

Meaning in Subjectivity (Taylor, Green, Frankl)

1. Objective Meaning: When is a life meaningful (if ever)? To better understand the question, Richard Taylor begins by asking instead, When is a life **meaningLESS**? He re-examines the Myth of Sisyphus, the epitome of meaninglessness. That life is:

- Difficult
- Repetitive
- Cyclical
- Endless
- It never comes to anything (i.e., it is pointless)

Which of these features make Sisyphus's life meaningless?

The element of **difficulty**, or hardship, does not seem to be necessary to its meaninglessness. Sisyphus struggles under the great weight of the boulder—but, we would judge his life to be just as devoid of meaning if it were a tiny pebble that he carried to the top of the hill over and over, without end.

But, neither do the **repetitive** and **cyclical** features of his life seem to be what make is meaningless. For, if Sisyphus performed different tasks, one after another, we would still judge his life to be meaningless so long as they never amounted to anything.

Even the fact that his actions are **endless** is not what makes his life meaningless. For, if Sisyphus rolled the stone for a while, and then died, we would still think his life was meaningless.

It is the *last* feature (**pointlessness**) that seems to be the crucial element. Sisyphus's life would cease to be meaningless if it *amounted* to something, if there was a *point* to it; e.g., if he carried a series of stones to the top for a very long time, but they were then constructed into a beautiful temple—then it would NOT be meaningless. He writes,

"Activity, and even long, drawn out and repetitive activity, has a meaning if it has some significant culmination, some more or less lasting end that can be considered to have been the direction and purpose of the activity."

Because Sisyphus's life lacks this crucial feature, his life is **objectively meaningless**.

2. Subjective Meaning: Now imagine that Sisyphus **WANTS** to roll stones to the top of the hill. Imagine that the gods give Sisyphus an insatiable desire to roll stones, such that, as soon as he has rolled the stone to the top of the hill once, he has an intense desire to do it again. His life would no longer be one of regrettable toil, for Sisyphus is happy now. After all, he is doing what he loves! This is *heaven*! What should we make of this?

Taylor says, from an impersonal perspective, his life would still be just as meaningless as before. For, if you were to look at him, he would look exactly the same. Only his internal mindset about what he is doing has changed. When you were first told the Sisyphus story, you probably judged his life to be meaningless without needing to ask, "But, what did he think about what he was doing?" So, even with this change, his life is still objectively meaningless.

Yet, this change in one's life seems *very* important for the one who lives it. To Sisyphus himself, he would not say that his activities never amount to anything. For him, there **IS** a point—some significant culmination—of his activities. He would say, "Every time I roll the stone to the top, I get an immense sense of personal satisfaction!" To HIM, then, if he loved what he was doing, his life would be meaningful. For this reason, Taylor concludes that an objectively meaningless life can still be **subjectively meaningful**.

3. Meaning In Our Own Lives: With a better understanding of meaning in life, we can now ask, What features do **OUR** lives have? Taylor begins with another living organism:

"There are caves in New Zealand, deep and dark, whose floors are quiet pools and whose walls and ceilings are covered with soft light. As you gaze in wonder in the stillness of these caves it seems that the Creator has reproduced there in microcosm the heavens themselves, until you scarcely remember the enclosing presence of the walls. As you look more closely, however, the scene is explained. Each dot of light identifies an ugly worm, whose luminous tail is meant to attract insects from the surrounding darkness. As from time to time one of these insects draws near it becomes entangled in a sticky thread lowered by the worm, and is eaten. This goes on month after month, the blind worm lying there in the barren stillness waiting to entrap an occasional bit of nourishment that will only sustain it to another hit of nourishment until Until what? What great thing awaits all this long and repetitious effort and makes it worthwhile? Really nothing. The larva just transforms itself finally to a tiny winged adult that lacks even mouth parts to feed and lives only a day or two. These adults, as soon as they have mated and laid eggs, are themselves caught in the threads and are devoured by the cannibalist worms, often without having ventured into the day, the only point their existence having now been fulfilled. This has been going on for millions of years, and to no end other than that the same meaningless cycle may continue for another millions of years."

The lives of these worms seems to be pointless. It never amounts to anything, except more worms, who continue the same cycle, without end. But, wait... Are OUR lives really so much different than that? Taylor observes,

"All living things present essentially the same spectacle. ... We toil after goals, most of them, indeed every single one of them of transitory significance and, having gained one of them, we immediately set forth for the next, as if that one had never been, with this next one being essentially more of the same. Look at a busy street any day, and observe the throng going hither and thither. To what? Some office or shop, where the same things will be done today as were done yesterday, and are done now so they may be repeated tomorrow. And if we think that, unlike Sisyphus, these labors do have a point, that they culminate in something lasting and, independently of our own deep interests in them, very worthwhile, then we simply have not considered the thing closely enough. Most such effort is directed only to the establishment and perpetuation of home and family; that is, to the begetting of others who will follow in our steps to do more of the same. Everyone's life thus resembles one of Sisyphus' climbs to the summit of his hill, and each day of it one of his steps; the difference is that whereas Sisyphus himself returns to push the stone up again, we leave this to our children."

All that we do, no matter how big or monumental, eventually never amounts to anything. All of the things we buy will fall apart, the buildings we construct; the art we produce—all of it will one day crumble; the people we love will die and decay; and all memory of us will eventually fade away. Taylor says that our life is like Sisyphus rolling the stone uphill. Our death, and the eventual decay is like the rolling back down of the stone. (Only, unlike Sisyphus, who is the SAME person performing the endless cycle—for us, the next cycle is performed by our children, or the generation after us.)

