

Embracing Absurdity (Camus & Nagel)

1. The Absurd: Albert Camus and Thomas Nagel confront the meaninglessness of life in a world without God. Life, they say, is **absurd**. They both offer examples of absurdity:

- Accusing an innocent virtuous man of a monstrous crime.
- Someone charging a line of people with machine guns holding only a sword.
- Electing a notorious criminal to be president of a philanthropic foundation.
- Someone's pants fall down as they are being knighted.

'Absurdity' can mean being *impossible* or *contradictory*, obviously *false* or *irrational*, but most importantly (for Camus and Nagel), it involves a **comparison** and a **tension**. Of the man charging with a sword, Camus writes:

"by virtue of the **disproportion** between his intention and the reality he will encounter, of the **contradiction** I notice between his true strength and the aim he has in view."

For Camus, the absurdity of life is born of the tension between our longing for things to make sense, and the fact that life is senseless.

For Nagel, it arises from the tension that arises between the way that we live our lives (as if they are significant) and the reality of our insignificance.

Realizing the Absurdity: Camus surveys the journey to the realization that life is absurd:

- First, there is the **monotony** of life. We work, sleep, eat. Over and over For what?
- There is the **march of time itself, toward death**; our bodies slowly falling apart.
- Moments of profound **strangeness**. Suddenly beauty & loved ones seem so alien.
- Realization of the **pointlessness**. There is no morality, no meaning, no purpose.

Man, says Camus,

"feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."

Nagel says the conflict has to do with the SERIOUSNESS with which we take life. We act AS IF life has some ultimate, objective seriousness about it, though it does not. We see this because we are, among the animals, uniquely able to step back and view our own lives from a detached, 3rd person perspective; and from there, it often seems as if all of our life-long struggles and daily pursuits are ARBITRARY; as if we are but tiny ants. Yet, we continue to plod along living life 24 hours a day anyway—and that is the absurdity.

The Absurdity Is This: We *desperately want* for things to make sense; to have a point; to mean something. We want our lives to be important; for there to be a *reason* for all of our toiling. The ABSURD is the fact that life offers us none of these things...

2. The Question of Escape: In the wake of the realization of the Absurd, Camus asks himself whether the appropriate response is suicide.

Philosophical Suicide: Many escape the conclusion of absurdity by attaching themselves to something greater—family, society, a team. We place our meaning, our purpose, in something greater than ourselves – something that is NOT insignificant.

But, as Nagel points out, this only pushes the problem back one level: Attaching ourselves to something bigger does not make life any less arbitrary unless that something bigger is ITSELF not arbitrary. Imagine that we discovered that planet Earth was actually a giant factory farm used to feed aliens human flesh. THAT would be something bigger that would make our lives meaningful TO THEM (the aliens), but it would still not answer the question of whether or not life was meaningful TO US. So, even if there IS something bigger than us, which has a purpose for us, that does not confer meaning FOR US.

So, many escape the absurd by turning to religion (as we saw with Tolstoy last time). But, Camus says, this is a sort of **philosophical suicide**. He writes,

"If there is an absurd, it is in man's universe. The moment the notion transforms itself into eternity's springboard ... [t]he struggle is eluded. ... This leap [toward God] is an escape. ... The intoxication of the irrational and the vocation of rapture turn a lucid mind away from the absurd. To [the religious] reason is useless but there is something beyond reason. ... [T]hrough a strained subterfuge, [the religious person] gives ... God the attributes of the absurd: unjust, incoherent, and incomprehensible."

However,

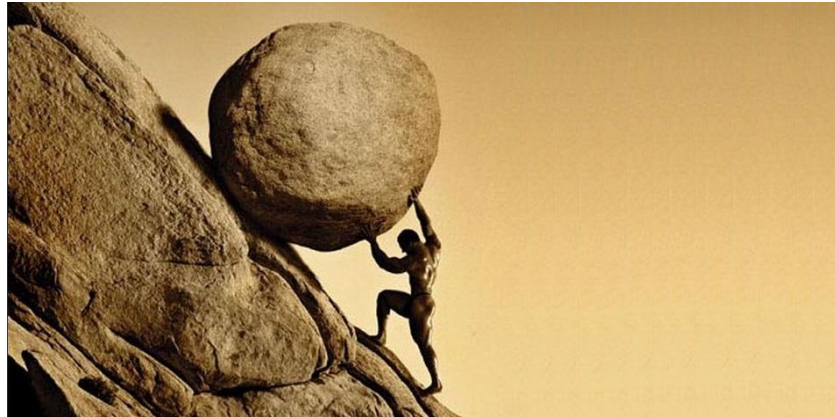
"To an absurd mind reason is useless and there is nothing beyond reason. ... [T]he absurd is the contrary of hope ... The absurd man ... does not undertake such a leveling process. He recognizes the struggle, does not absolutely scorn reason, and admits the irrational. Thus he again embraces in a single glance all the data of experience and he is little inclined to leap before knowing. He knows simply that in that alert awareness there is no further place for hope."

The religious commit "philosophical suicide" – they "leap" to their philosophical deaths, by escaping the absurdity of life, only by placing their belief in some equally irrational, incomprehensible, and absurd thing.

Yet Camus, unable to embrace religion, is interested in whether he ought to commit ACTUAL suicide.

