manager, and the risk-taker (Lafuente & Salas, 1989). More recent typologies based on the push or pull nature of motivations (Bayad, El Fenne & Ferry, 2016) highlight new profiles of entrepreneurs to reveal, for example, the pursuit of a well-thought-out project in conviction entrepreneurship (Bayad, El Fenne & Ferry, 2016) or the realization of a social project in the context of social entrepreneurship (Abebe, Kimakwa & Redd, 2020; Cater, Collins & Beal, 2017; Richez-Battesti, 2016). With the exception of those few recent studies, all of the typologies have in common a categorization of entrepreneurial motivations along three axes: the desire for autonomy or independence, the desire for growth, and the desire for sustainability (see the synthesis in the special issue of the *Revue de l'Entrepreneuriat*, 2016, especially Boutillier, 2016).

Therefore, the motivations examined in the entrepreneurial literature tend to be associated with the quest for power and autonomy or economic and family opportunities; few studies refer to the entrepreneur's deep aspirations. When the notion of aspiration is mentioned in entrepreneurship research, it tends to cover external motives such as independence, income

and wealth, and status (Giacomin, Janssen & Guyot, 2016; Hessels, Van Gelderen & Thurik, 2008; Valéau, 2017).

Yet, it may be, as we have shown in the previous subsections, that the meaning given to entrepreneurial activity is also related to the deep aspirations of entrepreneurs. Following this discussion about the links between genuine desires and meaningful work, our study aims to examine how entrepreneurs talk about their deep aspirations and whether they consider them as levers for or obstacles to meaningful work.

2. Methods

Although entrepreneurship research into well-being and work meaningfulness has developed in recent years, it does not address the notion of deep aspirations in any great detail. However, the choice to be an entrepreneur and the meaning that entrepreneurs give to their work activity can be linked to intimate and lasting aspirations that are independent of external economic, family, or organizational circumstances.

To explore their deepest aspirations, we conducted a qualitative investigation with engineering and business school graduate entrepreneurs who have chosen to identify a business opportunity and deploy the necessary resources required for its exploitation rather than be employed in large companies. As such, they are particularly likely to question why they did not follow the usual trajectory and opted for a path deemed more difficult and uncertain. One possible explanation for that choice is that work has increasingly become a means of expressing one's uniqueness for younger generations (Méda, 2010). The originality of our approach is to focus on the deepest aspirations which led our interviewees to make the entrepreneurial choice and give meaning to their activity. We ask ourselves how the aspirations underlying the choice of entrepreneurship contribute to the construction of meaningful work.

2.1. Data collection

The data were collected in 2017 and 2018 from fifty-five semi-structured interviews, of an average duration of 1 hour and 40 minutes, with French entrepreneurs who had started a new

business or taken over an existing business. Takeovers are included in our sample due to the entrepreneurial spirit that led them to acquire a company rather than be employed: they combine a willingness to take risks and innovate with a desire to bring about change (Deschamps, 2003; Julien & Marchesnay, 1996). In accordance with the purposive sampling method, we ensured that the entrepreneurs had different profiles based on their years as an entrepreneur, gender, age, and sector of activity: Just over a quarter of the interviewees (fifteen) had been entrepreneurs for more than ten years, while some others were starting their entrepreneurial activity; just under a fifth (ten) of the interviewees were women; just over half (twenty-nine) were under forty years old; and the respondents were entrepreneurs in diverse sectors of activity including manufacturing, logistics, building, commerce, education, tourism, energy, and IT. Interviewee profiles are presented in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

We sought to collect information on the entrepreneurs' personal histories by adopting a life-story approach. This gave participants the opportunity to recount their experiences and analyze the aspirations which guided their choices and were shared with their employees. Described as "depositories of meaning," autobiographical narratives are particularly likely to capture the singularity and richness of personal experiences (Shamir & Eilam, 2005) and to reveal the potential link between aspirations and meaning. After providing the participants with a brief description of the study and our commitment to keeping their identities confidential, we checked the interviewees' main characteristics and started the interview with broad questions focused on what had led them to become entrepreneurs and what meaning they give to their work. We prepared follow-up questions to obtain additional information on respondents' experiences as entrepreneurs: "What is the history of your company?" "What are your sources of motivation as an entrepreneur?" "Who were the key people and what were the key events?" "How do you see the future of your business?" We used the interview guide in a flexible manner, without adopting a systematic order for the questions. As such, we allowed the interviewees to concentrate on the deep aspirations they felt were fundamental in constructing meaning.

2.2. Data analysis

The two authors analyzed the recorded and transcribed data set of 10,539 words independently to capture the experiences to which entrepreneurs refer when they reflect on the meaning they give to their entrepreneurial activity. As proposed by Tracy (2013), we conducted a two-phase process of data analysis. We first reviewed the transcripts independently and selected all the extracts referring to the meaning that the interviewees claimed to give to their entrepreneurial activity. Our realization that the entrepreneurs gave particular importance to their deep aspirations convinced us to focus on this notion rather than on the conditions of meaningful work or the meaning-making process. During this second phase, we applied a thematic coding process to generate conceptual categories (Boyatzis, 1998). We generated first-order categories that reflected the multiple aspirations expressed and shared by the entrepreneurs. The codification of the entrepreneurs' verbatim transcripts was iterative, as we carefully analyzed our database several times to check the relevance of our first-order categories. We then aggregated our first-level codes into broader, second-order categories (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2012) depicting how entrepreneurs can build the meaning of their activity by fulfilling one or more deep aspirations (good, perfection, adventure, or passion-activity). That process generated much discussion between the authors. Although we quickly agreed that deep aspirations were both a strength and a weakness from the entrepreneurs' perspectives, further discussion was necessary to discern the different types of genuine desires at the basis of meaning: The quests for good, perfection and adventure emerged clearly from the data, as they were frequently cited by the entrepreneurs, but we chose also to highlight a fourth category cited by only a few interviewees: The quest for a passion-activity.

