

Philosophy the meaning of life



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Is There a Meaning of Life? There are many different views as to what makes life meaningful. Philosopher, Thomas Nagel, presents a good argument as to why a “Sisyphian” existence is meaningless. This does not necessarily mean that all lives are meaningless, because Richard Taylor and Raymond Martin provide strong evidence that prove otherwise. According to Greek mythology, “The Myth of Sisyphus”, by Albert Camus, condemns Sisyphus to forever roll the same rock up a hill; only to see it roll back down once he reached the top.

Sisyphus’ “scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life” was the reason for his punishment and endless turmoil in accomplishing nothing (Camus 775). In Nagel’s essay “The Absurd”, his views on the meaninglessness of life and the absurdity of it, provide evidence that Sisyphus leads a meaningless life and how all people are condemned to lead this life. He points out that the absurd comes about by “the collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt”(Nagel 769).

In other words, the things people take seriously in their lives are always open to doubt. Nagel believes that human life becomes absurd when the realization of living an unreasonable life becomes known. “Once the fundamental doubt has begun, it cannot be laid to rest”(771). When people begin to doubt their existence, they search for answers that cannot be justified. Humans are capable of being self-conscious and self-inspiring which gives them the ability to step back and observe themselves from an outside

point of view. This allows them to see the reality and pointlessness of their goals.

Some people try to escape the absurd and try to add meaning to their lives by giving themselves a role in something bigger. When Nagel says, “ a role in some larger enterprise cannot confer significance unless that enterprise is itself significant”, he means that the larger enterprise cannot have meaning, unless the enterprise as a whole has meaning (770). According to Nagel, for something to be meaningful it must be objectively meaningful. For example, Sisyphus leads an objectively meaningless life because he is condemned to roll the stone up the hill forever and achieving nothing.

Nagel says that the life of a mouse is not absurd because the mouse is not aware that it is only a mouse; it does not have the ability to perceive its life like humans can. “ Absurdity is one of the most human things about us: a manifestation of our most advanced and interesting characteristics”(774). The absurdity shows people that their lives are meaningless; and when this is recognized, the logical conclusion is suicide. This solution to absurdity is not accepted; instead it is suggested to keep on living in spite of the absurdity of life. If we relied hard on reason our life would have collapsed” because relying only on reason would leave people with many philosophical questions, leaving them to dwell on the doubts of life (773). One way to achieve some concept of the meaning of life is to consider the meaninglessness of it as Richard Taylor has done. Like Nagel, Taylor views the endless cycle of Sisyphus pushing the stone up the hill over and over again as a perfect example of a meaningless existence. Taylor proves that a life is meaningless if it is spent in pointless and repetitive toil.

Sisyphus's repetitive act of rolling a stone up a hill never gets him anywhere nor does anything come from it, and therefore his life is meaningless.

However, Taylor came up with concepts that could provide some meaning and hope to Sisyphus's life. First, if Sisyphus were still condemned to endlessly rolling stones up a hill, but instead of the stones rolling back down, they would “ become the foundation for a vast and beautiful indestructible temple...with this construction going on and on, endlessly, and the temple gradually becoming ever more beautiful and inspiring and capable of enduring to the end of time” (Taylor 788).

With these conditions, Sisyphus's actions now have a purpose because something results from his efforts and creates lasting significance; but his efforts are still endless and therefore still have no meaning. He is still doing the same repetitive routine, and if the temple were to be finished, what then? Taylor believes that “ the greatest evil that can be inflicted upon anyone is unrelieved boredom”, which means that if Sisyphus were to ever complete his task he would become engulfed in boredom until he finds another task.

Mankind continues the daily routine to escape this evil; without projects and activities man would be bored. Taylor concludes that human life from an objective viewpoint is “ described as a clockworklike thing, without purpose or meaning” because it will always consist of a routine that will never end (790). Another case in which Sisyphus' life can become meaningful is if his strongest desire was to push stones up a hill, for this is what makes him happiest. This makes his life subjectively meaningful; it is meaningful to him because it is fulfilling his desire. Taylor states “ Sisyphus, will view his life,
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not as one of hard labor, certainly not one of meaninglessness, but as good” because he is sentenced to forever doing something that he enjoys (791). This case still does not show a completely meaningful life because it is not whether he enjoys his existence; it is if his existence has meaning, which is still spent in routine. Taylor concludes, “ the only genuinely meaningful existence is one that is creative”(792).

For instance, if Sisyphus was willing to roll the stones up the mountain to build an everlasting temple that is not only “ beautiful to his eyes, but truly beautiful, in the eyes of every future generation...we have, finally, the perfect image of meaningfulness”(792). Taylor says that one can make anything meaningful by making it creative; not only in the sense of creating physical objects, but also that creativity is a state of mind. “ Some can – live meaningfully, by creating our own meanings, whether great or small, and then literally glorying in them, caring not in the least what we “ get” from it all”(793).

