

Rotation and translation: The meaning of life as a potential educational resource

Javier Bermejo Fernández-Nieto

Universidad Complutense de Madrid

Abstract

This article sets out to analyse how such a polysemic and subjective concept as the meaning of life can be addressed in educational terms. To do so, it starts from the conceptualisation of the term, framing it in the experiential plane, understanding that this experience develops both internally (rotation) and externally (translation). This is followed by the presentation of two core approaches based on which pedagogical proposals have recently been constructed. The first of these is based on the approach centred on narrative identity in both its classical aspect and its version linked to life history. The second is based on moral development, mainly using dilemmas as a didactic resource. Finally, the article addresses the framing of these considerations within the horizon of current educational philosophy, reflecting on the relevance of the same in the particular framework of its practice.

Questo articolo si propone di analizzare come un concetto polisemico e soggettivo come il senso della vita possa essere affrontato in termini educativi. Per farlo, parte dalla concettualizzazione del termine, inquadrandolo sul piano esperienziale, comprendendo che questa esperienza si sviluppa sia internamente (rotazione) che esternamente (traduzione). Segue la presentazione di due approcci fondamentali sulla base dei quali sono state recentemente costruite proposte pedagogiche. Il primo si basa sull'approccio incentrato sull'identità narrativa, sia nel suo aspetto classico sia nella sua versione legata alla storia della vita. Il secondo si basa sullo sviluppo morale, principalmente attraverso l'uso dei dilemmi come risorsa didattica. Infine, l'articolo affronta l'inquadramento di queste considerazioni nell'orizzonte dell'attuale filosofia educativa, riflettendo sulla rilevanza delle stesse nel quadro particolare della sua pratica.

Keywords: meaning of life; narrative; life story; narrative identity; moral education; philosophy of education

Parole chiave: significato della vita; narrazione; storia della vita; identità narrativa; educazione morale; filosofia dell'educazione

1. Introduction

The passage in the *Odyssey*¹ in which Odysseus, after descending into Tartarus, recounts the constant suffering of Sisyphus as he attempts to fulfil the punishment imposed as a reprimand for his sharp wit, is well known. This mythological tale, painted by Titian, was also linked in the past to the solar theory, identifying Sisyphus as the disc of the sun that rises each morning and sinks below the horizon as the day goes by. Both interpretations will serve to illustrate the analysis presented here in relation to the meaning of life. On the one hand, because, as is well known, one of the most illustrious works of contemporary literature, by Albert Camus², uses this story to criticise the absurdity of life, using the myth itself as a metaphor for futile effort and, on the other hand, to offer a similarity between earthly movements, *rotation* and *translation*, and the search for meaning. Obviously, the aim here is not to analyse the aforementioned work, but rather to identify, through the mythological passage, the relevance that reflection on the meaning of life still has today. Nor will any kind of geophysical phenomenon be analysed, but the analogy of earth movements will be used to relate them to the two fundamental ways in which the scientific literature deals with the human search for meaning, i.e. internally and externally respectively.

Fernandois (2015) explained that among the so-called eternal themes of philosophy, the question of the meaning of life figures prominently. Undoubtedly, from pre-Socratic to contemporary philosophy, there has been a succession of reflections that have been turning their focus in relation to all human questions, offering interpretative frameworks that have been giving way to others in a timeless and constant reflection on what is, or is not, the meaning of life³. However, as Fernandois himself points out, it seems that this perennial question in philosophical reflection is currently treated with some suspicion in the programmes of courses, seminars or scientific conversations, while the same does not happen with the bibliographical production that deals with this subject. If we analyse the number of references in articles and books at an international level, it is possible to confirm that, over the last few decades, a significant number of authors have approached this issue, making it resurface in a notorious way (Bermejo Fernández-Nieto, 2021). At the pace of this revival, pedagogical approaches have emerged that offer, as we shall see, frameworks for reflection and practical proposals with the aim of returning to educational reflection aspects of a personal, inner nature, which promote the consideration and benefits of attending to this issue.