3. Results

The interviewees evoke with ease the deep desires that guide their entrepreneurial choice. Although different in nature, all their aspirations have proven to be resources in the process of constructing meaning insofar as they are coupled with a desire to share them with their employees. Each of their aspirations has also been portrayed as a potential hindrance to the construction of meaning.

3.1. Deep Aspirations as the Basis of Meaning

The discourses that reveal how the interviewees give meaning to their entrepreneurial activity relate to the quest for good, perfection, adventure, or a passion-activity. Those aspirations are not exclusive, but each interviewee was able to express at least one of them.

3.1.1. Quest for Good

Some interviewees state that their strongest desire as an entrepreneur is to participate in doing good by "putting a little humanity back into work" (#53) and by contributing "to the intellectual and moral development of humanity and its progressive emancipation" (#31). The quest for good most often takes the form of a search for a "very strong societal impact, for a sovereign good" (#31), or at least a response to societal needs.

That desire to participate in doing good may lead an interviewee whose main activity is the engineering, production, and sale of integrated air and gas solutions to justify their mission by defending a positive moral vision of the use of new technologies:

> One might ask the question: Has technological evolution done more good or more harm to humanity? The answer is clear to me, it has done much more good than harm. And we must not forget the conditions in which our parents and grandparents lived 50 years ago, I think we live much, much better ... I think that in all fields, technological innovation has brought global benefits. And I disagree with the "it was better elsewhere, it was better before," I frankly have confidence in humanity, I think that technological innovation is the only way to give food to 10 billion people on the planet, I think that we gain in life expectancy every year, through technological innovation, and I have more confidence in the generation that follows us, I even rather admire them. (#50)

Most of the interviewees who strive to contribute to good mention the societal usefulness of some of their activities. For example, one, whose mission is to secure official documents, highlights the peripheral ethical issues that give special meaning to the main activity: "Today, how can I develop innovations to fight crime? How can I help people around me who are interested in this sector to progress?" (#31) From the same perspective, another interviewee in charge of the transmission of information to the operators of industrial production chains defines himself as a "militant against the lack of information" but also as a "militant to give freedom and power back to the people at the bottom of the hierarchical stratum" (#42).

3.1.2. Quest for perfection

Some interviewees refer to the quest for perfection as the foundation of meaning in the workplace, using criteria other than just customer satisfaction to evaluate the quality of a job. One of the criteria for perfectionism is the rigor and meticulousness with which the work is carried out; "that is to say, we looked at all the aspects of the work and each time we tried to do it a little better" (#9):

> There are rules of art in the profession, rules of art that have been built up over the years by building on past experience. (#50)

Another criterion of perfectionism to which some interviewees refer is achieving sustainable work, i.e., work that does not need to be redone:

> The best proof that this is really our greatest achievement is that it's a tool that was created in 1999. Today, I still have 500 people working on this tool in my company. So it's software that hasn't evolved since 1999, except for technical updates, but it's the same tool, it's the same design, it's the same spirit, it's the same way of working, and that's it. And when I ask someone to work with this tool, it takes no more than two days to master it. So it's a good tool, it's the result of a job well done. (#48)

Some interviewees also talk about sustainable work in the first stage of a long-term project: "We are going to create something from which we will be able to build new things, where we won't need to say: We will have to dismantle it, dismantle it and then do it again" (#30). In other words, work is also done carefully when it is part of the creation of a long-lasting project:

> Work well done, yeah, that's the one where you say, "OK. Thanks to that, it's a new step in the staircase. You can lean on it, it's solid and you'll be able to climb a little higher, you'll be able to climb higher because of this work." (#30)

Finally, more subjective criteria of perfectionism were suggested by some interviewees, considering that quality work is that which gives us "moments of contemplation" (#25) or that which surprises us:

> When you do a job, when you set up a project, at the end, contemplate your work a little. (#29)

> A job well done is a job that is done, beyond expectation, beyond my expectations. A job well done is beyond my expectations. I'm someone who has a lot of expectations anyway. I'd say we did a little something extra. (#19)

3.1.3. Quest for Adventure

All the interviewees are proud of what they have accomplished professionally, considering being an entrepreneur to be a success in itself. Some discourses reveal a deeper motivation to live their professional evolution as an adventure or a succession of adventures. Those entrepreneurs who sometimes imagine themselves as "serial entrepreneurs rather than managers" (#3) relate their taste for adventure by describing their different functions:

> I started out as an automation specialist, then as a computer scientist, project manager, and that includes a notion of management. And then business manager with a notion of business. Some people don't want to be managers. Some people don't want to do business. That's what I mean. And I would say that in terms of success, each time there has been a new stage, I have been able to succeed in getting through it and then moving on to the next stage. (#12)

