

The Question of Meaning as a Path to Transformation. Part 1 An Inspiring Image

Roland Urbain

Abstract

The article contributes to the discussion about the role of the question of meaning in education. Its author advocates a form of teaching that, beyond the acquisition of competencies, also emphasises the possibilities for students' inner transformation and individuation. This article is the first part of a series of three texts. In it, the author formulates the question of meaning based on an image that a teacher can use in class. Through this image, he describes his own experience with the question of meaning, which has accompanied him throughout his life. This personal narrative encourages students to identify their own encounters with the question of meaning.

Keywords

question of meaning; education; human development; philosophy of education; learning; teaching; philosophy; transformation

Introduction

A colleague once told me that we don't teach for our own pleasure. He was absolutely right, but I didn't take his remark to heart. Of course, learners must acquire the necessary skills through the teacher's instruction, whether the teacher likes it or not. So, I worked with students to help them discover concepts and tools that would be useful in their profession. Accompanying them in their discoveries and sharing their joy at mastering subjects and being able to apply them gave me a great deal of satisfaction. It was in tackling the material devoted to the question of meaning that I found pure pleasure in teaching. From then on, I always made sure to include this segment of the curriculum in the syllabi for the courses I was responsible for. You could say, I made it almost a prerequisite for the subjects that followed. In doing so, I shared my colleague's opinion while enjoying myself. It is this extra effort that I put into my teaching that I will modestly recount in the following text.

I will divide my remarks into three distinct parts, which will be presented separately: first, the formulation of the question of meaning based on an inspiring image that had a profound impact on me; second, the identifying of useful tools for enabling us to ask this question; and finally, exploring how the question of meaning relates to the transformation of the human person engaged in the process of individuation.

What I present in the first two parts of my discussion is the way in which I addressed the question of meaning in my teaching practice, and how I applied it in a specific environment where the concepts studied by my students were primarily technical. I will conclude with an original approach that I did not teach systematically, but on which I will expand in the third part of the article.

I want to thank Professor Blascikova for giving me the opportunity to write this new article. It is an opportunity for me to, once again, return to what I consider to be an essential question for human beings: the question of ‘Why’.

The students enrolled in a technical course with whom I worked had already been exposed to philosophy, but had not explored it in depth. Drawing from my own journey as a modest craftsman of philosophy, I shared with them a question that remains essential to me: who am I, where am I going, how do I accept the life I have been given, and by what ways do I consent to it?

Here, I present the point of view I have adopted in my teaching practice: that of approaching concepts and applying them to the everyday life of the students I have worked with.

An inspiring image



Picture source: Plantu (Plantureux, Jean). 1980. “Naissance.” In *Plantu. Dessins de presse*. Le Monde Éditions.

A little man who invites reflection

It would not be surprising if, while talking about me, my former students would draw parallels between the little man scratching his head and hatching out of his shell and me.

How I wish I had commented on that superb drawing by Plantu (1980)! I would examine it closely, through the reactions of my listeners and my own observations: we would discuss the shell, symbolising a cocoon conducive to the formation of a new being, but also a gilded prison that confines and prevents one from expanding their wings and being enabled to grow and become a mature, free and responsible person; we pointed out that here the little man is breaking out of the shell and beginning to emerge: he is only halfway out, which suggests that he is taking his freedom cautiously, maintaining a link with what he knows and finds reassuring; the drawing suggests that the little man is venturing into an unknown world that surprises him, that he does not know, as evidenced by the fact that he is scratching his head. Some pointed out that the questioning of this little man scratching his head must be an integral part of his existence, he himself being, through the shell, the question mark's dot. Many suggested that the question mark should be projected alongside the light that illuminated it, reminding the little man not to forget to question himself once he frees himself of his shell and takes his first steps, the shadow cast by the light. These same students said they were certain that the little man would follow the path of the light, his nose leaving no doubt about the direction he would take. Finally, some highlighted the darkness covering parts of the question mark, indicating that the light enables the dark sides, which also invited concern, as offered by the drawing. More anecdotal were the remarks of some who went as far as to propose that the cracks in the shell allude to the ups and downs of life.

