

## Education and the Meaning of Life

Tapio Puolimatka and Timo Airaksinen  
*University of Helsinki*

All serious discussion about educational problems leads to reflection about educational aims and turns into a consideration about the good life and the alternatives open to human beings. This leads ultimately to the question of the meaning of life. This question is so essential for educational philosophy that it cannot be avoided, although it is vague and equivocal. The meaning of life is a fundamental philosophical concept that has not received the attention in education that it deserves. To put meaning at the center of educational inquiry allows the integration of various educational dimensions and helps in the evaluation of educational activity in its totality.<sup>1</sup>

### EDUCATIONAL AIMS AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

Since formal education implies a comprehensive intervention in human life, it requires justification. Such an intervention can be justified only if something of value is conveyed. Therefore, the aims of education implicitly assume a conception about what kind of life is worth living. The direction given to the development of children derives from a vision of life, a commitment to those things which are most important. This assumes a world in which some states of affairs are more valuable than others. It is not sufficient simply to refer to values in an isolated manner since the latter connect with and complement each other. Particular values acquire their full significance by being connected with the meaning of human existence as a whole. Without such a totality they are threatened by distortion and fragmentation. By making a claim about the meaning of life, the aims of education also claim implicit validity; without such a claim educational intervention cannot be fully justified.

The perspective of the meaning of life sets values in an order of importance. This kind of perspective is self-evident for an educator who wants to promote the most valuable among the children's potentialities. Such an educator feels that she has failed in her task if her educational efforts have the consequence that a person devotes her life to something trivial or negative.

### DOES EDUCATION PRESUPPOSE OBJECTIVE VALUES?

This raises the question whether there are objective criteria for evaluating different conceptions of the meaning of life. Take the case of a person who devotes her life to something trivial like, for example, collecting empty beer cans. It is true that she does not harm anybody. However, we feel that the meaning of her life is at least questionable. No one tries to encourage children to seek their life's meaning in collecting empty beer cans. Educators encourage children to devote their lives to something more valuable, trying to elaborate the variety of valuable opportunities. To devote one's life to collecting trash for its own sake is to offend against the dignity of one's own person, since the activity is valueless or at least trivial.

If we cannot make sense of a life plan, it seems to be devoid of meaning and value. The reasoning goes like this: the collector's plan of life is incomprehensible

because we cannot solve the problem of the discrepancy between her subjective valuations and the negative external evaluation; no meaning for her activity can be found.

A moral antirealist could argue that here we bypass some key problems by appealing to the concept of meaning, namely, that meaning should be capable of communication and understanding. If someone feels happy in her chosen activity and if she does not hurt anyone, we are hardly justified in regarding the activity as worthless by appealing to its meaning to other people. Does it necessarily matter to a person how other people feel about the meaning of her life? Is not the most important thing how she herself feels about it? Is it not sufficient that her one dominant desire gives her activity an emotive meaning? Does not her own experience determine the value of her activity from the perspective of the meaning of her life?

This argumentation is not without rational force, but it has its problems. The significant question concerns how her choices objectively realize value. This issue has implications also for her personal satisfaction, since that is a function of her life's having a meaning. The claim that a person could be happy even if the meaning of her life is based on trivialities misses an essential point. Such a claim must be understood in a merely relative and psychological sense. To have the competence to judge her relative happiness the person would have to be able to compare a life that is valuable to one that is trivial. Then she would know what she loses when basing her life on trivialities. Insofar as her sense of contentment is based on ignorance about the available options, it is delusive. A person's life does not acquire genuine meaning through just anything which happens to be her inner meaning. Even though the meaning of life is a deeply subjective issue, it is necessary to transcend this subjectivity and to justify the meaning of life by more objective criteria. Such criteria may lead an educator to conclude that she has failed to convey some essential ingredients of life's meaning. In education it is impossible to avoid taking a stance on values since education promotes the capacity to evaluate one's life on grounds that should prove valid in practice.