Those interviewees do not hesitate to consider the positions they have previously held as challenges that they are proud to have overcome:

> The second position I had at [Large Retailer] was a professional success because it was not easy to get a job, they told me these positions were given to people who had a good ten years of experience, and I had two or three years of experience and uh, seeing that it was going well with my boss at the time, at the end of my second year, this position became available, so they gave it to me and finally it went very well. (#5)

The interviewees in search of adventure put forward particular qualities such as "a fighting spirit which is not negligible" (#37) or a resilience allowing them to remain focused on the objectives and not on the difficulties:

> During an event devoted to entrepreneurship, two other leaders who spoke that day used a metaphor on entrepreneurs and adventurers. Indeed, they said, "the entrepreneur thrives in chaos and uncertainty. To do so, they must rely on resilience." Both used the metaphor of the great traveler. The first said: "As an entrepreneur, you see the goal, but you don't know the road." The second drew a parallel between entrepreneurship and the film Back to the Future: "Where we are going, there is no road. As such, a good entrepreneur knows how to eat rocks." (#39)

One of the interviewees explains how the resilient entrepreneur turns failures into success: "Set yourself a goal that you don't reach and when you don't reach that goal you try to figure out why, and in fact, uh, as soon as you figure out why, it finally becomes a success; it becomes a success because you figured out why. And so that's how you get better. I often say that I'm a kind of black hole, when there's a problem I absorb it, I create energy from it" (#4). These interviewees, conscious of their combativeness, their "taste for challenge" (#2) and

their capacity for resilience, do not hesitate to consider themselves as adventurers, which one of them defines as follows:

> The adventurer is one who will like to take risks, who will like to reinvent themself, who will like to travel. On the other hand, the home-lover is someone who will rather be in a routine phase, who will enjoy themself in a safe environment. (#3)

3.1.4. Quest for a Passion-Activity

All the interviewees mention the pleasure of being an entrepreneur because of the latitude and responsibilities inherent in the entrepreneurial function, but some of them share a more specific motivation, which is to combine entrepreneurial activity with a passion they have had since childhood:

> It is a company in the manufacturing and distribution of windsurfing, kitesurfing, paddle equipment. It's a job with passion. (#8)

> The creation of this start-up was achieved around a common passion, video games in the broadest sense. This activity was not new to them, as they have always kept in parallel with their past professional lives an activity to develop [their] own video games. Entrepreneurship represents an opportunity to make a living from this activity, they manage to develop exciting projects for companies. Their activity corresponds to their expectations; it is a "profession-passion." (#29)

Proud of being able to combine their work and their passion, they evoke a positive dynamic they can benefit from in the long run: "The hardest challenge is to succeed in combining passion and work. If we can solve this equation, there's nothing to stop us. That doesn't mean it's going to be easy. It doesn't mean it will be effortless or that it won't be difficult, but I think it generates a real, virtuous state of mind" (#3). Those few interviewees consider that most entrepreneurs deprive themselves of this positive dynamic by giving in to family or social pressure:

> There are still a lot of [people] who don't have a passion for their job, because that's what happens in the family. They have classic jobs, like in banking or trading or something like that. There are a lot of jobs, they're not passion jobs, it's just because you earn a good living or just because in the social ideal it's a great job. (#29)

3.2. Prosocial Desires as Resources in the Construction of Meaning

Whatever their deepest aspirations, the interviewees report a desire to give their employees the opportunity to experience the aspirations for which they have chosen to develop an entrepreneurial activity. Hence, the interviewees give a particular meaning to the prosocial desire to allow their employees in turn to live a quest for good, perfection, adventure, or a passion-activity.

3.2.1. The Prosocial Desire to Enable Employees to Advance Humanity

Entrepreneurs who wish to participate in the development of good and have a positive impact on society seek to share this profound aspiration with their employees. One interviewee states that he strives to provide his employees with the opportunity to "work for a collective interest, i.e., for the intellectual and moral development and emancipation of mankind" and to "work together": "You don't have to agree on everything to work together, but you have to have a common goal ... Alone, you go fast. Together, we go far, and for a long time" (#31).

By giving his employees the opportunity to respond to real societal needs, an entrepreneur can in turn rediscover the primary meaning of his activity:

> I sent two guys to Guinea, to work on a hydroelectric project in a remote place, so I said to them, "Guys. It's your first trip to Africa, you'll see: it's complicated. Food, be careful, don't eat that. The hotel, the accommodation, it's extremely basic." They go there, they come back, after two and a half weeks, three weeks, and I see them come here in my office with a smile on their face, and I tell them "it was difficult, wasn't it?" They say, "We'll go back whenever you want. When we restarted the machine, the whole village thanked us, because they hadn't had any energy for four years." So we actually found the meaning of our work again. And so today, that's also why I'm involved in exporting, and that's why I'm working in the energy sector. (#53)

3.2.2. The Prosocial Desire to Allow Employees to Do their Job Well

In seeking to do quality work, entrepreneurs can also lead their employees to experience satisfaction of a job well done, i.e., "to be in agreement with what we have done" (#14) or "to be happy with what we have done" (#34). The satisfaction of a job well done can be shared by all employees, even if they have differing views on the criteria for quality of work:

> A job well done is a job in which all the stakeholders find satisfaction ... my brother is going to be satisfied when he can be creative, he is a little different because he is quite artistic, I am a little more commercial than him, we are a good fit. (#26)

Beauty-conscious entrepreneurs can help their employees do quality work by giving them a clear specification that allows them to "respond in the time allotted with the functionality they were originally asked for" (#8). They can also encourage their employees to work collaboratively, i.e., "in the right direction and in a direction that is shared by everyone" (#20).

