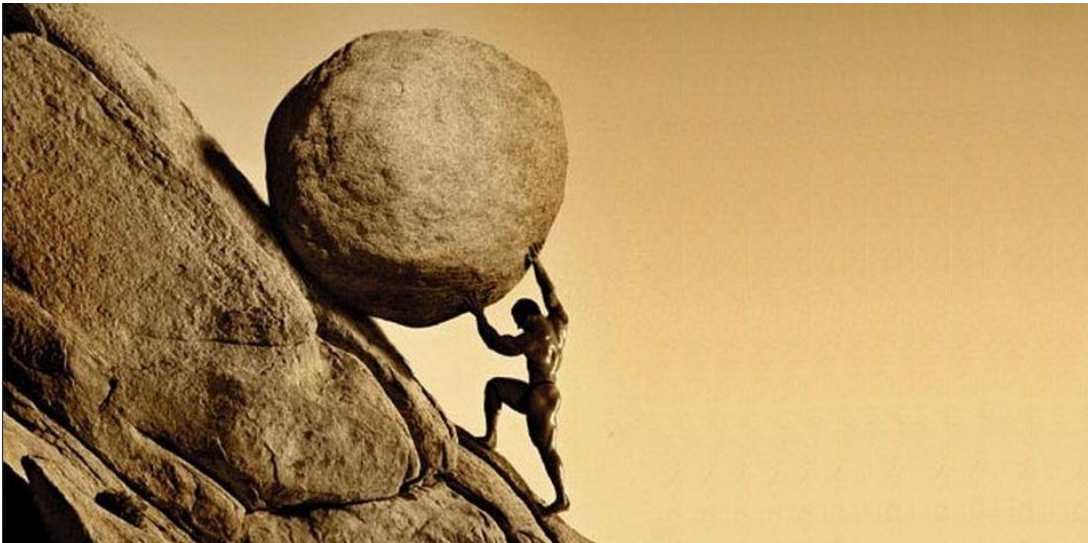


Meaning in Subjectivity (Taylor)

1. Objective Meaning: What is the meaning of life? When is a life meaningful (if ever)? To better understand the question, Richard Taylor begins by asking, When is a life **meaningLESS**?

Sisyphus Sisyphus, according to the mythology, was a king in ancient Greece. After committing certain crimes, he was punished by the gods. He was condemned to repeatedly roll a giant stone up a hill, only to have it roll back down once he reached the top. Over and over and over again, forever.



Taylor claims that this is the epitome of meaninglessness. Sisyphus's life is devoid of meaning. Nothing ever comes of it. He just engages in pointless toil, forever. What features of his life make it meaningless? Well, it 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 it 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; i.e., if there was a point to it. For instance, 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. (4)

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

2. Subjective Meaning: Now imagine that Sisyphus WANTS to roll stones to the top of the hill. Imagine that Sisyphus has 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! What should we make of this?

Taylor says, from an impersonal perspective, his life would 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 objectively meaningless.

On the other hand, it seems that this change in one's life is very important for the one who lives that life. 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: Now that we have some understanding of meaninglessness, we must ask, What features do OUR lives have? Taylor starts by picking 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. (4)

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, are OUR lives really much different than that? Consider:

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. (5)

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 the rolling back down of the stone. 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, that does not prevent them from being SUBJECTIVELY meaningful. We buy the things that we do so that we can ENJOY them—not so that they will never fall apart. We produce the things that we produce 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.

Thus, Taylor concludes, our lives can be subjectively meaningful if we want them to be.

Meaning in Both Objectivity and Subjectivity (Wolf)

1. What is Meaning?: What is being asked by the question, What is the meaning of life? Susan Wolf notes that "meaning" is used in many ways.

- As definition: 'Candor' **means** 'truthful, honest'.
- As indication: These footprints **mean** that someone has been here recently.