Antirealist arguments do not make this approach invalid. David Wiggins shows that the antirealist thesis can be reduced to the thesis of cognitive underdetermination. Even though there are objective values, they do not completely determine the meaning of a person's life, because of its personal nature. Meaningfulness without intentions and personal goals is not possible. Both the importance and the motivational force of values have a special relevance to the authenticity of value choices. Values should not be ranked only according to their objective weight but also according to what they mean to the person herself.<sup>2</sup>

#### THE CONCEPT OF MEANINGLESSNESS

One way to achieve an analytical grasp of the meaning of life is to consider meaninglessness, as Richard Taylor does.<sup>3</sup> It may be easier to conceive of the lack of meaning, or of a meaningless existence, than of the meaning of life. The negative approach has various aspects. According to Joske, life may exemplify: (1) worthlessness — a lack of intrinsic worth; (2) pointlessness — lack of direction toward an

end; (3) triviality — lack of significant point; and (4) futility — lack of achievement of a particular end.<sup>4</sup> On the basis of these characterizations of meaninglessness we may pursue a more exact conception of what gives life meaning and what we mean by this “meaning.”

A classical example of a meaningless existence in three senses of the four (that is, 1, 2, and 4) is provided by the ancient myth of Sisyphus. Because he betrayed divine secrets to mortals, he was condemned to roll a stone to the top of a hill, from where it rolled down again. We need not assume that stone rolling is especially laborious or painful. According to the original myth the stone was so heavy that Sisyphus never quite succeeded in rolling it to the top of the hill. Our aim is only to use the myth as an illustration of a meaningless existence. Let us suppose, then, that Sisyphus could easily roll the stone up the hill. The essential problem remains — the stone immediately rolls back down again, and Sisyphus has to continue the vain exercise forever. Since he accomplishes nothing by his efforts, his life seems to have no meaning.

Let us suppose that the gods have pity on Sisyphus and decide to alleviate his existence by infusing him with a new all-controlling desire to roll stones, which they achieve by means of a new substance which they implant in his bloodstream.<sup>5</sup> As a result there is nothing that Sisyphus would like to do more than to roll stones up the hill. Would this new dominant desire somehow change a meaningless activity into a meaningful one? He still accomplishes nothing, and his existence seems to lack any meaning even though he now wants to do what he is condemned to do forever.

Taylor supposes, though, that the dominance of Sisyphus’ new desire changes his hellish into a heavenly punishment.<sup>6</sup> Now he may eternally do what he wants and that constitutes his life’s meaning. According to Taylor, “The meaning of life is from within us, it is not bestowed from without, and it far exceeds in its beauty and permanence any heaven men have ever dreamed or yearned for.”<sup>7</sup> This suggestion is problematic. We can of course adopt the emotivist theory of value and assume that the new desire planted in Sisyphus changes his judgments about stone rolling so that they now take on an “evaluative meaning,” although his cognitive analysis of the situation does not change at all.<sup>8</sup> But the emotivist theory has well-known problems. As human beings we experience meaning (and meaninglessness) on a level much deeper than that of mere desires. Sisyphus could not even recommend his actions to others, since they would not understand. Such a meaningless stance could not function as a basis for education.

Therefore, it is best to say only that the meaning of life characterizes a person’s inner world and its worth more readily than happiness, which like well-being is more dependent on external circumstances. But as far as happiness is an “inner” notion, meaningfulness and meaning entail happiness. However, in many educational contexts it seems advisable to replace the concept of happiness with the concept of “meaning.”

Taylor might reply that the proposed description of the human situation changes the example under consideration. In the Sisyphus example, according to Taylor’s reformulation, the dominant desire is defined as the desire to roll stones. If the

dominant desire is defined as the desire to experience life as having a meaning, the example changes and we are discussing another example. But this defensive reply is problematic since the desire for meaning is such an essential aspect of being human that without it we could hardly conceive of a person. The latter is defined by his capacity to make what Taylor calls strong evaluations even of his own desires and values. A strong evaluation of desires means a contrastive and qualitative evaluation, classifying desires as higher or lower, virtuous or vicious, more or less fulfilling, more or less refined, profound or superficial; or judging them as belonging to qualitatively different modes of life, fragmented or integrated, alienated or free, and so on.<sup>9</sup> Since Sisyphus also has this capacity, he rationally evaluates his new, dominant desire to roll stones according to such strong criteria and is led to realize the complete worthlessness of his activity. As such it is without meaning according to his own strong evaluations.