3.2.3. The Prosocial Desire to Allow Employees to Experience an Adventure

Entrepreneurs do not consider the economic success of their business without thinking about the benefits that their employees can derive: "These are three million-euro projects. This is a success story for me because it takes everyone upwards" (#53). Interviewees in search of adventure mainly emphasize the opportunity given to their employees to develop their careers and "climb the social ladder" (#1). A few of them are particularly proud of having helped employees to overcome personal difficulties through entrepreneurial adventure:

> For me, the greatest achievement is to have helped people evolve within the company. It's also a success to think that today this company is running, that there are 250 people and families who make a living from it, and that there's a guy who had been destroyed by two divorces, who was starting to drink, and he's a guy who's been getting back on his feet. (#51)

Some interviewees point out that employees can live their work as an adventure if they have the autonomy to take initiatives and risks: "I am a rather demanding person but at the same time I think I am more of an educator, so I try to encourage initiative rather than blame failure" (#50).

3.2.4. The Prosocial Desire to Allow Employees to Experience a Passion-Activity

Almost all the interviewees share a desire to "allow their employees to grow" (#9) or "to enjoy their work" (#37), but some mention a more specific aspiration to help their employees combine work and passion: "Find a way to do something that makes me feel good, because the more I feel good, the more I make the people around me feel good" (#9). One, whose

passion is video games, tells how he has also changed his management style to share and develop happiness at work:

> We read Frédéric Laloux's book *Reinventing Organization*. It resonated with us, because it explains our philosophy of not just making money, but doing a job that makes sense for us. We had a passion for video games, [and] we are happy to work in a team, to be able to do our own projects, to have independence, to be able to innovate—all values we also wanted to share with our employees. So we wanted to make them more autonomous, to make them more responsible, and the model proposed by Frédéric Laloux, and which we heard from other testimonies, was the model of the liberated company, and that's something that really resonated with us ... My greatest success is to have set up this organization, to have done it with the team, to have succeeded in transforming the way we worked. From what we could see, it was much better. And it was a real pleasure for the people who were there to come to work in the morning ... People are happy to work. We don't impose very much. The hours are free, the leave is unlimited, they can work whenever they want from wherever they want. Holidays are free and unlimited. And it's working very well and it's going well. That's my greatest satisfaction. (#29)

3.3. Deep Desires as Risks in the Construction of Meaning

The deep aspirations which the interviewees refer to are not only resources in the construction of meaning. According to them, in some contexts, an excessive focus on one's own aspirations can be counterproductive and prevent the construction of meaning.

3.3.1. The Idealistic Quest for Good

Some of the interviewees recognize that their desire to advance humanity risks being disconnected from reality. One of them notes with regret that the quest for good is neither a condition nor a guarantee of success: "Meaning is much more intimate, and I have seen many business leaders who don't seem to believe in anything. Yet it works. Because the system is such that when you have a good product that is made without love and without anything, it still sells" (#21). Another interviewee, aware of having a potentially idealistic aspiration, explains how he strives to harmonize his desires and actions:

> My purpose is a bit, as I said earlier, it's a bit of a teddy bear. It's a bit abstract, that's precisely why I always try to concretize it by particular products or services (#9).

Those interviewees agree on the observation that the quest for good is likely to be just an idea, which they try to turn into practical action.

3.3.2. The Naïve Quest for Perfection

Interviewees who mention the quest for perfection as the foundation of meaningful work denounce the hunt for over-quality as an obstacle to the quality of work, particularly because it deprives workers of the time they need to do their work with care: "When you run around, one of the first feelings you have is that you're not doing a good job. Because when you have forty tasks in parallel, you're going to get to the essential. For me, a job well done is to have the time to do it and then to do it well in all its aspects, in all the details" (#12). That discourse remains rather isolated, as the majority of interviewees defend the hunt for quality, considering it necessary to preserve the company's profitability:

> I have technicians who are too perfectionist, and so if you look at profitability, they are not profitable for the company. That's what's dramatic. Because they have the impression, and that's their motto, they say "I like a job well done." Yeah, ok, but to do the 10% that will differentiate you from your colleagues, you're costing us 80% more (#53).

The quest for perfection thus means running the risk of leading workers to lose sight of economic demands.

3.3.3. The Exhausting Quest for Adventure

These interviewees recognize that they easily enter a spiral of success to which they become addicted and which leads them to be in constant search of adventure: "It's a kind of adrenaline that's quite amazing. But I think it's the same for a sportsperson when they win a competition. It's the achievement of a goal, but it lasts a few seconds. And then you go on to the next thing. A new goal. We're nourished by our goals; we're not nourished by our successes. It's the challenge" (#48). That entrepreneur also acknowledges that he exhausts himself looking for new adventures rather than building on his successes:

> Success tastes sweet and doesn't last very long. One success overshadows the other ... I thought, "Well, the day I get there, I'll be, I'll feel like a success." It lasts a few minutes. That's all it lasts. And it's just one step. Because we've set a goal, we've achieved

> something. Well, what's the next step? What's the next challenge? That's the problem, you can never be satisfied with success. So, actually, we forget about it pretty quickly (#48).