This drawing has accompanied me for years, and each time I look at it, it reveals something new or makes me aware of a new way to question myself.

A little man with a strong presence

I have always identified with this character, half-emerged from his shell. He is leaving one world to discover another, clearly wondering what is happening and where he is going. This is an entirely natural attitude, like looking around a new home, walking around a new neighbourhood to get your bearings, or finding your place in a new context.

The question 'why' is an expression of curiosity that allows us to understand our environment, find our place in it, and evolve within it. Understanding and evaluating through a 'why' that sometimes suggests that things could be different from what we once assumed them to be. However, some people go through life without really questioning it: they tend to just accept what happens to them, functioning in a way that provides them with a daily life that is more or less secure, more or less suited to their needs, more or less tailored to them. They live their daily lives without taking a step back to question and evaluate. This is linked to a way of life inherited from education, training, social context, or, more painfully, precariousness.

Thus, I have been known to generations of students as the friend of that little guy scratching his head. I liked him immediately because he was close to me and to many others, sharing this human propensity to ask questions.

I have always explained to students that the question ‘why’ is naturally embedded in everyday human life as a way of seeking to know and understand: where does it come from, where is it going, and how is it going?

When the questioning investigates the person I am, it takes on another dimension: metaphysics takes over, questioning the foundations to the point of asking about ‘being’ as such: ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’

My engineering students were particularly interested in this shift in questioning: From ‘What is it?’ when faced with a broken engine – which allows us to focus our investigations on isolating the causes and acting on them, without having to dismantle the engine every time to see what is going on inside – to ‘Why do I exist?’, ‘Why am I living?’ and, following on from these, depending on the topics covered (Who, What, Where, How, How much, Why), these questions are often asked to find out the origin ‘Why?’ and to focus on the purpose ‘What for?’. I will come back to this later in the last part of this article. But before leaving this image that has inspired me for a long time, it is important to explain, based on anecdotes from my own experience, when I recognised the importance of the ‘why’ for myself.

A little man meets a little child

I was undoubtedly predisposed to questioning, and my father was an engineer who stimulated me and opened my mind to many things during the many walks we took together until the day before he died. It was my father’s engineering background that made me interested, from an early age, in the elements that make up an object and the relationships between them, what makes them function. My students often heard me talk about constituent elements and operating mechanisms (Amiguet & Julier 1996). I was interested, I asked questions, I wanted to see and understand. Taking objects apart and putting them back together again were activities that fascinated me. I, Roland, questioned everything, seeking to understand, to such an extent that my grandmother called me ‘Why? What?’.

The following two anecdotes show that this propensity for questioning has been present in me since my earliest childhood.

My first memory indicates that I began to question metaphysically incredibly early on. When it was time to go to sleep, Dad would make the sign of the cross on my forehead, and Mum would put me to bed, reciting two prayers with me: the first addressed to Mary, mother of Jesus, the “Hail Mary”; and the second addressed to Jesus’ father, the “Our Father”. I remember in great detail sinking into my bed one evening after Mum left the room and wondering about the possibility of having two dads: my dad, who was in the living room and had just blessed me and wished me good night, and another dad, whom I addressed with Mum when I said ‘Our

Father' and who was in heaven. I tortured my child's mind until I cried, wondering how my other dad, whom I had never seen, could fly in the sky as the birds do.

That was the beginning of my metaphysical questioning, which has never left me since. I got to know my other Dad and met Him through an intimate heart-to-heart relationship. I was also able to tell the difference between the sky of the birds and the Heaven of Jesus. Philosophy and theology helped me formulate the question of being, as such, in a more developed way. The starting point is this experience from my early childhood. What followed was simply an unfolding of what was contained in that beginning.