The desire for meaning is the highest order desire which determines the perspective for evaluating first order desires. It is plausible to argue that a human being constitutes herself as a person by her evaluations. Using them she determines who and what she wants to be.<sup>10</sup> A person does not just realize her desires as given, but tries to integrate them in such a way as to relate them to her image of life's meaning as a whole. Therefore Sisyphus would have to deprive himself of his very humanity to be able to accept his rolling routine even assuming he had a dominant desire to roll stones. He would be confused simply because he knows this activity, the object of his desire, to be completely worthless. Only a fanatic is touched neither by rational reasons nor evaluations.

This can be used as a further and stronger argument for the claim that educational philosophy should focus on the concept of meaning in a sense that communicates and can be critically assessed. We experience as problematic desires that lead us away from meaningful activities, or which diminish our life's meaning. At least there are adequate reasons for claiming that our experiences should be like this, if they are rational and human. It is rational to put such a concept of meaningfulness at the center of education, since it gives an informative, holistic criterion for evaluating human actions. Because meaningfulness entails something like happiness we can speak of happiness in a more interesting sense than merely as the satisfaction of the dominant desire.<sup>11</sup>

#### ILLUSORY MEANING

Suppose that the gods convinced Sisyphus about some false factual beliefs which would give apparent meaning to the eternal rolling of stones. Let us assume that the gods convince Sisyphus that every time he rolls the stone to the top of the hill, he makes one person happy. Because the number of personal beings in the universe is almost infinite, he has to continue the work eternally. Sisyphus is condemned to roll stones in order to provide happiness to other persons. This false belief could provide Sisyphus's activity with a sense of meaning, although his life would continue to be objectively meaningless. Insofar as the gods succeeded in deceiving him effectively, and made him believe in this false proposition while he had the dominant desire to roll stones, he could acquire a personal idea of his life's meaning.

The problem is, however, that Sisyphus must renounce his critical faculty in order to accept a mythical belief of this kind. There is no rational foundation for arguing that rolling stones up the hill can make people happy. Renouncing the critical faculty means the loss of another crucial aspect of human nature. Again we come back to the fact that Sisyphus cannot understand the meaning of his own existence.

Peter Winch defends the function of certain illusionary beliefs in a culture as possibilities for finding a sense of meaning for one's life.<sup>12</sup> The significance of cultural illusions can, according to Winch, be assessed on the basis of their function in providing a social meaning. This sense of meaning is once again related to a person's ability to see her life as a totality.

Winch thinks that our own culture has failed to provide sufficient material for constructing a sense of meaning. Other writers see the disappearance of such a subjective sense of meaning from our culture as a key problem. Their background assumption is that life may not have a meaning in any objective sense, but culture should still provide the conditions for experiencing meaningfulness subjectively. We need cultural constructs which distract us from the actual meaninglessness of human existence. Cultural institutions and activities can then be evaluated according to their ability to help the integration of lives into meaningful totalities. The ultimate cultural problems involve, however, the truth of factual beliefs and the validity of value judgments. The harmony of the internal and external perspectives should not depend on illusions.

Perhaps Winch simply means the following: if illusions create harmony and thus contribute to the meaning of life they are, therefore, good. This approach implies a fundamentally irrational approach to the central aims of education. Education would involve offering myths in order to help people find a sense of meaning and orientation for their lives. It would imply an assumption that it is impossible to evaluate central educational aims critically. There is not, however, reason to accept such a position. We want to argue, on the contrary, that illusionary meaning is a form of self-deception and as such morally questionable. Via the requirement of genuine harmony, the meaning of life entails its own truth and validity. Both social practices and subjective notions can be criticized from an external perspective.

Taylor's solution to life's meaninglessness is to reject any objectivistic, external perspective and replace it with a person's inner perspective where one can sense meaning in one's life while doing what is subjectively experienced as meaningful.<sup>13</sup> Sisyphus' life may now have a meaning from the *internal* point of view (in the sense that he subjectively aims at something) but on rational *external* criteria the goal is trivial and worthless. According to such a solution, the fact that the inner and the external perspectives on the meaning of life contradict each other is unproblematic. Sisyphus is happy about a life which cannot be understood as a good life.