Thus, Taylor concludes, **our lives are objectively meaningless.**

However, this does not prevent them from being SUBJECTIVELY meaningful, like the Happy Sisyphus. We buy the things so that we can ENJOY them—not so that they will never fall apart. We produce the things so that we may take pride in our work NOW, and so that others may enjoy them too—not so that those things will last for eternity. And we love the people that we do because love PRESENTLY gives us joy and satisfaction—and this is not made any less meaningful for us when our loved ones die.

So, Taylor concludes, **our lives can be subjectively meaningful** if we want them to be. How so? Simply find some things that you enjoy! Or, alternatively, re-align your preferences to prefer and enjoy your dull, monotonous, toiling existence! 😊

Even the *worms* have a bit of meaning! They're doing what they want to do! "Their endless activity, which gets nowhere, is just what it is their will to pursue. This is its whole justification and meaning," says Taylor. "The point of living is simply to be living."

4. What's Even The Point?: Novelist John Green gives us a heartbreakingly beautiful look into his depressed mind when it begins to play the game, "What's Even The Point?"

"When my mind starts playing What's Even the Point, I can't find a point to making art, which is just using the finite resources of our planet to decorate. I can't find a point to planting gardens, which is just inefficiently creating food that will sustain our useless vessels for a little while longer. And I can't find a point to falling in love, which is just a desperate attempt to stave off the loneliness that you can never truly solve for ... What's even the point? All this trial and travail for what will become nothing, and soon. Sitting in the airport, I'm disgusted by my excesses, my failures, my pathetic attempts to forge some meaning or hope from the materials of this meaningless world. I've been tricking myself, thinking there was some reason for all of it, thinking that consciousness was a miracle when it's really a burden, thinking that to be alive was wondrous when it's really a terror. The plain fact, my brain tells me when it plays this game, is that the universe doesn't care if I'm here. ... The thing about this game is that once my brain starts playing it, I can't find a way to stop. ... When I think of the future, I start to only see the big blank space, the whyless bright terror. As for the present, it hurts. Everything hurts. The pain ripples beneath my skin, bone-shocking. What's the point of all this pain and yearning? Why? ... Any earnest defense I try to mount is destroyed instantaneously by the searing white light, and I feel like the only way to survive life is to cultivate an ironic detachment from it. If I can't be happy, I at least want to be cool. When my brain is playing What's Even the Point, hope feels so flimsy and naïve—especially in the face of the endless outrages and horrors of human life. What kind of mouth-breathing jackass looks at the state of human experience and responds with anything other than absolute despair?"

But, in the face of all this despair, Green holds on nevertheless.

"I must choose to believe, to care, to hold dear. I keep going. I go to therapy. I try a different medication. I meditate, even though I despise meditation. I exercise. I wait. I work to believe, to hold dear, to go on."

Moments of joy DO come to us, no matter how bleak things seem at times. Just as the whole cause of despair for so many is the knowledge that *nothing lasts*, we must remember that, therefore, *neither does the despair, the horror*. Green recalls one moment of such immense joy, with his son under the shade of a giant Sycamore tree:

"I'm just looking up at that tree, thinking about how it turned air and water and sunshine into wood and bark and leaves, and I realize that I am in the vast, dark shade of this immense tree. I feel the solace of that shade, the relief it provides. And **that's the point**. My son grabs my wrist, pulling my gaze from the colossal tree to his thin-fingered hand. 'I love you,' I tell him. I can hardly get the words out. I give sycamore trees five stars."

5. Stoicism: Viktor Frankl, a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps of World War II, finds meaning even in the most dismal and horrific of circumstances. No matter how meaningless it all seems, no matter how much we suffer, we can still choose how to RESPOND to that suffering. Frankl writes,

"If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete. ... [E]verything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. ... The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity—even under the most difficult circumstances—to add a deeper meaning to his life. ... For us, as prisoners ... Long ago we had passed the stage of asking what was the meaning of life, a naïve query which understands life as the attaining of some aim through the active creation of something of value. For us, the meaning of life embraced the wider cycles of life and death, of suffering and of dying. ... When a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he will have to accept his suffering as his task; his single and unique task. He will have to acknowledge the fact that even in suffering he is unique and alone in the universe. No one can relieve him of his suffering or suffer in his place. His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden."

Think of those who care for you – family, a loved one, God – in our time of suffering, they "would hope to find us suffering proudly—not miserably—knowing how to die."

A crucial part of staving off the horror of meaningless is HOPE:

"in spite of [it all], I had no intention of losing hope and giving up. For no man knew what the future would bring, much less the next hour."

Of those who did not succumb to the horrors, and helped their fellow inmates:

"It can be said that they were worthy of their sufferings; the way they bore their suffering was a genuine inner achievement. It is this spiritual freedom— which cannot be taken away—that makes life meaningful and purposeful."

Here, Frankl takes a very Stoic approach. We have no control over most of our external circumstances, or the state of human existence. But we DO control our ATTITUDE. Meaning in life, for Frankl, can be found in one's RESOLVE; in PERSISTING. If we lose hope, or resolve, then we have lost. In that case, life truly **IS** meaningless. But there is meaning in the CHOICE; the choice to keep going, no matter what, never losing hope.

[Note: Frankl is NOT suggesting that we SEEK suffering, or that we shouldn't try to get out of situations where we are suffering. He agrees that life is MORE meaningful when it involves love of family, or making art, or intellectual pursuits. Yet, if you find yourself in a situation where you are FORCED to suffer, with no control of your situation, you still retain control over how you RESPOND to this – and there is meaning in this choice.]