

Camus, "Sisyphus" Taylor, "The Meaning of Life"

Camus

Sis' punishment is the worst imaginable—futile and hopeless labor.

-is that the worst thing we can think of?

"his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth."

-how are passions tied to despair and fruitless pursuits?

"The workman of today works everyday in his life at the same tasks, and his fate is no less absurd." Camus seems to think there's a clear parallel b/w Sis and the contemporary worker. What's the primary difference between them?

Camus focuses on the moment when Sis returns to go back and roll the stone again. He says that in this moment "he is superior to his fate" and "stronger than his rock". Why? What is he doing?

The Absurd Victory: "There is no fate that can not be surmounted by scorn." Again, what's the idea here? It sounds like Sis' solution lies somewhere in the attitude he takes toward his labor. But what exactly is this attitude, in Camus' description?

When does the rock win? "When the images of earth cling too tightly to memory, when the call of happiness becomes too insistent, it happens that melancholy arises in man's heart...The boundless grief is too heavy to bear." How do we interpret this? Is he reiterated Schopenhauer and Buddha's views of suffering as linked to desire? Or is the source of the problem located elsewhere?

"The absurd man says yes and his efforts will henceforth be unceasing." Is that it? The way to deal with pointless labor is to just grin and bear it? Affirm it? How? How can I simultaneously recognize my labor as being pointless and view it as meaningful?

"The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart." Does it make sense to struggle pointlessly, though? Is it enough to struggle if I know that my struggle will be futile?

Taylor

I can't tell you outright what meaning is, but I can tell you what it isn't.

-How do we think of this in terms of general strategy? If I want to know what a chair is, you could tell me a *lot* of things that it isn't. Not all of these things will

be helpful in explaining chairs to me. What are the relevant sorts of contrasts that help us to understand concepts?

Meaningless pursuits are pursuits that are *pointless*: nothing comes from them

-the end of a pointless pursuit is just more of the same

-ex: a video game where you just repeat the same thing over and over, or tic-tac-toe

2 ways that a pursuit can then be meaningful:

1. It can give rise to some enduring structure; it can have a purpose

2. Compulsion: have an impulse to do what the labor requires, such that you are fulfilling your desire through your pointless labor

qs. does 2 work if you know that your acting compulsively? Think about OCD sufferers—they often report feeling horrible at being unable to get past their compulsions.

2 may require some sort of ignorance or active delusion

-what do we think of 2 as a strategy?

(2) doesn't make the endeavor more *objectively* meaningful—it just changes the perspective of the actor

-interestingly, the actor doesn't even need to willingly adopt this new perspective

-why does Taylor specify this? Why might it be relevant that meaning of the second kind can be achieved by means of a drug or other external device?

Does (2) then make behavior meaningful, or simply solve the problem of despair in the face of meaninglessness?

p. 260: “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.”

Taylor's question: can our lives have meaning (1) or only meaning (2)? That is, can our lives have objective meaning, or only subjective meaning?

Look at glow worms and cicadas: Life, considered objectively as a biological process, only culminates in more of the same. It has no type-1 meaning.

We might think we're different, but are we? Our goals all aim at transitory achievements. If you think your goals really amount to something worthwhile, you just need to look closer to see otherwise.

-behavior is directed at establishment and perpetuation of the home and family, for example

-we don't live forever like Sis, but instead dump the rock off on subsequent generations

Why does Taylor think that our struggles come to nothing? Why does permanence amount to objective meaning, but impermanence not?

He concludes that since permanence is not possible, nothing you can ever do will ultimately matter for very long—won't matter in the 'grand scheme of things'.

p.264 He suggests that this is why we have stories about things like heaven—we need them in order to keep going, so they're important. But that's all they do for us.

a similar idea is developed by Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*

-we make up religious stories to cope with the despair we face when we try to determine the objective meaning and purpose of our lives.

So it looks like option (1) is not available to us or anyone—life has no objective meaning.

So he opts for (2)

But again: what does it mean to say that x has meaning *for me*?

-it needn't be tied to rationality

-is it a kind of self-deception?

Taylor further thinks that (2) is better than (1)

-even if (1) were possible (and it's not), we'd get bored (i.e. Schopenhauer)

-last par p.265 (1) would give our endeavors objective meaning, but it turns out that that's not really what's going to satisfy us

So what do you do? Focus on the role of the individual will—what you care about.

-go for the 'strange meaningfulness'—it's meaning, but not what we might have thought we were originally asking for

-the best we can hope for is an irrational desire to do just what we are doing

-is that really it?

p.266 we get the (now) cliché that it's the journey, not the destination, that counts (the building, and not the thing built)

p.268 read last par.

-we despair when we ask for the objective meaning of life because there is none.

But (2) is possible, and in any event better than (1).

Hard questions now: Once you've started thinking about this stuff, can you go back?

Can I really achieve (2) once I'm aware that that's what I'm doing? Is the investigation of the meaning of life counterproductive?

Do (1) and (2) really exhaust the ways in which our lives can be meaningful?

Think about our desires for fame and making a difference—two sides of the same coin, perhaps. Why do we care about these things, and are they worthwhile pursuits? How do we distinguish between "important" differences we can make and "frivolous" ones?