But, when we're asking what the meaning of life is, we're not asking what the definition of life is, or what the presence of life is indicative of. So, what are we asking??? The question, she says,

seems to be a search to find a purpose or a point to human existence. It is a request to find out why we are here (that is, why we exist at all), with the hope that an answer to this question will also tell us something about what we should be doing with our lives. (1)

If that's the case, then many think that whether or not life has meaning all depends on whether or not God exists. If God does exist, then there might be a purpose to our existence, and there might be something that we ought to be doing (namely, whatever God dictates). On the other hand, if God does not exist, then life is meaningless. There might be CAUSES that explain our existence, but not REASONS, or PURPOSE.

Wolf confesses that she is sympathetic to this line of reasoning.

Subjective Meaning: Still, there seems to be some subjective sense of the word that exists whether or not God exists. Evidence:

- Wanting meaning: When someone wants their life to have more meaning, they seem to mean that they want to be doing something that THEY FEEL is more rewarding.
- Meaningful experiences: When someone says that an experience was really meaningful, they seem to mean that it was one that was really important TO THEM.

2. Meaninglessness: Like Taylor, Wolf finds it easier to understand what is *meaningful* by first examining what is *meaningless*. She considers this case:

The Blob The Blob is an individual who does nothing but sit on the couch, drinking beer, and watching sitcoms.

PASSIVITY: Wolf writes, this picture, where The Blob's "life is lived in hazy passivity, a life lived at a not unpleasant level of consciousness, but unconnected to anyone or anything, going nowhere, achieving nothing - is, I submit, as strong an image of a meaningless life as there can be." This feature of PASSIVENESS, failing to act at all, or interact with the world, seems to contribute to the meaninglessness of The Blob's life.

USELESS: Wolf says that the passiveness of The Blob is not necessary for meaninglessness though. She can imagine a meaningless life where the individual is quite active, but engages in meaningless activities (for instance, someone who does nothing but work 80 hours a week, slaving away merely for personal wealth). Such a life might seem "pointless, useless, or empty." Being USELESS seems to contribute to meaninglessness.

BANKRUPTCY: But, one could even engage in activity that WOULD be meaningful if it ever amounted to anything. But, imagine now someone who slaves away for their entire life, and spends their entire savings, to cure cancer—only to find that someone else cures it two weeks sooner. It was all for nothing. This sort of BANKRUPTCY seems to contribute to meaninglessness too.

Conclusion: To live a meaningful life, one must avoid all three of these features. That is, one must live a life that is:

- (1) ACTIVE: One must DO things, and interact with the world, and with others.
- (2) USEFUL: It is not enough to do things that are of no use. Rather, one must engage in activities that contribute some positive value to the world.
- (3) SUCCESSFUL: One must not only TRY to do things that are useful, or contribute positively, to the world. One must at least to some extent succeed in doing so. In other words, at the end of one's life, one must not be able to say, "It was all for nothing. I tried, but I never ended up doing any good."

Proposal: Wolf writes, "a meaningful life is one that is actively and at least somewhat successfully engaged in a project (or projects) of positive value."

Note1: The term "project" need not invoke something like finding the cure to cancer. A "project" might be something as simple as being a loving friend or partner to someone.

Note2: To be suitably "engaged" in a project is to, so to speak, "have your heart in it." It is to perform an activity happily, and with pride.

3. The Meaning of Life: Wolf argues that the “positive value” that she speaks of cannot be MERE subjective value. For, there does seem to be a distinction between the following two things:

- A life that IS meaningful.
- A life that SEEMS meaningful to the one who lives it.

But, if merely engaging in activities that SEEM meaningful TO YOU legitimately gave your life meaning, then the distinction above would disappear—a life that SEEMED meaningful would BE meaningful. This will not do. For, perhaps The Blob really enjoys what he does every day. But, surely this would not make it the case that we could then truly say of him that he lived a meaningful life? [What do you think?]