An essay published a few years ago by sociologist and Baylor University professor Paul Froese (2016) shows that history, evolving norms of the self, communities, cultural rhythms and power dynamics determine how each person understands and constructs meaning in life. Several decades ago, Helmunt Gollwitzer (1977), already identified that culture, in a general sense, was in itself a possessor of meaning or, at least, its evolution and solidity have appeared to give it meaning in the course of history. However, beyond the concept of passive inheritance that this vision implies, other theses show that it is each person who presents the challenge of constructing or discovering his or her vital meaning with a certain independence of the context in which he or she is located, which is why reflection and pedagogical proposals along these lines are relevant today. Having or giving meaning to our lives is, of course, no small matter. Even those considerations that understand it as nonsense to wonder about this issue, give it notorious importance when outlining their own theories (Metz, 2013a). Evidently, within the recent bibliographical production to this effect, and more specifically, within those contributions that consider reflection on this issue to be relevant - among which it is worth noting that the philosophy of education approaches it in a very timid way to date - it is possible to contrast different proposals for approach, different paradigms on which the debate is served, and it is within this framework that the analysis presented here is framed in an educational key.

2. The meaning of life

Jean Grondin (2005), one of the main authors who has recently tackled this subject, indicates that philosophical reflection on this question will always have a component of rebellion and hope at the same time. Of rebelliousness, because thinking about the meaning of life itself is a question that implicitly exerts on the person the impression of rebelling against the absurd, as exemplified in the myth of Sisyphus, the rebelliousness of finding certainties, reasons. And of hope, because facing a consultation as profound as this one implies the feeling of hoping to achieve a positive result. Asking for the meaning of life is, thus, a question from life and from the meaning of what it carries and is (Grondin, 2012). However, what really is the meaning of life, what is its significance, and what can we expect when we ask this question?

Evidently, the first challenge facing reflection on the meaning of life, like any other question, is its description. Analytic philosophy, from Wittgenstein to Armstrong, via Russell or Carnap, has been concerned with analysing the meaning of this expression linguistically in depth, trying to avoid the supposed void left by traditional metaphysical reflection. Although we will not deal here with the contributions that this philosophical current has offered, we will now detail the main contemporary considerations on the meanings of this concept, which are largely the result of the analytical exercise developed during the last 20th century. Indeed, a first approximate reading of the term reveals that there are different meanings of the concept. Let us see.

It is within the current interpretative framework, and thanks to the growing interest in approaching the question, that the different meanings of the concept emerge. Authors such as the aforementioned Fernandois (2015), Grondin (2005, 2012), Cooper (2003) or Alexis (2011), among others, identify the existence of at least four meanings of the term, namely: meaning as direction, as feeling, as importance and as meaning. Thus, a meaningful life can be understood as one that has a goal -direction-; one that is fully felt; one that has importance in itself; or, finally, one that is meaningful. Implicit in all these meanings is a bidirectional connotation in which, on the one hand, it is the person who gives or discovers meaning to his or her life and, on the other, it seems that to do so he or she needs something more than himself or herself. Indeed, if we consider the meaning of life, for example, as a direction, although it is the person who is heading towards the chosen destination, he or she needs to consider elements that are not his or her own, such as the possibilities of the journey, the certainty of the goal, the foreseeing of certain problems on the way, etc. If, on the other hand, meaning is considered as significance or even as importance, something similar happens, because the person who directs his or her exercise towards the achievement of this significance gives importance to his or her life since this is the means to reach this end, simultaneously understanding that this goal is valuable in itself.

Therefore, despite the existence of different meanings of the concept of meaning in life, it seems clear that they are all interrelated and need not only the person and his or her will but also a significant context for their achievement. From this inference it can be deduced that people search for meaning in life both internally and externally, that is to say, both from within themselves and from what is outside them.

2.1. The meaning of life as rotation

During the rotational movement the earth offers the passing of the hours until the complete revolution is achieved, changing its angle in relation to the sun. Just like Sisyphus as he struggles up the rock on the mountainside, seeing how it inevitably falls down the hill. This analogy can serve as an illustrative reference to allude to those personal, intimate issues that make our lives meaningful in individual terms.

