

Patrick Boyle, Ultimate draft.

Not Absurd Enough

Imagine a person struggling to travel across a great desert consisting of clumpy orange sand because their life's work has been to map out the entire world. Their trek seems endless and there are few places to rest. Ultimately, instead of the reprieve of some final destination they find the desert abruptly stops with an endless wall made of some mysterious waxy substance. As they ponder the defeat of their journey the sky opens and a giant silver object scoops up the dunes on which they were sitting. The earth shakes as they are lifted skyward and, looking over the rim, the person sees that the entire time they were merely a microbe in a jar of Tang and the world is an infinitely larger place than they could ever have conceived of! From this new perspective the goals that person had in life appear meaningless.

In Thomas Nagel's article, "The Absurd," Nagel considers what it means for life to be absurd. He accounts for human life being absurd on the basis of the human ability to take a "step back" from our every day perceptions and beliefs, that is, to imagine ourselves from a perspective outside our own. He argues that this new perspective would bring the person imagining it to doubt the very things that they typically use to justify their goals and aspirations in life. All the effort one puts forth in life seems to be for nothing. Unable to stop taking their life seriously, but unable to forget their new realization, the person's life has become absurd.

For Nagel's account of why the absurd exists to be accurate, he must argue that being able to doubt the very beliefs that justify our actions and goals clashes with our desire to take ourselves seriously. This is not the case, however, because the reasons why we do take ourselves seriously are fundamentally grounded in reasons that were never believed to be wholly trustworthy to begin with. That is to say, our justifications lie in the world around us, and while Nagel may be able to force us to admit that these justifications are circular or ultimately insufficient at times, this move must appeal to standards that appear empty and incompatible with real life. The "step back" that Nagel prescribes results in a viewpoint that cannot be considered seriously enough to generate the feeling of the absurd.

According to Nagel, we are forced to take our lives seriously even though we are capable of reflecting upon our existence in such a way as to perceive of our lives as having little value or meaning. As he states, "We step back to find that the whole system of justifications and criticisms, which controls our choices and supports our claims to rationality, rests on responses and habits that we never question, that we should not know how to defend without circularity, and to which we shall continue to adhere even after they are called into question" (Meaning 154). In this view we become skeptics of our own lives, our goals, and our beliefs, but are at the same time unable to give them up. He argues that it is this ability that we have to take this "step back" and consciously examine our life without being able to escape our situation that causes the absurd.

A person is preoccupied with their own existence. Human existence takes a lot of effort to maintain. Because of this, there are a number of beliefs and values that get taken

for granted. These can be broken into two categories, ordinary beliefs and eventual beliefs. Ordinary beliefs are those that are, well, ordinary. This category includes beliefs like, “the floor exists and supports me,” or “I can die of hunger, but eating food allows me to survive.” Eventual beliefs are larger in scale and vision, and are the beliefs that one uses to determine things like what career they wish to pursue or what charities are worthwhile. Nagel’s “step back” attacks the latter set of beliefs. By “feigning a nebula’s-eye view” (Meaning 159) these beliefs become unjustified. From this cosmic perspective the person realizes that there is no objective reason to have ever thought those beliefs to be anything more than arbitrary. He states, “We step back to find that the whole system of justification and criticism, which controls our choices and supports our claims to rationality, rests on responses and habits that we never question, that we should not know how to defend without circularity, and which we shall continue to adhere even after they are called into question” (Meaning 155). He is arguing that we value and put meaning to our goals without ever considering them from any perspective other than our own comfortable subjective one.

What does Nagel mean by a “nebula’s-eye view?” It is merely to examine our lives without the preconceptions we carry with us in our daily existence. It is to transcend our mundane life to achieve a sort of distance from which we can objectively judge ourselves. Nagel believes that taking this view, the “step back,” will ultimately lead us to question our goals. We view ourselves, “with the detached amazement which comes from viewing an ant struggle up a heap of sand” (Meaning 155).

According to Nagel and Albert Camus, who originally proposed the topic of human absurdity, a situation that is absurd is one that presents the observer with a disproportionate and possibly contradictory comparison between two things. As Camus states, “...a demonstration by the absurd is achieved by comparing the consequences of such reasoning with the logical reality one wants to set up. ...The absurdity springs from comparison. ...It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation” (Myth 29, 30). So, for example, the condition of a person who believes that their planet is the most important thing in the universe only to find out that it is really just a jar of Tang is absurd because their beliefs and expectations in the matter clash drastically with the reality of their situation. Alone, the jar is not absurd, nor is the believer. It is the combination of the two that makes the situation absurd. The traveler expected their life’s work to be of great importance only to find that there was little value to be found in it at all. These facts are in conflict with one another, and in comparison one can realize that they are absurd.

This, however, only describes the aspect of “being absurd.” It is the property or quality of absurdity. What Camus was concerned with is the “phenomenological” absurd, that is, the absurd as a person experiences it. He was concerned with what it meant for a person to feel absurd. This is when a person (or any self-conscious being) comes to perceive that some aspect of their own existence can be described as absurd, and probably feels pretty silly for it. This feeling is the ultimate result of rationally judging a situation to be absurd, and is irrevocably tied to that judgment, both of which are distinct from the property of absurdity. Camus states, “The feeling of the absurd is not, for all that, the notion of the absurd” (Myth 28). While Nagel’s version of the absurd appears to only discuss the intellectual judgment of the absurd, I maintain that the two are as inseparable as the experience of levity and the judgment that something is humorous.