Wiggins points out, correctly, that this contradiction is not unproblematic.<sup>14</sup> When we focus on an object from different perspectives, we assume that these

perspectives complement each other. The object must retain its unity and thus receive a more adequate description through our viewing it from various aspects. Since rationality does not allow us to accept contradictory descriptions, different perspectives must be mutually consistent. They should allow us to arrive at a unified description of the object. In other words, the sum of one's critical evaluations and beliefs should not be incompatible with one's intuitions and basic desires. But there is more to the objectivity of the external perspective than the simple requirement of the mutual consistency of desires and beliefs. These considerations highlight the difficulty of the noncognitivist position because there the internal and external perspectives on life's meaning can unproblematically contradict each other. People have in fact different attitudes and opinions. But it is not consistent to regard an activity as objectively worthless from the external perspective and at the same time to regard it as worthwhile from the internal one. Either an activity is objectively worthwhile or it is not. As Wiggins writes, "Still less does the language of perspective license the supposition that the philosopher who answers the question of the meaning of life could make a virtue out of committing himself to neither, or either and both perspectives."<sup>15</sup>

#### THE SUBJECTIVE, THE SOCIAL AND THE OBJECTIVE DIMENSION

John Rawls suggests that "a rational plan of life establishes the basic point of view from which all judgments of value relating to a particular person are to be made and finally rendered consistent."<sup>16</sup> The "basic point of view" must include the person's own view. If she finds the meaning of her life on the basis of aesthetic notions (a creative artist), although others see it on the basis of moral values (a defender of justice), we can hardly claim that one of these meanings is objectively to be preferred over the other, even though we might suppose that moral values override the aesthetic ones. Therefore the dominant idea may well be the person's own. Certainly we must not give priority to plain social observations. The question is not whether the agent's plan is actually understood, but whether it can be understood.

The necessity of including personal notions in a meaningful plan of life presupposes that even if it is possible to rank-order values according to their relative importance, it does not necessarily follow that this ordering determines what a particular person's meaning in life could and should be. Meaning is something that has an essential reference to a person, who has the qualifications of uniqueness and autonomy. Values have to be related to a person's intentions, character, desires. In other words, a desire has to be subjectively valued before we can say that it contributes objectively towards the meaning of life. Therefore individuals can justifiably choose different meanings for their lives even in a world where we can order values according to their importance. For a person to choose the meaning for her life implies that she appropriates certain values in a special way while remaining authentically herself. Of course it is rational to rank values according to their relative importance, because in this way the individual can maximize value in her life. But this is not all. For a person to find a meaning for her life involves her being authentically herself and feeling satisfied while living according to the meaning and

plan she has chosen.<sup>17</sup> We are now looking for a plan of life which we, with the existentialists, could call “authentic existence.” But this need not involve maximizing.

The subjective perspective is concerned with the goal of a person’s intentions and actions and her sense of their having a meaning. Here we presuppose, first of all, that a person plans her life. She aims at realizing certain states of affairs or acquiring certain character traits, which she regards as meaningful or valuable. The concept of a goal has to be understood very loosely here. It can consist of something to be achieved or of becoming a certain kind of a person. For example, the aim may be to create a just society or to become a just person. Such an intentional standpoint is based either on consequentialist values or on person-related virtues. This aspect of the concept of the meaning of life is closely related to the concept of a life plan, since a person’s meaning of life integrates her life plan. Such a plan can be more or less conscious. It is necessary (but not yet sufficient) that a person lives in a certain way in order to express a more or less consistent life plan through her choices. A person’s explicit or implicit life plan expresses who she is as a person.