3.3.4. The Constraining Quest for Passion-Activity

In the opinion of some of the interviewees, the realization of a passion-activity coupled with the granting of freedom can be sufficient for the fulfillment of the group. The risk for these entrepreneurs is then to impose a meaning based on passion and freedom without taking into account the heterogeneity of the employees' needs, values, and aspirations. Concerned about each individual's fulfillment, the entrepreneur may be tempted by an injunction to be happy and free, and a denial of certain relational or economic difficulties.

The interviewee working in the video game sector insists on the idea that all successive decisions aimed at increasing organizational freedom have been the subject of a consensus among his colleagues: "Everything is horizontal, even I am no longer the boss. We have abolished everything that was management, bosses, and all that. ... we presented this to the employees in September 2015 and everyone agreed, we had created a subsidiary, to develop our own games" (#29). Moreover, this entrepreneur emphasizes that even faced with economic difficulties, colleagues remained united and able to make decisions unanimously: "The game did not have the financial success we hoped for ... we made the collective decision that the best thing was to stop the activity ... These were the employees who chose to implement their economic redundancy plan that they managed themselves" (#29). Finally, this entrepreneur considers it appropriate to reaffirm that the freedom of organization did not cause any concern for his colleagues and that it remains a source of unanimous satisfaction: "Whether the game worked or not, there are one million reasons why a game does or does not work, but we are talking about a bit of luck, that's all, the reasons are not linked for me to our organization that we set up. We have seen that there are only advantages in setting up this type of organization" (#29).

Table 2 summarizes how deep aspirations cited by entrepreneurs can be levers for or, on the contrary, obstacles to the construction of meaning.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

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4. Discussion

When questioned on meaningful work and, more specifically, on the meaning given to entrepreneurial activity, interviewees mention less the components or factors of meaning than deep aspirations. The exploration of this concept contributes to entrepreneurship literature and practice to reveal how entrepreneurs manage to align their activity with their aspirations. Further research could continue to pursue our goal of examining the concept of aspiration in the entrepreneurial context.

4.1. Entrepreneurship as a means of fulfilling one's aspirations

Four types of entrepreneurial aspirations emerge from our data: quest for good, quest for perfection, quest for adventure, and quest for a passion-activity. We have called the quest for good the desire expressed by some entrepreneurs to meet societal needs and to participate in the humanization of work. The quest for perfection covers the search for work that is neat, lasting, constructive, surprising, or that workers can contemplate in the way Simone Weil invited us to contemplate our own work (Weil, 1988). The quest for adventure reflects a taste for challenge, a fighting spirit and a capacity for resilience. We used the expression "quest for an activity-passion," when entrepreneurs expressed an aspiration to combine work and a personal hobby. This desire to place one's main hobby at the heart of an entrepreneurial project may have similarities to what recent entrepreneurial literature calls product passion—a passion for activities related to a product or service (Cardon, Wincent, Singh & Drnovsek, 2009; Warnick, Murnieks, McMullen & Brooks, 2018).

Each of those aspirations alone does not characterize an entrepreneurial profile; some of the interviewees expressed a plurality of desires that give meaning to their activity. Some narratives on meaningful aspirations complement each other or are in synergy with each other. It may be that a passion-activity is experienced as an adventure, or that the search for perfection is perceived as being good for society. For example, one interviewee highlights the positive and adventurous spirit of entrepreneurs who are fortunate enough to combine work

and passion (see the statements of #9), while another strives to help his employees do their jobs well, considering the quality of work as a good for humanity (see the statements of #50).

The objective of our study is not to develop an ethical hierarchy of the aspirations cited by interviewees, but to show that each of these aspirations can constitute a resource in the construction of meaning, since it is accompanied by a desire to help others to experience those same aspirations. The desire to help others in the organization is imbued with both caring for others and caring for oneself, thereby reflecting the selfless and self-interested dual nature of the pro-social desire (Allan et al., 2018).

Our study also shows that each of these aspirations entails a particular weakness that can prevent the entrepreneurs from making sense of their work. A search for meaning based on the quest for good risks being disconnected from reality, or even concealing entrepreneurial practices that do not contribute to good. The quest for perfection as the exclusive purpose of entrepreneurial activity can lead to justifying unprofitable activities and neglecting certain economic realities. The quest for adventure can drive the entrepreneurs to pursue new challenges and to lose sight of the benefits of actions already accomplished. The quest for activity-passion may lead the entrepreneurs to formulate an injunction to be free and happy, and to deny the other levers of community development. These results echo some recent studies revealing that adventurous or passionate entrepreneurs have a higher propensity for risk-taking or rigidity (Cardon & Murnieks, 2020). Some interviewees recognize the fragility of their own posture and sometimes regret such denials of reality, especially when their aspirations are idealistic or involve a frantic succession of adventures.

4.2. Contributions to entrepreneurship literature

Our study enriches the entrepreneurship literature by showing that the meaning given to entrepreneurial activity is not only linked to the characteristics of the activity—independence or status (Hessels et al., 2008)—or to the circumstances of the creation (Bayad, El Fenne & Ferry, 2016; Giacomin et al., 2016) but also to deep aspirations. That confirms the intuition of entrepreneurship researchers examining prosocial (Brieger, De Clercq & Meynhardt, 2021; Cater, Collins & Beal, 2017; Pathak, 2121) or intrinsic motivations (Brdar, Rijavec & Miljković, 2009). Indeed, as indicated by the few studies to which our research relates, prosocial or intrinsic aspirations can be sources of meaning and well-being. However, our

study points out that those aspirations can be rooted in deep-seated quests intimately linked to entrepreneurs' profiles. This closer examination of entrepreneurial desires may justify the development of a typology of aspirations based on both external and internal motives.

