Lecture 2: Taylor on the Meaning of Human Existence

Philosophy 200
11 September 2012
O’Rourke

I. Administrative
   A. Roll and argument distribution
   B. Be sure to check out the Handouts page!
   C. I am working on responding to all the emails I’ve received. I hope to finish that by Thursday
   D. Schedule review and upcoming weeks…
   E. Questions?

II. Discussion of In-Class Arguments
   A. This was a tricky exercise, and you did pretty well as a group. There are a few things to think about as you prepare for the group paper in a couple of weeks, though.
   B. It’s good to stick to the text, but be sure to interpret what you find there
   C. Think about how the premises relate to one another and to the conclusion:
      1. Are the premises a list, and the conclusion a summary or a counting of that list?
      2. Do the premises relate to one another as nested conditionals that give rise to the conclusion when affirmed?
      3. Do the premises (if true) force the truth of the conclusion (in which case the argument is deductive) or do they merely increase the likelihood of its truth (in which case the argument is non-deductive)
D. Think about the conclusion:
   1. Are all parts of your conclusion contained somewhere in the premises, at least implicitly? (If implicit, you might be well-served to make them explicit for the purpose of your representation of that argument.)
   2. Is the conclusion appropriately strong, given the strength of the premises?

E. Write these to capture the flow of the reasoning

III. Thoughts on Meaningfulness

A. What is meaningful?

B. Worldview as the frame in our search for meaning.

C. Can one supply a theory of meaning that accommodates mundane cases (e.g., street signs) as well as more difficult cases (e.g., lives)?

D. One Suggestion: Meaning as information
   1. X is meaningful if it carries information about something Y.
   2. Meaning here involves standing for or signifying something.
   3. Structure: X is the vehicle, S the signal, and Y the object.
   4. How does X come to be associated with Y? And how does S come to have meaning about Y? There are different alternatives here:
      a. Causal association.
      b. Purposive association.
   5. This captures meaningfulness for me and meaningfulness simpliciter.
   6. Does it accommodate the meaning of life? Understood as meaning carried by a life, this can be accommodated.
E. What about a meaningful life, for the individual? This is tougher, although it should be assimilable to meaningfulness (in general) for me.

IV. Reading Taylor, “The Meaning of Human Existence”

A. The Thesis: Human life can be meaningful (although often it is not) just in case it involves the achievement of autonomous purposes creatively identified by the agent.

B. The Overall Structure of the Argument

1. Schopenhauerian spirit: “human life, in spite of its joys and in spite of the tenacity with which we cling to it, does have the character that led Schopenhauer to deem it meaningless” (765).

2. Following the Sections:

   a. Life is not self-authenticating

   b. The Myth of Sisyphus provides a model of meaninglessness as being deprived of purpose, “including even the minimal purpose of somehow avoiding total boredom from one hour to the next” (768).

      i. Happiness or contentment does not imply a meaningful life

      ii. Animal life is like that of Sisyphus, meaningless: “It is all for nothing, it just goes on and on, to no end whatever” (770).

      iii. So too is human life, even though it is more various: “And what, besides the pleasure of the moment or, more likely, the momentary escape from boredom, is the purpose of it all? Rarely is it anything beyond the accumulation of possessions” (771).

• [Boredom is the greatest human evil]

• [Human life is very similar to animal life, even though culture and intelligence add complexity]
• [What about humans as a whole? It doesn’t help to scale up—things are just as meaningless]

c. Pursuing meaning in four stages: enslavement, irrationality, rationality, truth

i. This reveals that meaning requires *purpose*

ii. [But again—see b.i above—just because you like a meaningless life does not make it meaningful]

iii. Meaning cannot derive simply from endless pursuit …

iv. … so the purpose must be *achieved*

v. Is that enough? No—it must also be the agent’s *own* purpose; that is, it must reflect the agent’s creativity

vi. [Again, just because you have a strong will to live, find happiness in your pursuits, and even regard your life as fulfilling, *does not make it meaningful*]

vii. A genuinely meaningful life: “It would be a life that has a purpose—not just any sort of purpose that we happen to find satisfying, but one that is truly noble and good. And it must be one that is in fact achieved and not just endlessly pursued; and it must be lasting; and finally, it must be our own rather than just something imbibed. In short, the only genuinely meaningful existence is one that is creative” (780)

viii. [Creation can be small or big, since creativity is a state of mind]

C. The Argument from Meaninglessness

P1. Sisyphus is the image of a meaningless life.

2. Given P1, meaninglessness in a life consists in repetitive behavior that does not achieve a purpose and, worse, is essentially purposeless.
P3. Many humans live repetitive lives in which purposes are not achieved.

C. Therefore, many human lives are meaningless.

D. The Argument for Meaningfulness

P1. Meaningfulness in a life requires the negation of meaninglessness.

2. From P1, meaningfulness in a life requires that one’s life not be a boring, repetitive cycle in which no purpose is achieved.

P3. It is not sufficient that a life achieve purposes, though; those purposes must also be creatively identified by the person and must be their own.

C. Human life can be meaningful just in case it involves the achievement of autonomous purposes creatively identified by the agent.