3. The Myth of Sisyphus: Camus finds his answer by way of the Myth of Sisyphus.

Sisyphus: Sisyphus, according to the mythology, was a king in ancient Greece. After committing certain crimes, he was punished by the gods. He was condemned to repeatedly roll a giant stone up a hill, only to have it roll back down once he reached the top. Over and over and over again, forever.



His life is clearly meaningless. It is absurd. But Camus takes a closer look at the moments when Sisyphus **CHOOSES** to keep going; he intentionally goes back down the hill to do it all over again, and again. It is Sisyphus's resolve, says Camus, where he finds meaning. His perseverance to keep doing the task that is obviously so pointless.

"At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock."

He ends up concluding that it is actually better to live in the absence of meaning:

"It was previously a question of finding out whether or not life had to have a meaning to be lived. It now becomes clear, on the contrary, that it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning. Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully."

For, suicide is to run away from the problem! It is cowardice!

"Negating one of the terms of the opposition on which he lives amounts to escaping it. To abolish conscious revolt [i.e., to die] is to elude the problem. ... Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it. ... [T]he absurd dies only when we turn away from it. One of the only coherent philosophical positions is thus **revolt**. It is a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity. It is an insistence upon an impossible transparency. It challenges the world anew every second. ... [M]etaphysical revolt extends awareness to the whole of experience. It is that constant presence of man in his own eyes. It is not aspiration, for it is devoid of hope. That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it."

HERE is where we find our meaning. In **revolt!** The absurd man:

"can ... decide to accept such a [meaningless] universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation. ... **That revolt gives life its value.** Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty to that life. To a man devoid of blinders, there is no finer sight than that of the intelligence at grips with a reality that transcends it. The sight of human pride is unequalled. ... The absurd is his extreme tension, which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows that in that consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of **his only truth, which is defiance.**"

Ultimately, Camus seems to think that we can even find JOY in this act of revolt. Sisyphus may trudge down the hill in sorrow – but then the rock has won! When he finally takes control and realizes HE is consciously choosing to bravely face the absurd, and keep going, in defiance, there can be joy in that.

"The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. **There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.** ... All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. ... The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

(Essentially, Camus is in complete disagreement with Tolstoy that option #4 – continuing to live in absurdity – is cowardice. It is, rather, the bravest thing one could do!)

4. Just Getting On With It: Nagel accepts the absurdity of life, but denies some of the reasons that frequently lead to this conclusion. People say things like:

(1) *If life won't matter in a million years, then it does not matter now!*

Reply: But, why would that be the case? Whether or not something matters in a million years depends on whether or not it mattered, period.

(2) *We're so insignificant! We're just specks of dust in a vast universe, and our time here is but a tiny blip in the staggering history of the universe!*

Reply: But, why should size have anything to do with the question of whether or not life has meaning? As if it would somehow become MORE meaningful if we were larger, compared to the universe, or lived longer, compared to its timespan?

(3) *Since everything ENDS or CEASES to be, everything we do is meaningless. Life is "an elaborate journey leading nowhere"!*

Reply: Why would this render everything meaningless or pointless? Imagine saying, "I have a headache, but why take an aspirin? Everything dies in the end."

Nagel writes, "No further justification is needed to make it reasonable to take aspirin for a headache, attend an exhibit of the work of a painter one admires, or stop a child from putting his hand on a hot stove."

The third complaint seems to derive from the thought that everything needs to be justified by something OUTSIDE itself. But recall the factory farm aliens: Is the idea that THEIR meaning or purpose for us becomes OUR meaning or purpose? That is absurd. To be meaningful FOR US, we would still have to PERSONALLY identify with their goals, or purposes for us. In short, what really matters is what purpose WE have for ourselves.

Of religion, Nagel says that people sometimes feel like they share in the “glory of God ... in a way in which chickens do not share in the glory of coq au vin.” But this is only because WE subjectively accept that purpose or meaning as our own, and require no further reasons. In short, what really matters is that

“justifications come to an end when we are content to have them end—when we do not find it necessary to look any further.”

External World Skepticism: Nagel likens our predicament to the worry that skeptics raise, which relies on the tension between our living out our everyday lives as if we know that the world really is as it appears to be—while simultaneously not being able to rule out the possibility that we might be dreaming, or in a computer simulation. Taking your senses at face value is ABSURD in some sense—and yet, the standard response to this puzzle is just to keep going. Keep living WITH this tension.

We face a similar tension with respect to meaning: The tension between our lives seeming meaningful to us, despite the fact that there seems to be no ULTIMATE source of meaning when we examine ourselves from that bird’s eye perspective. But, we keep going, living WITH this tension.

Yet, Nagel sees no point in responding to absurdity with despair (as Tolstoy does) or anger (as Camus does), but rather with **resignation**, and perhaps **irony**. After all, we do not respond to the possibility that we might be dreaming with despair or anger, but rather simply continue to plod along nevertheless. That is, Nagel says, what makes us human beings. Of Camus’ fist-shaking, Nagel writes:

“This seems to me romantic and slightly self-pitying. Our absurdity warrants neither that much distress nor that much defiance. At the risk of falling into romanticism by a different route, I would argue that absurdity is one of the most human things about us: a manifestation of our most advanced and interesting characteristics. Like skepticism in epistemology, it is possible only because we possess a certain kind of insight—the capacity to transcend ourselves in thought.” He adds, “If *sub specie aeternitatis* [from an external, timeless perspective] there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that doesn’t matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with **irony** instead of heroism or despair.”

The ultimate hipster reply. Let us live on, ironically!