That finding illustrates a more general reflection evoked in our literature review in which proponents of a dynamic vision of meaningful work (Bailey & Madden, 2016; Frémeaux & Pavageau, 2020; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017) and the philosophers of action (Blondel, 1893; Ricoeur, 1966, 1992) participate: the realization of deep-seated aspirations may explain certain choices more than the classic motivations listed in the academic literature.

Our study also contributes to the literature on meaningful work by revealing that the focus on real intrinsic aspirations prevents an over-objectivization of meaning (meaning reduced to the achievement of prescribed results) in which managerialist systems may participate to coerce workers into adopting a logic of production in the interests of their superiors (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). Our study shows, however, that the realization of one's deepest desires, no matter how virtuous they may be, can also lead the individual to experience an excess of subjectivization of meaningful work. In other words, a focus on one's deepest aspirations risks locking the individual into an idealistic, naive, exhausting, or constraining search for meaning, and into a denial of other aspects of meaningful work. Our results enhance our understanding that the search for meaning can lead to unpleasant experiences when it is diverted from its primary purpose and results in an exaggerated achievement of one's aspirations (Florian, Costas & Kärreman, 2019). We highlight a new form of "excess of self" that is not just an excess of activities (Aubert, 2005) but also an excess of desires. Meaningful work, which can result in work-related well-being (Brieger, De Clercq & Meynhardt, 2021) or eudemonic well-being (Brdar, Majda & Dubravka, 2009), is consequently based on a *moderate* realization of one's aspirations, thus making it possible to avoid both excessive objectivization and subjectivization of the meaning. Therefore, our study also enriches the literature on sensemaking and sensegiving (Weick, 1995; Maitlis, 2022) by revealing not only an oscillation between action and cognition but also an oscillation between satisfaction of deep aspirations and consideration of objective dimensions of meaning.

Figure 1 depicts the mechanism by which the fulfillment of deep aspirations can support the construction of meaning.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

4.3. Contributions to entrepreneurship practice

Our study invites entrepreneurs and, more generally, all workers in positions of authority to undertake a search for meaning that is both determined and moderate. It should combine an objective consideration of the organizational project with a focus on the workers' own aspirations. Indeed, even supposing that employers resist the ease of purpose-washing and actually pursue higher objectives that are mindful of economic, social, and environmental concerns, it is by no means certain that workers can appropriate these missions and experience them as sincere and personal aspirations. Hence, since objective meaning does not necessarily coincide with subjective meaning (Bailey & Madden, 2016), some workers may not be able to make sense of their activity, even in mission-driven companies. With sufficient autonomy and resources to implement freely chosen, even spontaneous, projects, workers have a greater chance of fulfilling a deep aspiration while pursuing the company's mission. By demonstrating that the opposite reasoning is also true, our study highlights another practical implication that is equally valuable for entrepreneurs and empowered workers, including researchers. By focusing on the fulfillment of their deep aspirations, people risk becoming locked into their inner dream of meaning and losing sight of the demands of reality. Thus, paradoxically, the deep aspirations established as a professional life path are weakened if workers do not accept the test of reality. Our study therefore invites us to become aware of our deepest aspirations, perhaps even to express, share, and revive them, while accepting that they will not necessarily inspire all the tasks related to our activity.

4.4. New research paths

Future research in entrepreneurship could examine the differences between deep aspirations and artificial aspirations and then focus on the former, awareness of which facilitates the experience of meaning and, ultimately, eudemonic well-being (Bailey, Lips-Wiersma et al., 2019). In line with the philosophers of action, our study suggests that deep aspirations are sources of joy, while artificial aspirations cause pleasure. Bergson (1920, p. 30) emphasizes the idea that joy occurs when our destination is reached and uses an example from the business world: "The merchant developing his business, the manufacturer seeing his industry prosper, are joyous—is it because money is gained and notoriety acquired? No doubt, riches

and social position count for much, but it is pleasures rather than joy that they bring; true joy, here, is the feeling of having started an enterprise which goes, of having brought something to life." Through joy, individuals perceive that they are going to be a little more themselves by making choices in accordance with their deepest aspirations. We can thus think that joy manifests what Maritain (2018) calls an orientation of the spiritual unconscious or spiritual preconscious, which makes it possible to perform free acts, unlike acts emanating from the Freudian unconscious or automatic unconscious. This joy results from the "creation of self by self" (in the sense of deployment) (Bergson, 1920, p. 31), while pleasure is ordered to the survival of the species: "I say joy, I do not say pleasure. Pleasure is merely an artifice devised by nature to obtain from the living being the conservation of life; it does not indicate the direction in which life is launched" (Bergson, 1920, p. 29). In this sense, unlike hedonic pleasures, joy is not incompatible with hardship; it is not a continuous and permanent emotion, but rather an emotion that can be experienced anew when making choices that are in the same direction. To understand the heterogeneity of entrepreneurial experiences and not be restricted to an analysis of external motivations (Giacomin, Janssen & Guyot, 2016; Hessels, Van Gelderen & Thurik, 2008), future typological constructs should include deep-seated aspirations, especially those that generate joy. Future research could extend this reflection by examining in other entrepreneurial contexts and with other samples how entrepreneurs identify their deepest aspirations and rely on this awareness of what animates them to renew their experience of meaning. Finally, other studies could analyze the evolution of entrepreneurs' deep aspirations over time: it may be that despite deep aspirations being more stable than hedonic pleasures, they give rise to different work practices depending on the circumstances.

