

Sisyphus 4.0

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Evan Tiffany's Philosophy 221 course *Ethical Theory*. The assignment asked students to articulate Richard Taylor's view regarding what makes a life meaningful as presented in his paper "The Meaning of Life." The paper uses MLA citation style.

In his paper, "The Meaning of Life" Richard Taylor presents an uncompromising thesis on the origins of meaningfulness, proposing that as no objective meaningfulness is possible, the only remaining possibility for meaningfulness must therefore be subjective and acquired by the being itself. He illustrates this view by invoking the timeless parable of Sisyphus, a tragic character condemned by the gods to roll stones up a mountainside for all perpetuity. Taylor describes Sisyphus's activities as the pinnacle of meaninglessness, and from this he derives his definition of meaninglessness: "repetitious, cyclic activity that never comes to anything" (38). From this he asserts that meaningfulness must therefore be the opposite – but as there can exist no activities that are not repetitious and cyclic, and none that are everlastingly purposeful, our lives must not differ fundamentally from that of Sisyphus. He concludes that meaningfulness in our existence can only be subjectively derived (48). In this paper I will argue that Taylor's central claim that there can exist no objective meaningfulness creates a false dichotomy in its insistence that objective meaningfulness must necessarily be dependent on cosmic permanence, and that his thesis on a purely subjective definition of meaningfulness undermines many aspects of what we typically envision meaningfulness to be.

Taylor commences his essay by conceding that meaningfulness is an exceedingly elusive quality to define, and embarks instead on capturing the

paradigm of meaninglessness – the existence of Sisyphus. In the original myth, Sisyphus had betrayed the gods by divulging a divine secret to the mortals, and was therefore sentenced to an eternity of stone rolling. He was to, ever laboriously, push a stone atop a hill, only to watch the stone tumble immediately downhill, over, and over, and over again (Taylor, 38). It is emphasized that Sisyphus's efforts never amount to any fruition, no temple ever arises from the summit of the mountain, and that no sooner does one stone roll down must he roll up another. On this Taylor states, "It is not that his great struggle comes to nothing, but that his existence itself is without meaning" (39). With Sisyphus as reference, Taylor obtains his vision of meaninglessness, which he terms "endless pointlessness" (41).

For Taylor, our lives are no different that of Sisyphus. None of our achievements are, from the cosmic perspective, significant to any degree – all of our civilizations will return to dust and new civilizations will be built upon them, our accomplishments forgotten and replaced with others. As meaninglessness is "repetitious, cyclic activity that never comes to anything and meaningfulness is therefore the opposite," objective meaningfulness must be an impossibility, as all of our activities culminate in nothing (Taylor, 38). Each of our days resembles one of Sisyphus's steps – but whereas Sisyphus returns to the foot of the hill once more, we leave the repetition to our next generation. The cycle is, by nature, endless pointlessness. Taylor describes in vivid detail the lifespan of an unsighted worm native to New Zealand, residing in caves and feeding on airborne insects it attracts with its luminescent tail. Its existence is brief and without purpose – it lies, listlessly, awaiting its next meal until it may one day transform into a winged adult that subsists for mere hours for the sole purpose of mating, before it is devoured by its cannibalistic kin. For Taylor, all of existence is in essence, "the same spectacle" (42).

Taylor, however, does not conclude on this note. He applies an amendment to Sisyphus's torment, proposing that we envision that the gods, as an afterthought, had bestowed upon Sisyphus a perverse mercy in the form of an insatiable desire and satisfaction towards stone-rolling. His existence is now centered on his singular obsession, and "he no sooner gets a stone rolled to the top of the hill than he is restless to roll up another" (40). Taylor claims that, however particular this fate might be, it is no longer a condemnation, but precisely the

inverse. As Sisyphus's one pleasure in life is to roll stones, he is assured in its endless fulfillment. Whereas previously, it may be imagined that he wished his life to cease, even welcoming the release from the agonizing monotony that death would bring - he is now brimming with mission and meaning. Taylor ventures as far as to claim that with this amendment, Sisyphus "seems to himself to have been given an entry to heaven" (40). It is stressed that outwardly, no aspect of Sisyphus's existence has changed, and that the only alteration made was to his internal view of his condition. Taylor's view can be summarized thusly – as there exists no objective meaningfulness, the only form of meaningfulness that can be attained must originate from within us.