As Martela and Steger (2016) detail, recent psychological research seems to have three fundamental ways of attending to the meaning of life in personal terms. On the one hand, the conception of the meaning of life as coherence, on the other, as purpose, and finally as significance, the latter two being the ones that have attracted

most interest lately. The relationship between meaning and coherence, they argue, demands the understanding that life has meaning and, as such, requires personal coherence to achieve it. For its part, understanding the meaning of life as a purpose means the personal disposition of central objectives that guide the person's vital exercise in order to achieve them, thus materialising their meaning and, ultimately, the meaning of life. Finally, the link between meaning in life and importance, for the authors, leads to an understanding of the inherent value of life and at the same time fosters the desire to have a life worth living *important*. However, authors such as Mintoff (2008) argue that for a life to be considered meaningful, based on the achievement of goals, it is necessary for these to be of a transcendent nature, understood as those of a long duration and broad scope. Indeed, the meaning of life seems to be considered as a matter far removed from short-termism, from immediacy. In this sense, Stanford University professor Iving D. Yalom (2011) indicates that, in order to appreciate the development of the meaning of life in a person, it is necessary to look at it from a high perspective that makes it possible to appreciate its evolution, since both the purposes and the vital objectives or the meaning of coherence that a person gives to their life and its exercise, change and evolve throughout life.

A metaphorical and illustrative example of what we have called rotational movement can be found in Robert Fisher's (2005) novel, *The Knight in Rusty Armour*. In it, the protagonist, a knight absolutely dazzled by his armour and his successful battles, one fine day observes how this robust frame begins to rust to the point of being unable to get rid of it. Trying to find a solution to his distressing problem, he turns to Merlin, and thanks to his advice, the knight embarks on a journey along the path of Truth, passing through the castles of Silence, of Knowledge, and of Will and Daring, where he discovers what is truly valuable in life, an experience that will help him get rid of his heavy and rusty armour. Another example might be a person whose ultimate goal in life is to become a doctor. Achieving that goal is what fills him with happiness. In this way, he would direct all his efforts and personal objectives towards achieving this goal, for which he must gradually achieve goals such as obtaining good grades, getting to university, preparing himself thoroughly and getting a job in a hospital or medical centre.

In all these approaches, the reference to the individual sphere is noteworthy. The rotation of the person on him/herself to give coherence, to identify objectives or to give importance to both his/her exercise and his/her goal. However, in our purpose of rotation, it seems consistent to find connections, links with another series of elements that are positioned in our path and that form part of the search for meaning itself. Next, we are going to look at both perspectives in depth.

2.2 The meaning of life as translation

Remembering Aristotle, the happy man needs friends. Thus, the Aristotelian idea of happiness, understood as the supreme end to which every person tends, shows that full satisfaction, such as that obtained by achieving our goals, as well as being that which arises as a result of good action, is that which is shared, since for Aristotle no good, as in our case is the disposition of meaning, can be fully enjoyed without company. Indeed, beyond the importance given by the Stagirite to the way of doing, it seems necessary to consider the context and more specifically the people who form that context as important elements in the construction of meaning. The consideration of others as participants in meaning is important because we are not alone in the world, we live in society, we relate to each other, etc. In this sense, Ricoeur (1996) infers that perceiving the self as another person leads to the understanding that the person needs others in order to be fulfilled, since every person shares with others the equality of the same desire, that of sharing⁴.

Again, an example that can illustrate this consideration can be found in the movie *Up in the Air* (2009). Its protagonist, Ryan Bingham, the undisputed star of his company, is enjoying what initially appears to be a

meaningful life, successfully individualistic and seemingly full of meaning. However, various forced changes in the way he carries out his work, imposed by his company, the discovery of his distance from his family, or the accidental heartbreak he suffers in love, lead the protagonist to identify his life as empty, discovering that what Ryan himself identified as the primary objectives of his life did not include others to share them with, colleagues, family, partner.

Along the same lines, Kronman (2007) states that people construct different meanings according to their personal background, their experiences and their cultural framework, which shows that, in the construction of meaning, it is also necessary to take into account contextual aspects which include not only physical spaces and temporal moments, but also others, people. In these terms, the meaning of life seems to require the consideration of a broader spectrum than that offered only by the individual person as the integral agents of vital meaning.

3. Educational proposals on the meaning of life

Up to this point, different approaches to the concept of meaning in life have been presented, identifying how individual, social and contextual factors play a considerable role in the construction or achievement of meaning. In this section, we will focus our attention on the way in which different current pedagogical perspectives approach the development of meaning in educational terms.

3.1 Narrative as a proposal

As Sarasola Sánchez-Serrano and Hornillo Araujo (2003) identify, the term narrative can create confusion due to the diversity of conceptions recurrently used when referring to it. Within it, it is possible to identify aspects such as autobiography, reminiscence, *life review* or life history.

