

**Introduction:**

Taylor begins this paper by focusing on what it would mean for life to be meaningless. Taylor delves into the concept of meaningless existence through the allegorical tale of Sisyphus. In this myth, Sisyphus is condemned by the gods to roll a heavy stone to the top of a hill, only to watch it roll back down. Worse, he must repeat this futile task for all time. This narrative symbolizes the idea of a purposeless and endless toil - a life without any meaningful redemption.

That is not to say that his life is meaningless because it is difficult, repetitive, or endless. Simple, random, and finite actions are equally capable of being meaningless. For Taylor, it is the *pointlessness* of the task that explains why Sisyphus' life is meaningless.

“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.” (pg 4)

**Objective vs. Subjective Meaning**

There is a further distinction that is needed, however, if we are to fully understand the status of Sisyphus' life. If the Gods were merciful and changed what desires Sisyphus has, such that he now *only* desires to roll his rock for eternity, Taylor claims that Sisyphus' life would gain meaning. From the outside perspective (i.e. the objective perspective) the actions are the same and so they are *objectively meaningless*. From the inside perspective (i.e. the subjective perspective), however, things are radically different. With his new desire, Sisyphus finds himself fulfilling his desire every day. Hence, his life has gained *subjective meaning*. According to Taylor 'an existence that is objectively meaningless ... can nevertheless acquire a meaning for him whose existence it is.' (pg 4) In other words, a lack of objective meaning does not entail a meaningless life.

There are some interesting, and perhaps odd, qualifications that Taylor adds to his understanding of subjective meaning. All living things, according to Taylor, have subjective meaning.

“Even the glow worms I described, whose cycles of existence over the millions of years seem so pointless when looked at by us, will seem entirely different to us if we can somehow try to view their existence from within. Their endless activity, which gets nowhere, is just what it is their will to pursue. This is its whole justification and meaning. Nor would it be any salvation to the birds who span the globe every year, back and forth, to have a home made for them in a cage with plenty of food and protection, so that they would not have to migrate anymore. It would be their condemnation, for it is the doing that counts for them, and not what they hope to will by it. Flying these prodigious distances, never ending, is what it is in their veins to do, exactly as it was in Sisyphus' veins to roll stones, without end, after the gods had waxed merciful and implanted this in him.” (pg 8)

Moreover, in the next paragraph he states that 'the point of living is simply to be living, in the manner that it is your nature to be living.' (pg 8) Taylor seems to be suggesting that the kind of instinct that drives the worms and birds to act as they do is sufficient for subjective meaning.

For Taylor, then, any creature can acquire subjective meaning so long as they are engaging in a task which corresponds to their nature. True, humans use cognition and conscious planning, whereas other creatures use, for example, instinct. For Taylor, however, that seems to be merely a difference of capacity and not of meaningfulness. So long as a creature's nature drives them to action, then that creature has a (subjectively) meaningful life.

**Questions:**

Question 1: In the case of a comatose patient, the patient has a nature (human) but cannot take any action. Are such patients devoid of subjective meaning?

Question 2: Taylor emphasizes the *desires* of Sisyphus when unpacking how one acquires subjective meaning. Taylor does not, however, distinguish between (for example) good and bad desires. So long as the moral monster is satisfying their desires their life seems to have subjective meaning. Is this a benefit or a cost of the theory?

Question 3: How would Taylor advise an agent with competing desires? Perhaps Sisyphus both wants to roll the rock and, equally, to nap. How does Sisyphus gain subjective meaning when his desires compete?