The second perspective from which a life’s plan and meaning can be viewed is the social one. Here we are not so much concerned with what an individual intends with her life as with what her plan communicates to others. A person’s intentional goal is not necessarily the same as her life’s meaning as understood by others. In the social perspective the crucial question concerns the meaning which a life acquires socially.<sup>18</sup> In this sense the key feature of the concept of the meaning of life is that it refers to the meaning that is communicated to others through, say, one’s actions. Since meaning is not generally thought of as something private, it is something that should be understandable and communicable. We use the word “meaning” here in a sense which assumes a socially recognized set of values. We cannot speak about a life having a meaning without common assumptions about the valuable and the supremely important. In this sense there are no completely private values.

In addition to these two perspectives, there is a third one which forms a connecting link between, and even the foundation for, the two others, that is, the perspective of what is really meaningful or valuable in life. We have called this viewpoint the external perspective. Here we are concerned with the validity and the justification of life’s meaning; it should be justified with reference to values. We do not merely ask for an explanation of human activity, but the direction of the life plan should be justified as an answer to the question of the meaning of life. This challenge invites a group of answers through which we justify our existence, answers to the question of how we should live. We ask for the ultimate reasons for what a person is or does. Is one way of life better than another? Which objectives, if any, are worth striving for? These questions are legitimate although one must resist the temptation to say that the meaning of life is possible only to saints and heroes. On the contrary, the good life can be understood even as a minimal moral notion, and yet it refers to some values which are invited to provide its justification.

The meaning of life can be understood in terms of the good life which makes sense and whose point may be communicated to others. Because one is required to



say what this life is about, communication is possible only if the life is sufficiently integrated. However, now a new and exciting possibility emerges. We need not say that values justify a plan of life and thereby contribute to its meaning. Instead, we can say that if the life has a meaning, in the full communicative sense, the corresponding life plan must exemplify its justifying values. The meaning of life logically entails its own justification. Moreover, we can sometimes recognize the meaning without first making a decision about whether the justification is there or not. In many cases important lives are admired because of their meaning and their moral qualities are derived from the meaning. Some lives do not have a meaning; hence they are the results of accidental influences, mistakes, or unrealized plans. The fact that they make no sense shows why the concept of meaning is useful.

#### CONCLUSION

The concept of the meaning of life is essential for education as it provides the ultimate perspective for the evaluation of educational activity. Education aims at helping a person to realize her life's meaning in a way that takes advantage of the options available in the most valuable manner possible. It is not sufficient merely that the person is subjectively satisfied with her life's meaning if her contentment is based on a narrow and impoverished knowledge on the options available, of the alternative lives that could be lived by the person and of their relative value. A superficial contentment may deprive the person of a more valuable alternative life that she is not aware but which she could acknowledge as more meaningful were the possibility opened up for her. Therefore education should not be evaluated merely on the basis of the contentment of its recipients but an external, more objectivistic value perspective must be employed. Without such a perspective educational intervention cannot be ultimately justified.

*For response see essay by Laird*

1. David Wiggins, "Needs, Values, Truth: Essay in the Philosophy of Value," *Aristotelian Society Series* 6 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 88.
2. *Ibid.*, 108-9.
3. Richard Taylor, *Good and Evil* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1984).
4. W.D. Joske, "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life," in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E.D. Klemke (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 252-53.
5. Taylor, *Good and Evil*, 259.
6. *Ibid.*, 259-60.
7. *Ibid.*, 268.
8. By contrast, see Wiggins, "Needs, Values, and Truth," 97.
9. Charles Taylor, "Responsibility for the Self," in *Identities of Persons*, ed. A.O. Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 282.
10. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).
11. This theme is discussed in Spinoza's *Tractatus De Intellectus Emendatione* (Opera I - IV, Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1925). The desires central for a personal conception of the meaning of life should be meaningful, that is, characteristically human or worthy of the human being so that she can find permanent happiness in their satisfaction.
12. Peter Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," in *Rationality*, ed. B.R. Wilson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970), 104-6.



13. Taylor, *Good and Evil*, 266-68.
14. Wiggins, "Needs, Values, and Truth," 108-9.
15. Ibid.
16. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 409.
17. John Hepburn, "Questions about the Meaning of Life," in Klemke, *The Meaning of Life*, 202.
18. David Novitz, "Love, Friendship, and the Aesthetics of Character," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 28 (1991): 207-16.