Within the last-mentioned term is where the *Life Story theory of Identity* is presented, a current that has been one of the main ones to which psychology has paid attention at the end of the last century, fundamentally developed by the work of McAdams (1985, 1995, 2021). The Northwestern University professor identifies that, during late adolescence and early adulthood, people begin to organise and make sense of their lives by creating personal stories based on the reconstruction of their past and their future expectations. To do this, people review all the substantial events of the past in sequence to make sense of their existence, using their own life story to explain their identity based on personal questions such as who they are, why they are who they are today and where they are going (Houkamau, 2008). However, it is worth identifying that there are differences between narrative identity and life history. As Heersmink (2023) points out, narrative identity understands one's own identity as an excluding aspect between people, thanks to time and the experience of each particular event. Life history, on the other hand, is a concept that refers to the methodology that helps to understand narrative identity. However, as Seachris (2009) expresses, although the question of the meaning of life can be coherent, as can the approach to a certain personal narrative, this must be understood as the personal request for a life narrative that exposes the aspects of greatest importance and existential significance for people, if the question of the meaning of life is to be addressed.

A study by Genreux and McKeough (2010) details that during adolescence there is a significant transformation in both the structure and content of narrative thinking, this being the fundamental vital stage in which people begin to construct meanings of life. From this approach, there are several methodological proposals that address the meaning of life based on personal narrative. For example, Nash and Jan (2014), based on the idea that between the ages of eighteen and thirty is a period of personal turmoil in which personal expectations and professional development come into play, offer their university students activities aimed at developing personal narratives so that reflection on their life history enables them to identify their true concerns and motivations while

meditating on the ways used in the past and those needed in the future to achieve them. Another similar proposal, which combines the benefits of life storytelling and the digital tools so in vogue today, is the one initially developed by Jane Van Galen (2010). Her idea focuses on students developing and sharing personal life stories through digital storytelling, producing videos of less than ten minutes in length, with the aim that this experience, both of making and viewing the narratives of other peers, will help students to understand their own life story, their past and their goals, as well as to be more inclusive and understand the diversity of experiences that are brought into the classroom by the rest of the group.

Other narrative proposals are those that extend their concept to broader contexts than the personal or classroom environment. Thus, Mar et al. (2011) identify that through examples in poetry and literature it is possible to promote autobiographical narrative. These literary resources are presented as examples for students to use in their personal narrative construction for inspiration. This idea is also explored by authors such as Bathmaker and Harnett (2010) and Goodson (2005), who argue that attending to individual life narratives may not be sufficient for the construction of meaning in people. They suggest that, based on the narratives of other people, such as illustrious historical figures, for example, a personal reflection should be carried out that encourages the consideration of other perspectives on the meaning of the life of others, subsequently triggering the development of a realistic personal life narrative in accordance with the life moment of each subject.

We conclude by returning to the classical concept of narrative. The conventional form of narrative, i.e. oral narrative, can also be considered as a source of meaning creation (Balduzzi, 2017), because through this particular form of narrative people tell and tell each other, they meet, transmitting the deep meaning of the experience and favouring the personal creation of meaning, something similar is proposed by Rogers et. al (2023) who identify that the meaning of life is closely linked to the personal stories that each individual tells about their own life, thereby generating individual expectations that serve as a comparison with their own.

3.2 Moral development as a proposal

Moral identity, in general terms, has been defined as that which approaches personal construction based on moral development (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). The meaning of life, understood as previously indicated, as coherence, direction or goals, has historically been considered as the main source of happiness, of personal fulfillment, however, different perspectives, both psychological (Steger et al., 2006) and philosophical (Kristjánsson, 2013), have suggested in recent years that a strong moral identity can significantly promote the development of the meaning of life in people. Somewhat more current studies, such as the one presented by, Han et al. (2016), show that people with a stronger sense of moral identity are more likely to do what they know is right, while they are more likely to show more lasting moral commitments over time in relation to their personal coherence and life goals.