The second memory takes me back to a walk with my father. It was a walk we took regularly, following a path behind some houses to the end, where it wound down to a marshalling yard. We would stop at the first bend in the sloping path and look out over the yard. We would stand there for ages, gawping at the locomotives going back and forth, changing tracks, uncoupling carriages from one train and attaching them to another. These terraced tracks fascinated me. I would stand there for long minutes, motionless, watching the multiple movements. I was spellbound.

This anecdote from my early childhood makes me realise today that my mind functioned analytically from a very early age and that my fascination with the movements on a set of terraced rails is similar to the way my brain works while 'Mind Mapping': The arrangement of the railway yard tracks resembles the graphic technique of 'mind mapping,' which organizes ideas, information, or tasks around a central concept, with branching structures similar to a tree, mirroring the way the brain functions. In the wake of this classic definition, easily found on the internet, I think back to my grandmother's fruit trees, also arranged in rows against the garden wall, whose branches are reminiscent of the tracks at the marshalling yard of my childhood.

When faced with a question or problem to solve, my brain explores the structured map line by line, branch by branch.

A small child in a supportive environment

I realise how privileged I was to live in a stimulating environment, opening my mind to a wealth of things, taking an interest in my childhood, and mobilising a wealth of resources to develop it. This, however, is not always the case, as Michel Onfray denounces vigorously. The author first points out that childhood is the ideal time for questioning: "A propensity to question, to ask why, how, in what way. Without being prompted, independently of any social conditioning – and even often in spite of it, against it... children take nothing at face value if they do not understand the sequence and causality." (Onfray 2004, 109–10). The author then explains that not everyone nurtures this capacity to question in the same way. Some even lose it: "Why do they then lose this sublime propensity? Because the family and the school, both complicit in this murder, do everything necessary to prevent, disappoint, and prohibit this questioning approach, replacing it either with pure and simple apathetic renunciation or by force-feeding them answers to questions they do not ask themselves. Why think for oneself when one can obey for others?" (Onfray 2004, 111–2).

The child in me was spared and able to develop and unfold its full potential. It would be interesting, but would go far beyond the scope of this article, to examine the places where Michel Onfray refers to social conditioning. The author's condemnation is still relevant in specific contexts. It must be said, however, that new, active, and cross-disciplinary teaching methods are being implemented to encourage learners' creativity and help them fulfil their respective potential. This certainly deserves further discussion. I am merely touching on the subject here.

A question mark that won't go away

The question of 'meaning' is therefore unavoidable for me. I use and abuse it at will, applying it to everyday life and to what might lie beyond: the question of being as a being, the question of God, if He exists. I have never doubted it. In this vein, very often, if not every day, I think about my death, which directs my questioning in two directions: the question of meaning applied to the question of God; and, consequently, the question of my life and my existence in everyday life in relation to their 'future'. I have developed these questions in greater depth elsewhere (Urbain 2013 et 2022).

Conclusion

The little man coming out of his shell is very familiar to me. He accompanies me every day. The question of meaning, that he seems to be asking as he scratches his head, has been with me since my early childhood. It comes naturally to me. It allows me to understand, to identify, the elements of a system, a group, a situation, and to see the relationships they establish and maintain with each other. It allows me to cope with the ups and downs of my existence. It allows me to persevere when it comes to living for the sake of living. It allows me to nurture my hope and understand the realities of the hereafter. It takes its rightful place in the transformations that gradually make me who I am. It will accompany me, I hope, until the moment when the great scythe reaps me. For that I wish, and should that happen, mission accomplished. In the second part of this article, which will be published at a later date, I will briefly present the tools used with my technical higher education students to formulate the question at hand.

To be continued in the next issue.

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Dr Phil. Roland Urbain

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2851-3240>

Retired professor

Haute Ecole de Namur-Liège-Luxembourg, Hénallux

Campus Pierrard-Virton (École d'Ingénieurs)

Rue d'Arlon 112, 6760 Virton

Belgium

roland.urbain@gmail.com