I. What is Meaning?

A. The reading response asks, “How does Taylor understand meaning in this essay?” This is a request for an analysis of the concept of meaning, which should be general.

   1. That is, as an analysis, it should apply generally across all contexts in which the concept can be deployed.

   2. It is fine to associate it closely with human existence in thinking about it, as that is the focus of Taylor’s discussion, but the key to supplying an analysis is to identify conditions that apply to other meaningful things as well.

   3. The Goal: identify conditions that will apply to all those things that are meaningful and not apply to all those things that aren’t meaningful.

B. There are a couple of common approaches to answering this question:

   1. Top-Down: guided by prior theoretical commitments, identify what meaning must be by deriving the conditions from those commitments.

   2. Bottom-Up: locate examples of meaningful things in the world and then isolate those common characteristics that make those things meaningful; this may require working at significant abstraction from the examples themselves.

C. We conducted a bottom-up analysis. Here are your suggestions of meaningful things:

   1. When something worthwhile is achieved

   2. Purpose

   3. Understanding of a thing for the person

   4. When you’re working toward something, that something is meaningful (e.g., a goal)
5. Anything that is meaning is subjective
6. Something that gives us personal gratification
7. Something you think about a lot
8. Permanent things
9. Works of art (to the artist)
10. Important reason to exist

II. Thinking about the Meaningful

A. If you adopt a bottom-up approach, then once you have a list, you need to examine the list, sorting things according to similarities and differences. You need to look for patterns among the data, and then work toward reading the conditions off those patterns.

B. In our data, there are a number of observations to make:

1. #5 provides a candidate necessary condition on meaningfulness—according to it, if a thing is meaningful, then it is subjective; that is, if a thing is not subjective, then it is not meaningful. But note that a thing can be subjective without being meaningful (on this interpretation), which establishes that #5 does not give an example of a meaningful thing.

2. #8 points to a sufficient condition—if a thing is permanent, then it is meaningful. Unlike #5, it also gives us an example of a meaningful thing, namely, any permanent thing. Note that this need not satisfy the subjectivity condition, and so represents a different analytic approach than #5.

3. #1, #2, and #4 are very similar—all involve purposes, where having a purpose endows something (e.g., one’s work) with meaning.

4. #3, #5, #7, and #9 are similar in that they focus on subjective meaningfulness. #3 and #6 give us examples of psychological states—understanding and gratification—that indicate meaningfulness. #7 notes that a sufficient condition of meaningfulness for one would involve being something one thinks about a lot, so it is also psychological in focus. #9 relativizes meaningfulness to the artist, but note that it need not. Perhaps one could say that if a thing counts as a work of art, then it must be meaningful. (These are clearly also related to #5.)
C. The next step is to proceed to an account. This involves taking the insights, keeping the ones you believe are correct, jettisoning the ones you think are not, and then providing a narrative that ties the correct ones together, explaining them.

III. One Account: Meaning as Information

A. Idea: X is meaningful if it carries information about something Y.
   
   1. *Meaning* here involves standing for or signifying or representing something.
   
   2. The model for this approach is language—words are meaningful because they can stand for other things.

B. Structure: X is the vehicle, S the signal, and Y the object.
   
   1. How does X come to be associated with Y?
   
   2. How does S come to have meaning about Y?
   
   3. There are different alternatives here:
      
      a. Causal association
      
      b. Purposive association

C. This captures meaningfulness for me and meaningfulness simpliciter.

D. Tests:
   
   1. Can this accommodate purpose? Yes: actions can indicate one’s purposes, so they are Y to the action’s X. (And they can also be the X to a larger purpose’s Y.)
   
   2. What of subjective meaning? One could add an additional parameter, a “for Z” parameter, indicating the agent for whom X carries information about Y.
   
   3. Does it accommodate the meaning of life? Understood as meaning carried by a life, this can be accommodated.