Imagine that The Blob woke up one day and cried, “Oh no! I see now that I have been living a meaningless life!” Now imagine that his doctor said, “Fear not. I have a simple way to make your life meaningful again. I will give you a pill that will make you satisfied with sitting on the couch, and you will once again think that what you are doing has value.” Surely the difference between living a meaningless life and living a meaningful life is not just taking a pill that makes one perceive differently whatever one is doing?

Conclusion: In order to be meaningful, one’s life must not only SEEM to have value, it must REALLY have value. Thus, Wolf argues that a meaningful life must contain at least some OBJECTIVE value, or goodness.

Note that objective goodness does not necessarily include MORAL goodness. True, if one is a moral pillar in life (e.g., Mother Theresa, Ghandi), then one’s life is full of meaning. But, surely others such as famous composers and Olympic champions have also achieved lives with some meaning too (though musical and athletic projects are non-moral ones). In fact, living a morally good life is not even a guarantee that it will be a meaningful one. (She considers a discontented housewife, who is a morally good person, but takes no pleasure or pride in any of her life activities. Even The Blob is surely not a BAD person, morally, though his life is nevertheless meaningless.)

The Imperative: Wolf says that, not only have we now identified the features that make a life meaningful, but we also feel some strong sense that one SHOULD STRIVE after a life full of meaning. For instance, if The Blob expresses that he has no desire to change, we feel some intense sense of regret for him. It is BAD that his life is so meaningless. He ought to want more. Even if The Blob enjoys what he is doing, and his life is “good” in one sense (he enjoys it), it is bad in another sense (it is meaningless).

[Presumably, she would say the same about the Grass Counter]

But, why should this be the case? If The Blob (or the Grass Counter) is HAPPY doing what they are doing, why should they want to live more meaningfully? We might ask, "As long as you are engaged by your activities, and they make you happy, why should one care that one's activities be objectively worthwhile?"

The answer, she says, is that to live solely for one's own happiness is "solipsistic"—or, in other words, *selfish*, or *egocentric*. One who lives one's life indifferent to the bigger picture—namely, that there are other beings in the world; beings who feel joy or suffering just as real—lives as if those beings aren't real, and that their joy or suffering isn't real either. As such, such a person lives a life that is in contradiction with a very real fact about the universe (the fact that you are not the center of it). She writes,

To devote oneself wholly to one's own satisfaction seems to me to fly in the face of this truth, to act 'as if' one is the only thing that matters, or perhaps, more, that one's own psychology is the only source of (determining) what matters. (12)

Wolf encourages us to recognize that we are just specks in a vast universe, and that living solely for one's self fails to respect this fact. We might be tempted to think, with Craig, Tolstoy, Taylor, and Nagel, that without God, life simply cannot be meaningful in the way that Wolf describes. For, the very fact that we ARE specks seems to make living meaningfully impossible. How on Earth could living even in an OUTWARDLY-directed way imbue one's life with meaning, when all of the things that one directs one's self toward are just little specks too!? If God existed—a being of infinite value—and looked down at our lives and said "It is good", then maybe THAT would make our lives meaningful. But, without God, such meaning seems impossible.

Answer: Because, the very fact that some projects are more valuable than others—some worthwhile and some not—gives us reason to pursue them, whether or not some being of infinite value approves of them. She writes,

People are sometimes tempted to think that if God doesn't exist, then nothing matters. They are tempted to think that if we will all die, and eventually all traces of our existence will fade from all consciousness, there is no point to doing anything; nothing makes any difference. ... But the reasoning is ridiculous. If one activity is worthwhile and another is a waste, then one has reason to prefer the former, even if there is no God to look down on us and approve. More generally, we seem to have reason to engage ourselves with projects of value whether God exists and gives life a purpose or not. ... If one turns one's attention to other parts of the universe – even to other specks like oneself – in a way that appreciates and engages with the values or valuable objects that come from outside oneself, then one corrects one's practical stance. (15-16)

In short, she says, "Get Over It".