Suffice it to say that in any case, the intellectual judgment of the absurd sans feeling is still distinct from the mere property of absurdity in that it requires human comprehension. Because Nagel does require this element of human comprehension for his account of absurdity to succeed, he is clearly not discussing the mere property of the absurd.

Nagel illustrates this element of his claim by explaining why the life of a mouse is not absurd. He states that a mouse, although working hard to live, “lacks the capacities for self-consciousness and self-transcendence that would enable him to see that he is only a mouse” (Meaning 160). He states that were the mouse to gain those qualities only then would it be in the same absurd predicament that humans would be. Hence, according to Nagel, self-consciousness capable of the realization and subsequent judgment is necessary for absurdity to exist at all.

This analysis of the absurd seems erroneous, as Jeffrey Gordon claims in his article, “Nagel or Camus on the Absurd.” Gordon states, “If all our human commitments are indeed arbitrary, it would seem that the discrepancy between this fact and our undaunted devotion to them would be quite sufficient to establish our absurdity” (Nagel or Camus 19), and that, “Recognized or not, arbitrary ends pursued with passion spells absurdity” (Nagel or Camus 20). The point of this is simple. If Nagel was discussing the mere property of the absurd as it applies to humanity, there would be no reason for him to require a person to be capable of realizing that life is absurd. The arbitrary nature of our goals combined with the seriousness with which we commit to them would be enough to label our existence with the property of absurdity. Nagel then must be describing our judgment that life is absurd. Much like the tree falling in the woods with no one around to hear it, the quality of absurdity alone, without someone to recognize and feel it, is a non-issue. Consciousness of the absurd relating to oneself must be the problem, not the mere existence of the quality. Like Camus, Nagel must be concerned with the feeling of the absurd.

Because of this shift in Nagel’s argument, for Nagel’s account to be accurate the step back must be instrumental to the person judging their life to be absurd. This means that, according to Nagel’s definition of the absurd, a person must come to realize a “conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality” (Meaning 153) upon taking the step back (as during step back is the only time that the fallacies in which a person lives their life become evident). The step back ultimately fails in this regard, because it cannot cause this “conspicuous discrepancy” that is necessary to feel absurd.

The backwards step causes a person to reconsider their eventual beliefs, because given this transcendental step they realize that their standards of meaning or worth are arbitrary. The backwards step is much less devastating than Nagel wants it to be, however. Many decisions a person makes and many of the beliefs a person holds are unjustified and admittedly so. In fact, a person often realizes this without considering some alternate alien viewpoint. Much of what a person does is simply based on notions as deep as, “I felt like it” or “I just like that sort of thing” or “I have faith.” This sort of decision making is not limited to trivial matters. It is not uncommon for lifelong goals (like careers, for example) to be based off of arbitrary personal preferences that never needed to have some other justification to be considered valuable to the individual. Even if the person is lead to reconsider their eventual beliefs upon taking the step back, their commitment to them was never so great as to cause the great discrepancy between their expectations and reality that causes the absurd. The step back is not threatening to the

eventual beliefs in such a way as to create absurdity because eventual beliefs were always fairly arbitrary to begin with.

This is not to say that people do not have goals or beliefs that are bound up in great aspirations. People often do take goals that they feel are neither arbitrary nor mundane, and are quite meaningful not only to themselves but to the world. Were these people to take the step back they would undoubtedly believe their life to be quite absurd up to that point. That point must be conceded to Nagel. Where his account fails is that people are not doomed to continue on in this manner. When Nagel states, “(The step backward) is not supposed to give us an understanding of what is really important...” (Meaning 157) he is only half right. The step backwards does not have any positive account of what would be meaningful. Nothing about the step backwards says what *is* meaningful from the detached, objective perspective. The step backwards does, however, eliminate all of the wrong-minded eventual beliefs people hold.

It is not as exhaustive a pruning as Nagel would like it to be, however. Because people are able to realign their goals there is nothing that traps them into taking their old absurd life seriously. Nagel argues that people try to avoid having absurd beliefs by seeking broader concerns. He states, “one may try to escape the position by seeking broader ultimate concerns, from which it is impossible to take the step back- the idea being that absurdity results because what we take seriously is small and insignificant and individual” (Meaning 155). He argues that if a person dedicates their life to some goal greater than themselves then the step back might show that particular thing to be meaningful, or at least more meaningful than the trifles of the individual. Service to the state, the glory of God, science, and success of society are all examples of the sorts of things that people can (and do) dedicate their lives to in an attempt to add meaning to their lives. Nagel defeats this claim by stating it is wrong because, “we can step back... and put all these things into question in the same way” (meaning 156).

This is clearly the wrong path to follow. Seeking these larger goals almost seems to make the absurdity worse. These goals are bigger, grander, and possibly even more arbitrary or built on much more complicated series of faulty justifications which the step backwards defeats. What he fails to mention is that people can stop doing all of those things quite easily. Instead appealing to smaller personal goals with simple justifications would be the possible escape. Doing things because you enjoy them, they give you pleasure, or they are directly connected with your continuation without preconceived notions of meaning outside of their intrinsic value avoids the scrutiny of the step backwards.

So let us return to our adventurer, having escaped the spoon and returned to the harsh desert. The explorer could give up his quest, disheartened. But what is far more likely is that they will realize that someone might still have use for a map of the jar, if not the recently expanded universe, and that they wouldn't have gone this far if they hadn't taken some pleasure in traveling. The traveler would continue on their trek, ready to once again indulge their hobby formerly known as work.

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