

## Isn't it ironic?

Before diving into the paper, it would be good to have a clear understanding of what Nagel means by 'the absurdity of life'.

"And that is the main condition of absurdity - the dragooning of an unconvinced transcendent consciousness into the service of an immanent, limited enterprise like a human life." (Nagel, 22)

For Nagel, the issue at the heart of the absurdity of life is this tension between the subjective and the objective, the internal and the external, the view that we have from our lives versus that of the *sub specie aeternitatis* (view from eternity). There is a collision, according to Nagel, "between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt." (Nagel 14)

Is there a way to resolve this tension? At the end of the paper, Nagel dismisses Camus' approach whereby one takes a defiant stance against the absurdity of life. This may make our lives more Nobel, Nagel states, but it will not make them less absurd. (Nagel, 22 - 23) Before getting to Nagel's solution, it is worth spending some time unpacking how inescapable he views the problem.

In another area of philosophy (epistemology) there is a longstanding issue about whether or not we can have knowledge. On the surface, the question seems silly; of course I know for example, that I'm in the Arts and Science building right now. The skeptic will respond, however, that such claims of knowledge are not able to rule out certain scenarios. For example, I may be suffering from a powerful hallucination such that it only seems to me that I am in ASH. I could actually be in a psychiatric ward of a hospital in Spain. Such skeptical possibilities are easy to conjure up, and if we cannot rule them out, then it seems odd to claim that I know anything (at least with certainty). Nagel claims such a situation is structurally identical to the issue of life's absurdity. At first glance, life seems to have meaning.

"Think of how an ordinary individual sweats over his appearance, his health, his sex life, his emotional honesty, his social utility, his self-knowledge, the quality of his ties with family, colleagues, and friends, how well he does his job, whether he understands the world and what is going on in it. Leading a human life is full-time occupation to which everyone devotes decades of intense concern." (Nagel, 15)

But, at some point, our reflective powers allow us to switch from this subjective point of view, to a more objective one. We can 'see' that without reference to ourselves, that life loses its meaning. That does not mean that we should stop pursuing that which we originally did, but it does result in a change in our responses to them. (Nagel 20) It is these reflective powers which

give rise to life's absurdity as the mouse, who lacks them, does not have an absurd existence. If they were able to reflect, then their life would be likewise absurd. (Nagel, 22)

This connection between the absurd and our rational capacities is not a bad thing. After all, few of us would willingly choose the life of the mouse over our own lives. The way out, then, is to view life *ironically*. (Nagel, 20 & 23) Anything more than that is to not appreciate just how unimportant our situation really is. In some sense, Nagel does not see the absurdity of life as a bad thing. It frees us to not be so serious and arises from mental capacities that we do in fact want.

As a final note, we will be examining Camus in more detail soon. It may turn out that Nagel's rejection of Camus was correct, but it may also turn out that Nagel dismissed him much too quickly.