While it is possible to consider two fundamental educational trends in relation to the attention that moral development receives in general terms, that is, those that emphasize the development of character on the one hand, and the development of reason on the other, there is a third way that emphasizes the interest in the development of identity in relation to moral growth. As Walker and Thoma (2017) point out, this perspective, unlike the virtue-centred or traditional rationalist perspectives, considers the moral person as the agent who uniquely prioritizes the will, the will being the one who identifies and pursues a conscious moral course in his or her life. In this sense, there are also several educational proposals that focus on moral development as the axis of the construction of meaning, being the use of moral dilemmas the methodology that has attracted most attention in recent decades.

Authors such as Schinkel and De Ruyter (2017), point out that moral growth can be favoured from problem solving. According to their proposal, offering difficulties, propositional conflicts in the classroom, as could be the resolution of moral dilemmas, triggers in the experience of rupture of harmony between beliefs, values and perception of life of students, offering an enriching starting point for the construction of vital meaning. In a similar vein, the previously mentioned proposal by Nash and Jan (2014) additionally offers another similar methodology, with the same objective. This is the one called by the authors as *moral conversation*, in which different meaningful discussions are proposed in the classroom to encourage listening, intimate reflection and student participation. In a similar sense, it is also possible to find another innovative proposal that converges this last idea of the use of debates in class. This is the methodology developed by Manning (2017), in which imagination is presented as a tool for the construction of meaningful life. From the presentation of existential questions, students must share their impressions by answering these questions in an imaginative, creative way, generating personal evaluations from different perspectives with the aim that students finally make a decision in favour or against them.

However, the proposals presented so far present a methodology that, despite being active, inclusive and global in relation to the construction of meanings based on moral development, do not seem entirely innovative. This is the starting point of the proposal offered by Karen Schrirer (2015), who offers a novel framework for action, *EPIC⁵*, which is based on the use of video games in the classroom. Her proposal is based on the fact that, in the same way that resources such as cinema, television, literature, comics or even *role-playing* or case studies are used to encourage students to reflect and make personal decisions, video games offer a unique opportunity for students to assume different roles both in a group and individually and to make interdependent ethical decisions with the aim of developing students both ethically and morally.

4. New challenges for the philosophy of education

After the pragmatic turn and the turn offered by analytical philosophy during the twentieth century, even after the turn towards a concern for feelings in recent philosophy of education (Jover et al., 2017), it is possible to find a concern, not excessively relevant but with a growing trend, for the pedagogical approach to questions of an existential nature such as the meaning of life (White, 2009; 2011; Schinkel, 2015; Sprigge, 2010). This trend arises because, as Schinkel, Ruyter and Aviram (2016) point out, there are deep connections between education and the meaning of life, which ultimately stem from the fact that for people, how to live and therefore how to educate is a fundamental question, as is overcoming human needs.

Despite the interest that this question has aroused since the beginning of the century among many authors (Metz, 2002, 2007, 2011, 2013b, 2022; Wolf, 2010; Thomson, 2003; Wong, 2012; Steger, 2009; Seachris, 2012), it should be emphasised that it has always had its origins in philosophy and psychology in a fundamental way; however, it is paradoxical to note that it has not received the same attention when it comes to being approached in a solid way from the perspective of the philosophy of education, despite the various isolated proposals analysed here. Taking into consideration that attending to the meaning of life implies reflecting on interrelated and important aspects such as the person, inner development, the construction of meanings, the achievement of personal goals, the development of feelings, the consideration of others, attention to moral development, reflection on the different forms of life or even death (Metz, 2002), it is possible to identify that, without a doubt, its attention offers a wide range of reflective possibilities in educational terms. Research on the meaning of life, based on the philosophy of education, not only broadens the scope of research on the subject, but also offers the possibility of adding new reflective components with the aim of enriching the actual educational activities (Reber, 2018). Additionally, the current discussion, to a large extent enhanced by advances in neuroscience and

psychology, invites philosophy of education to face different challenges, among which is the need to approach different modes of learning, experience and sensibilities (Noddings, 2016), aspects that are directly related to the development of meaning. At the same time, and as has been addressed in the article, through the proposals offered on the basis of moral education or narrative, the possibilities that this subject matter offers, due to its personal and social nature, enable the development of innovative pedagogical initiatives that respond to social demands for the renewal of teaching activity (Escudero Muñoz, 2017).

