

Nagel, “The Absurd”

Here are some bad arguments for absurdity:

- Nothing will matter in a million years—so what? If what you do doesn't matter now, then what difference would it make if it were to matter in a million years?
- we don't live forever/we're tiny specks with no impact—that's not it. if a short life is absurd, wouldn't an infinitely long life be infinitely absurd?
- we're going to die, so the justification for our acts is necessarily open
 - no good. “chains of justification come repeatedly to an end within life, and whether the process as a whole can be justified has no bearing on the finality of these end-points.” (717) my acts can have a purpose without some larger context.

still, there seems to be *something* that we perceive when we say that life is absurd. what is it?

“a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality” (718)

we have this inflated view of what our lives are that conflicts with what we know life to be when we consider it from a certain perspective.

we take our lives seriously (all of us, no matter how frivolously we might approach our day-to-day endeavors). we can deliberate and reflect on what we're going to do with our lives, as well as in much less momentous matters.

but when reflecting and deliberating in this way, we take things for granted. things that we don't have justification for believing. what's more, we *know* we're not justified in believing them, if we stop to think about it.

p. 720 “we step back...”

so we get this tension: we can adopt this perspective toward *our own lives*, and yet we continue to live them the way we do. we can, in this way, observe our own “pointlessness”—or at least, we can observe how ill-founded our assumptions about our own significance are.

we can take refuge in some larger enterprise—join a team or a corporation or a church or a humanitarian movement—but these things can only give our lives meaning if they are themselves meaningful. and the criteria for their meaningfulness is no better known to us than the criteria for the meaningfulness of our own lives *sub specie aeternitatis* (under the aspect of eternity, or from the universal perspective)

p.722 we do what we do “just because”—we are faced with the fact that we don't really have certainty about why we live the way we do.

“There lies our absurdity: not in the fact that such an external view can be taken of us, but in the fact that we ourselves can take it, without ceasing to be the persons whose ultimate concerns are so coolly regarded.” 720

(721) how does Nagel's view differ from the view he takes Camus to hold?

2 questions: how can/might we avoid absurdity? *Should* we worry about avoiding it?

how might we avoid absurdity? think about why a mouse's life is not absurd. it's because it can't reflect on itself *sub specie aeternatis*. but we can't consciously refuse to reflect on ourselves this way, "for to do that we would have to be aware of the viewpoint we were refusing to adopt." (725)

you could refuse to adopt the personal perspective—this might be what something like Buddhism advocates. But still, in order to do this, you need to take *that endeavor* seriously. If you pursue the aspect of eternity too vigorously, you run the risk of undermining the whole project.

"if someone simply allowed his individual, animal nature to drift and respond to impulse, without making the pursuit of its needs a central conscious aim, then he might, at considerable dissociative cost, achieve a life that was less absurd than most." (726)

--you'd have no meaning in your life, but you'd have no absurdity, either. you'd be, essentially, like an animal.

suicide could be a response—but wait. shouldn't we determine whether absurdity is something to be avoided, after all?

nagel thinks that absurdity is actually ok. it "warrants neither that much distress nor that much defiance." (726) no camusian scorn required. just approach life with a healthy sense of irony, and consider that your absurdity is part what makes you human.