Having this creative sense leaves people able to find meaning everywhere. Finding out the meaninglessness of life helped Taylor find concepts that could make life meaningful. Martin’s essay, “ A Fast Car and a Good Woman”, addresses the problems of both Nagel and Taylor by depicting his own meaning of life. He describes the difference between the problems of the meaning of life and the problems of life itself. Martin says that the problem of the meaning of life is the philosophical question of whether or not life can be worth living.

Instead of focusing on this subject, Martin discusses how the problem of life, “ is a practical question of how to live our lives so that they are as worth living as they can be”(Martin 1). Since there is no objective meaning in life as Nagel says, Martin does not try and find it, but tries to see what would make life meaningful in the psychological sense. Martin believes in practical wisdom, “ if we take proper care of our lives, questions of meaning will take care of themselves”, that way people are not worried about the meaning of life.

If someone worries about the meaning of life, like Nagel said, and tries to give it reason, it will result in madness. There are those people who cannot set questions of meaning aside; Leo Tolstoy is a prime example of this kind of person. When Tolstoy says, “...And I was absolutely unable to make any reply. The questions were not waiting and I had to answer them at once: if I did not answer them, I could not live”, he means that he needs to be able to understand the questions of meaning before he can move on with his life (1).

Martin says that philosophical questions bring about existent anguish, for instance, when one’s sense of security is lost because it was built on a foundation of unquestioned beliefs. For example, a person whose sense of security that rests on religious beliefs suddenly become subject to doubt, results in such suffering that calls into question the meaning of life.

Philosophical questions normally only challenge the beliefs we depend on for security and not necessarily the meaning of life.

Martin says that the suffering is not because of the philosophical problem of the meaning of life, but the sudden realization that our personal beliefs rest

on uncertain assumptions. Nagel and Tolstoy both believe that “philosophical challenges to the meaning of life are an important source of psychological problems”(3). With this belief, Martin’s view of practical meaning is wrong. Not being able to overlook the philosophical questions of meaning will ultimately bring you down because of the realizations it brings.

Nagel claims that there is not solution to this, because the absurd cannot be avoided. Martin believes that when life is at its subjective best, that questions of the meaning of life do not arise. At this moment one has temporarily solved the problem of life because the thought of meaning did not arise. This statement makes practical wisdom valid because, “when we are happy, questions about the meaning of our lives rarely ever become problems”(3). To become happy one must take chances, and if one goes down the wrong path to happiness, it could lead to philosophical problems about the meaning of life.

Taylor, like Nagel, uses philosophical questions differ between objective meaninglessness and subjective meaning. He views that life is objectively meaningless, but not completely meaningless. According to Martin, Taylor finds meaning everywhere and Nagel finds is nowhere. However, neither one is psychologically valid because they both rely on philosophical questions for their meaning. Martin says that Taylor’s view is too romantic and makes meaning too easy and Nagel is the opposite with an intellectual view, which makes meaning too hard.

Martin agrees with a view suggested by Taylor’s discussion, “that people have meaningful lives not when they are doing what they will to do but when

they are doing what they love to do”(4). Martin believes that life is not essentially meaningful but that it can become meaningful if one does something they love to do. When at one’s subjective best, when not disturbed by questions about the meaning of life, are you also completely satisfied at this moment? According to Martin, it is close enough to being completely satisfied, but it does not last long. Since satisfaction doesn’t last, then either we have to continually resatisfy ourselves or successfully and pleasantly distract ourselves from the fact that we haven’t”(5). This is our fate, but it does not completely provide a solution to the problem of life. Therefore, Martin suggests that everyone is chronically unsatisfied. This repetitiveness is one of Taylor’s reasoning’s to the meaninglessness of life, which is reason to why life is not essentially meaningful. To solve the problems of life one does what makes them happy, for Martin this consists of a fast car and a good woman. Happiness is different for everyone.

Martin’s view on life seems to be the most reasonable and ultimately provides happiness for people. He avoids suffering by completely ignoring the philosophical question of the meaning of life. Nagel and Taylor both concentrate on this meaning of life, which lead to no happy results. At least Martin lives a subjectively happy life by not being troubled by the meanings of it. However, Nagel’s argument completely rejects Martin’s because according to Nagel, the absurd cannot be ignored once it is recognized. Martin clearly recognizes but puts it aside to make him believe that there is meaning.

If someone lives a life believing that it is meaningless, then what is the point of living? For the reason of trying to perceive any sort of meaning for human

life is so that humans do not always live in doubt. Overall, life objectively has no meaning but that does not leave human existence in utter turmoil. The evidence that Taylor provides, gives us a sense of how there is hope for a meaning in life. Eventually concluding that life would need to be given meaning, purpose, variety, and the sense of creativity to become meaningful, “ the only meaningful existence is a creative existence”(Taylor 792).

This is the only meaning for the philosophical meaning of life. Taking Martin’s view, and putting aside philosophical meaning and taking the psychological meaning, gives humans a positive outlook on life by letting subjective happiness be the basis to the solution to the problem of life. All views of life are all based on the struggle to overcome doubt, so ultimately “ the itch of desire returns...until death ends the struggle – perhaps forever”(Martin 6).