Education, as the main agent of personal development, must consider and attend to all personal dimensions, including the question of the meaning of life. In a technological world, in which digital culture surpasses mere reality, through, for example, augmented reality, both formal and informal education present methodological possibilities far removed from conventional education, which at the same time could well serve to increase both the reflective and practical possibilities for approaching the question of meaning. Beyond this inference, and taking into account the very definition of philosophy of education: “a globalising, comprehensive knowledge of educational phenomena, referring to the anthropological, epistemological, axiological and critical presuppositions of this process” (García Amilburu and García Gutiérrez, 2013, p.26), it seems reasonable that the question of the meaning of life, which is an anthropological issue that implies epistemological and axiological consideration of education, should be addressed by this discipline. However, the current trend, in global educational terms, is veering towards technification and quantifiable results and, with it, philosophical reflection on questions such as the one that concerns us here does not seem to have sufficient marketing to be considered actively. Does education not have the need to make us reflect on who we are, what is the meaning of life or what is the meaning of our activity, even on how to live in order to achieve, learn or discover these goals?

As Harvey Siegel (1999) pointed out a few years ago, and Richard Pring (2016) later, with acuity, expressed, beyond the problems and tasks that philosophy of education has faced recurrently over time, philosophy of education, as a discipline, has to be consistent with the fact that all educational activities, from classroom practice to the establishment of policies, are inevitably based on philosophical assumptions. Therefore, philosophy of education is essential for an adequate orientation of the educational practice itself, and, in this reflection on what and how to educate, it is worth remembering, multidimensional themes are immersed which, in addition to technique, infer and imprint the need to consider the human interior and, within it, reflection on subjectivity and its influence on the educational act itself is relevant (Sprigge, 2010). Thus, it seems that the philosophy of education today, fortunately, continues at the crossroads of facing challenges that transcend the virtual, bringing back to the scene, aspects of a metaphysical nature (Wilson, 2022), which probably help, or at least under that premise must be considered, to understand both the new artificiality of intelligence and the new notions of human improvement brought about by NBIC technologies (Gil Cantero, 2022).

Although educational reflection on the meaning of life is still in its infancy, and this is not the case if we analyse the volume of existing publications on the subject from fields of knowledge such as psychology, where there is a long history of reflection and research, there are more and more proposals from different perspectives on the need to consider this concept as educational in itself, motivating teachers and educators to approach and continue developing research on the subject.

To conclude, we will recover Clark’s (2006) reflection on his review of the state of philosophy of education at the beginning of the century, which, almost two decades later, is still valid. He expressed the idea that no philosopher of education is indispensable today, however, all professionals in the philosophy of education have the ethical duty to face the challenge of showing the world that the philosophy of education is indispensable and, with it, so is all reflection in relation to the purposes and aims of education itself. Based on this statement and taking into consideration what has been analysed and addressed in this article, it seems consistent to add that,

for the philosophy of education it is also essential, or at least it should be, to attend to questions of an intimate and personal nature that adhere to the educational act itself because they constitute the axis of what is most human and, if this is not done, it seems easy that the philosophy of education, and with it the educational act, will fall into nonsense, like the repetitive exercise of Sisyphus with his rock.

Note

1. “I saw Sisyphus likewise, who was toiling with both hands to push a huge stone. He struggled with his feet and hands; but when he was just short of lifting it, a mighty force overthrew the stone, and it rolled down into the plain. Then he pushed it again, and again the same misfortune befell him” ((La Odissea, Canto XI, p. 101).).
2. We refer to the essay: *El mito de Sísifo*. Madrid, Alianza.
3. However, as Grondin (2012) points out, the formulation in these terms of the question of the meaning of life is recent, having been popular since the second half of the nineteenth century. Previously, he says, the formulation had other variables. Aristotle, for example, asked about the pursuit of happiness as the supreme good. St. Augustine, for his part, wondered about the end of man.
4. To illustrate this approach, see Ricoeur’s (1996) work, particularly the seventh study, *The Self and intentionality* (pp. 189-202).
5. Acronyms referring to *Ethics Practice and Implementation Categorization* [EPIC].

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Javier Bermejo Fernández-Nieto is professor in the Department of Educational Studies at the Faculty of Education of the Complutense University of Madrid, associate professor at the Instituto Europeo de Posgrado and Territorial Head of the Teaching and Research Department of the Quirónsalud Group in Madrid. His lines of research focus on the philosophy of education, fundamentally on the concept of the meaning of life as an educational resource.

Contacto: javierbermejo@ucm.es