Conclusion

The confinements and the extension of telework imposed in most countries during the Covid-19 pandemic may have led many entrepreneurs to question the meaning of their work and to be more attentive to the reasons why they perform this activity (Meahjohn & Persad, 2020). This study has highlighted deep aspirations—quests for good, perfection, adventure, or a passion-activity—that can contribute to the construction of meaning when they are shared by other members of the organization. But it is possible that in wanting to escape an excessive

objectivization of meaning (meaning reduced to the completion of prescribed tasks), some entrepreneurs and, more generally, some workers fall into the opposite trap, that of excessive subjectivization (meaning reduced to the fulfillment of personal aspirations), leading them to an idealistic, naive, exhausting, or constraining quest for meaning.

We argue in favor of the development of an awareness of the dangers of extremes. Indeed, it may be that this awareness helps us to navigate the ridge between objectivization and subjectivization of meaning. In turn, that progress may allow us to develop a certain prudence in the establishment of the objective conditions of meaning and in the fulfillment of our deepest aspirations.

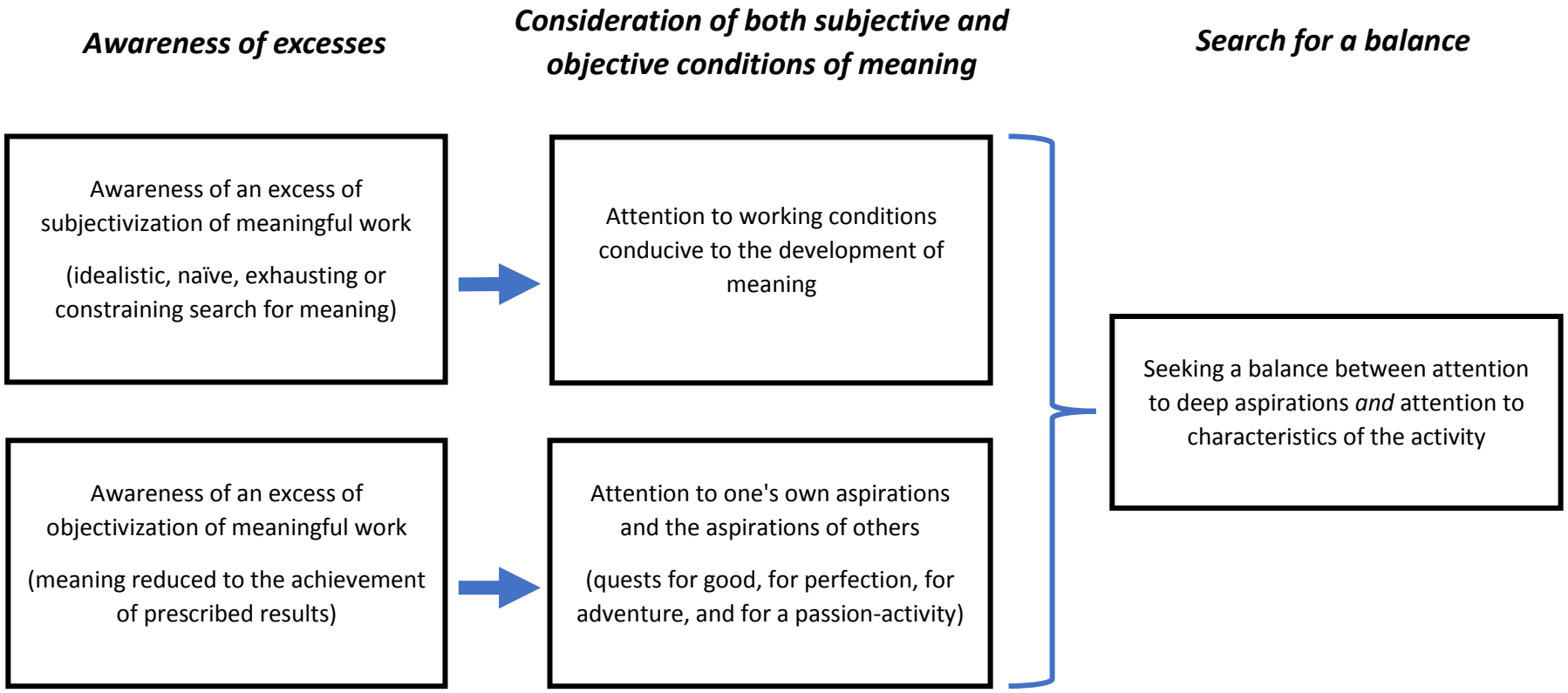
Table 1. Sample composition

Interviewees	Years in entrepreneurship	Gender	Age (in years)	Sector	Duration
#01	0	Man	32	E-finance	1h 42m
#02	0	Woman	35	E-commerce	1h 31m
#03	1	Man	27	Recruitment	2h 5m
#04	1	Man	27	IT	0h 37m
#05	1	Man	27	Manufacturing	1h 58m
#06	1	Man	28	Building	2h 24m
#07	1	Woman	30	Logistics	1h 40m
#08	1	Man	31	Corporate services	1h 15m
#09	1	Man	34	Consulting	1h 35m
#10	1	Woman	40	Building	2h 20m
#11	1	Man	42	Entertainment	1h 37m
#12	1y 6m	Man	41	IT	1h 45m
#13	2	Man	26	Entertainment	2h
#14	2	Woman	30	Human services	1h 39m
#15	2	Man	56	Logistics	1h 47m
#16	2y 6m	Man	39	IT	1h 35m
#17	3	Woman	28	Event services	1h 45m
#18	3	Man	29	Robotics	1h 55m
#19	3	Woman	30	Tourism	1h 27m
#20	3	Man	33	Ecological food	1h 11m
#21	3	Man	38	E-finance	1h 22m
#22	3	Man	46	Energy	1h 55m
#23	3	Man	48	Building	1h 36m
#24	4	Man	34	IT	2h 16m
#25	4	Man	41	Consulting	1h 35m
#26	4	Woman	51	Craft	1h 28m
#27	5	Man	28	E-commerce	1h 5m
#28	5	Woman	31	HR	1h 23m
#29	5	Man	31	Entertainment	1h 40m
#30	5	Man	34	Entertainment	1h 50m
#31	6y 6m	Man	38	Security	1h 33m
#32	7	Man	29	Manufacturing	1h 27m
#33	8	Man	31	Marketing	1h 8m
#34	8	Man	37	Fair trade	1h 17m
#35	8	Man	53	Building	2h 10m
#36	9	Man	34	IT	1h 40m
#37	9	Man	38	Transport services	1h 51m
#38	9	Man	52	Education	1h 47m
#39	10	Man	42	Maintenance services	1h 38m
#40	10	Man	56	Insurance	1h 33m
#41	12	Man	42	Entertainment	1h 25m
#42	13	Man	31	IT	1h 31m
#43	13	Woman	40	Human services	1h 49m
#44	13	Man	43	Education	1h 45m
#45	13	Man	46	Building	1h 52m
#46	17	Man	45	Building	1h 44m
#47	19	Woman	53	Education	1h 34m
#48	21	Man	43	Entertainment	1h 30m
#49	21	Man	50	Manufacturing	1h 50m
#50	21	Man	58	Energy	1h 40m
#51	22	Man	58	Corporate services	1h 35m
#52	23	Man	63	Logistics	2h
#53	25	Man	56	Energy	2h
#54	28	Man	64	Manufacturing	1h 22m
#55	30	Man	52	Manufacturing	1h 12m

