

The Meaning of Life as an Ultimate Justification for Education

Susan Laird

University of Oklahoma

The connection that Tapio Puolimatka and Timo Airaksinen propose between education and the meaning of life (henceforth ML) could be unique among contemporary philosophical inquiries on either ML or education. No essay in E.D. Klemke's extensive, representative collection of inquiries on ML, some of which Puolimatka and Airaksinen have critiqued, addresses educators.¹ Likewise, although philosophers of education have taken up questions about "self-examination" and spirituality,² I know of no philosophical inquiry in education that has engaged ML as Puolimatka and Airaksinen have done here. Their contribution is an original and thought-provoking one indeed.

They seem to agree with the French existentialist writer Albert Camus that "the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions."³ Without invoking or denying the existence of God as many theorists of ML do,⁴ they nonetheless reject the office that many assign to myths as guides to finding ML and as distractions from the actual meaninglessness of existence. With that caveat, they argue that ML can provide "ultimate justification" needed for education, "the ultimate perspective" from which to evaluate educational activity. This is a large claim, whose soundness I will here briefly examine in light of a case from United States history that locates ML, as existentialist Hazel E. Barnes does, on "the far side of despair."⁵

For the purpose of evaluating education "in its totality," Puolimatka and Airaksinen elaborate objective criteria by means of which to evaluate ML toward which education should aim. I have taken the liberty to name their criteria crudely thus: *rationality*, *internal-external consistency*, *authenticity*, *intelligibility*, *social acceptability*, *ultimacy*, *integration*, and *values*. Wherever education fails to result in ML that meets such demanding criteria, educators have cause to evaluate their own efforts negatively.

For Camus, ML was not an educational, nor even a social question. "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem," he wrote in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy."⁶ Also citing *Sisyphus*, Peter Singer observes how this question of ML confronted both aboriginal Australians after colonization and suburban housewives living in affluence (what Betty Friedan called "the problem with no name").⁷ It also confronted in a quite different way many persons of African descent whom white men in the southern United States actually claimed to own as property as recently as the early nineteenth century. Attempts to escape from slavery often amounted to suicide. Was life as a slave worth living?

By the criteria that Puolimatka and Airaksinen have elaborated for ML, it surely was not, despite its non-trivial material productivity. A slave was not recognized as rational, hence not even as human. There was no notion of authenticity to slaves' labors, which were externally determined by the master; hence no notion of

consistency, either, between slaves' own internal desires and external beliefs. Their actions therefore made the master's purposes intelligible, but not their own. In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, Douglass remarks that the slaves "would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone." They "would sing as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves."⁸ As sources of economic value for the masters, they had socially recognized value, even what some might regard as "ultimate" value insofar as so many white southern men were willing to die at war for the right to own slaves. For the slaves' labor enabled those white men's, as well as Thomas Jefferson's, George Washington's, and others' own capacities for integrating their own "meaningful," affluent, patriarchal lives around their own socially accepted ambitions and desires. (If space permitted, I would demonstrate how Jefferson's life plan brilliantly met Puolimatka's and Airaksinen's criteria.) This instrumental meaning violently imposed upon the lives of African captives had a dis-integrating effect on the slaves' lives, however.⁹ Here can be found no cause for wonder that so many slaves attempted to escape from slavery, despite the almost certain fate of recapture and death.

Unlike Meno's slave boy, United States slaves were denied education. Yet Douglass gave his own life meaning even as an uneducated slave, and the meaning of his life meets all the objective criteria that Puolimatka and Airaksinen have set forth. Douglass himself explains the decisive moment at age seven or eight, upon being sold to a new master, Mr. Auld, that directed him toward "the meaning of life," a life plan, the quest for his own freedom. Mrs. Auld, began to teach him to read. Once he had learned to spell words of three or four letters, "Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read."¹⁰