I argue that Taylor's view mischaracterizes meaningfulness in one critical way – his insistence that the only form of objective meaningfulness must be inextricably linked to continuity on a universal standpoint constitutes an unfair ignorance of an alternative definition of objectiveness. I concede that if Taylor means uniquely to define objective meaningfulness as cosmic permanence, then perhaps his thesis stands true. However, it is far more probable that his definition constitutes a false dichotomy, for objectiveness need not be conceptualized this way. It can also be, more fairly, conceived as denoting 'non-subjective'. Furthermore, it may be of interest to us to envision meaningfulness as a spectrum, with one extreme being entirely subjective, the other extreme being cosmically objective, and the midground constituting some compromise, wherein meaningfulness is objective only in its quality of being non-subjective, or independent of attitude. The addition of this midground allows us to account for the fact that while it is true that no civilization may be capable of persisting for all perpetuity, some do endure longer than others, just as some novels hold more significance than others, some leaders have greater impact than others, and that these differences cannot be adequately captured by mere subjective tastes.

I contend that a spectrum of meaningfulness is necessary in the resolution of many objections to which Taylor's purely subjective viewpoint gives rise. Take for example, a cancer researcher who is prone to episodes of self-doubt and depression – he may wake every Monday morning feeling dejected and utterly detached from his work, but regain his motivation the following day. Is his work periodically deprived of all meaning, at every moment when he suffers from a fleeting

sensation of hopelessness, only to regain it the moment his mood upturns again? Taylor's subjective view would suggest so – but I believe that meaningfulness should be grounded in something significantly more substantial than a mere, possibly transient, state of mind. At the opposite end of this example, we can envision a particularly capricious individual, who, whenever she pleases, dedicates herself to a completely different career and outlook on life. She may find herself a gardener one day, a dog food taster the next, and a professional Netflix watcher the day after that, and believe each of her passing fancies to be wholly and unironically purposeful. And from Taylor's viewpoint, her life *would be* entirely meaningful.

I propose a far more plausible conceptualization of meaningfulness – one that is bipartite in its recognition of both subjective engagement and non-subjective worth as composites of meaningfulness. As an illustration, consider four variations on the myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus 1 is the original, neither engaged in his activities nor accomplishing anything of non-subjective worth. Sisyphus 2 is Taylor's alteration, thoroughly engaged but nevertheless still performing activities that constitute endless pointlessness. This is where Taylor's considerations conclude, but I propose two additional modifications – let us envision Sisyphus 3, who, instead of stone rolling, was sentenced to the construction of a palatial temple at the summit of the mount, the completion of which would draw in countless parishioners who would visit, seeking divine connection and profound introspection. He is as detached to his work and as laboriously tormented as Sisyphus 1, but surely now, his activities have gained some non-subjective significance. Compare him to Sisyphus 4, who is also constructing such a temple, and shares the same attitude towards his activities as does Sisyphus 2. Sisyphus 4 is both subjectively engaged and his activities have some degree of non-subjective culmination.

It is evident to me that Sisyphus 4 is the most preferable version, so much so that had the ancients originally recounted this version, it is entirely possible that Sisyphus would no longer encapsulate the epitome of meaninglessness, but rather, its direct antithesis. It is equally clear to me that Sisyphus 3 cannot be entirely discounted on the basis of his lack of subjective engagement. My theory is as follows: the optimal form of meaningfulness should ideally contain the maximum

of both subjective engagement and non-subjective worth, but the diminution of either qualities does not completely nullify the meaningfulness of a life. As such, both Sisyphus 2 and Sisyphus 3 have existences of some degree of meaningfulness, and while it may be preferable to be Sisyphus 2 instead of Sisyphus 3, the most favorable choice is without doubt, Sisyphus 4. The inclusion of activities of non-subjective worth as a composite of meaningfulness allows us to accord some meaningfulness into the lives of individuals who pursue activities of worth but do so listlessly, as with the aforementioned cancer researcher, and to individuals who are entirely engaged, albeit in activities that are relatively inconsequential.

While Taylor's argument for the meaning of life may be persuasive in its simplicity, it ultimately fails on two fronts: firstly, in its creation of a false dichotomy by necessarily connecting objective meaningfulness with cosmic permanence, and secondly, in its inability to ground meaningfulness as more substantial than a mere mood. Taylor claims, "the meaning of life is from within us" (47) but it is evident that subjective engagement alone is inadequate in capturing the quality that some activities have which renders them non-subjectively more significant than others. As such, it is probable that my theory better describes the dualistic nature of meaningfulness as dependent on both subjective engagement and non-subjective worth.

Works Cited

Taylor, Richard. *Good and evil: a new direction*. Macmillan, 1970.



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