Table 2. Deep aspirations and construction of meaning in the context of entrepreneurship

Deep aspirations cited by entrepreneurs	Deep aspirations as resources in the construction of meaning	Deep aspirations as impediments to the construction of meaning
Quest for the good - Humanize - Respond to societal needs "We contribute to the intellectual and moral development of humanity and its progressive emancipation." (#31)	**Pro-social desire to allow employees to advance humanity** - Help employees to work for the intellectual and moral development - Help employees to work together to respond to societal needs "Together we go far and for a long time." (#31)	**An idealistic quest for good** - Reduce good to an idea disconnected from reality - Pursue idealistic aspiration "My purpose is a bit of a teddy bear. It's a bit abstract." (#9)
Quest for perfection - Consider the rigor, meticulousness, and care with which the work was carried out - Consider moments of contemplation or wonder at work "We've looked at all the aspects of the work." (#9)	**Pro-social desire to allow employees to do their job well** - Help employees to experience satisfaction of a job well done - Give employees a clear specification "A job well done is a job in which all stakeholders find satisfaction." (#26)	**A naive quest for perfection** - Carry out over-quality to the detriment to the company's profitability - Prioritize the care with which work is carried out "I've got technicians who are too much of a tinkerer, and if you look at the profitability, they are not profitable for the company." (#53)
Quest for adventure - Consider the positions held as challenges - Develop a fighting spirit and a capacity for resilience "The adventurer is one who will like to take risks, who will like to reinvent himself, who will like to travel." (#3)	**Pro-social desire to allow employees to experience an adventure** - Help employees to develop their careers - Give employees the autonomy to take initiatives and risks "An adventure ... this is a success story for me because it takes everyone upwards." (#53)	**An exhausting quest for adventure** - Become addicted to a spiral of success - Exhaust oneself looking for new adventures "One success overshadows the other." (#48)
Quest for a passion-activity - Combine entrepreneurial activity with a passion - Benefit from a positive dynamic - Resist family or social pressure "It is a company in the distribution, manufacturing and distribution of windsurfing, kitesurfing, paddle equipment. It's a job with passion." (#8)	**Pro-social desire to allow employees to experience a passion-activity** - Help employees to combine work and passion - Help employees to feel free and experience happiness at work "It was a real pleasure for the people who were there to come to work in the morning ... People are happy to work." (#29)	**A constraining quest for activity-passion** - Formulate an injunction to be free and happy - Deny certain relational or economic difficulties "Everybody had to have more freedom to be happier." (#29)

Figure 1. Awareness of excesses as a lever for constructing meaningful work



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