Mr. Auld's "justification" for *not* educating Douglass — that it would "forever unfit him to be a slave"¹¹ — hideously demonstrates how ethically repulsive the very notion of "justifying" a decision to educate or not to educate someone can be. Yet in Mr. Auld's proffered justification for not educating him, Douglass ironically found a reason to educate himself. Founded upon the connection his master made between literacy and human capacities for freedom, this slave's quest for freedom through self-education got by stealth and cunning was certainly *rational*. The connection between his master's reason for prohibiting his learning to read and his own belief in at least the possibility of achieving freedom was a logical one, and that belief's correspondence with his own desire for freedom gave his life plan the *internal-external consistency* that Puolimatka and Airaksinen consider essential. No one can doubt the *authenticity* of the quest for freedom that gave meaning to Douglass's life as a slave. It is true that this life plan would have failed if Douglass had made it intelligible to others before he had achieved freedom, but once he had reaped the reward of his secret life plan, it developed from a quest for his own freedom into a quest for all slaves' freedom, at which point he wrote the famous narrative of his life in slavery that communicated the earlier life plan and its justification. Thus his life plan meets the *intelligibility* criterion that Puolimatka and

Airaksinen have set forth. His life plan contradicted the social values of the southern U.S. before abolition of slavery, but it later found affirmation from abolitionists who like himself deplored those social values that “justified” slavery. His life plan — the quest for freedom — was his answer to the question of life’s meaning; his life had no meaning without the hope for freedom, so he risked his life to claim it. Thus one might say his life plan was charged with a sense of what some might call *ultimacy*. He met the *integration* criterion by rigorously relating his desires for freedom and literacy to each other and to his ever more vividly detailed image of himself in the future, as a free man. His life as a slave was not a good life in the sense of being a happy one until he had achieved freedom, thereby exemplifying the valid distinction that Puolimatka and Airaksinen draw between happiness and ML. Douglass’s life was, however, a good life in the sense that it embodied the intrinsic value he placed on human life and freedom, moral values that he applied to himself, to other slaves, and to women. Thus his life met what I have named the *values* criterion, based on my reading of Puolimatka and Airaksinen.

So what, you may ask, if Douglass’s life as a slave met all their objective criteria for ML, as Thomas Jefferson’s life as a national leader surely did too? Puolimatka and Airaksinen do not want us to attribute ML only to saints and heroes like Douglass and Jefferson. If a slave boy of seven or eight years old, possessed of no more education than the alphabet and a few three- and four-letter words, can find ML that he sustains through adulthood, ML that meets all their objective criteria, then how credible is it to claim that such a notion can provide an “ultimate justification” for education? To be sure, there is a relationship here between ML and education — an ironic one from the perspective outlined by Puolimatka and Airaksinen. For Douglass, it was ML that led him to educate himself, not educational activity that directed him toward ML. Indeed, it was Mr. Auld’s mean-spirited disclosure of the connection between education and freedom from oppression that directed Douglass as an illiterate child toward ML and toward self-education. The case of Thomas Jefferson, whose life plan was founded upon slavery, raises ethical questions about what sort of “ultimate perspective” a de-contextualized notion of ML can provide for evaluating education.

To demonstrate that education is not necessary to ML, albeit perhaps necessary to its fulfillment, and to suggest that evaluating education on its criteria may raise social-ethical questions that Puolimatka and Airaksinen do not take up, is, however, not to demonstrate that education can and should never be helpful or obstructive to ML. The usefulness of Puolimatka and Airaksinen’s criteria may not reside in “ultimate” justifications and perspectives for evaluation that they offer education, but rather in their possible function as conceptual tools for exploring contextual connections between education and the meanings of many different sorts of lives. These criteria may also prove useful in interrogating the ethics of claiming both education and ML at the expense of others’ freedom and humanity, as many men throughout history have done in relation to women and children, and as Europeans and North Americans certainly do in relation to the third world.

1. Many thanks to Michael Martin for introducing me to this text.

2. Alven M. Neiman, "Self-Examination, Philosophical Education and Spirituality," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 34, no. 4 (November 2000): 571-90. Other writers on spirituality and education include Nel Noddings, Iris Yob, Hanan Alexander, Ignacio Gotz.
3. Albert Camus, "The Absurdity of Human Existence," in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E.D. Klemke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 94.
4. E.D. Klemke, ed., *The Meaning of Life*, Parts I and II.
5. Hazel E. Barnes, "The Far Side of Despair," in *The Meaning of Life*, 160-66.
6. Camus, "The Absurdity of Human Existence," 94.
7. Peter Singer, *How Are We To Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest* (New York: Prometheus, 1995), chapter 10.
8. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: Signet, 1854), 31.
9. They lost their native languages; their spiritual practices were extinguished or over-laid with "Christian" ones. Masters sexually exploited slave women, thus producing more slaves, while slave families were separated when parents or children were sold.
10. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 49.
11. Ibid.