

Philosophy 141
Final Paper - 1st Submission -Anmol Mohanty
LIFE IS ABSURD?

Life is absurd

Billions have lived before us, billions still continue to live far after any trace of us is extinguished. We are but mere blips in the spectrum of life. We have not figured out the meaning of life, and can reasonably infer/deduce that we likely never will figure out a universal objective meaning of life. This implies life, as we know is inherently absurd.

I justify my claim by something different than Nagel's claim of "conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality" (718). I agree with Nagel's reasoning. My reasoning thus follows.

An absolute objective framework is needed to provide axiomatic meaning of life. We haven't discovered such a framework thus far, despite exhaustive inquiry into it. If there were such a framework we would have discovered it. It is extremely unlikely we ever will discover it. Therefore, there is no such framework. Therefore life has no meaning.

Within the existentialism camp, my own views resonate more with Camus. Here is my analysis and appreciation of his 'myth of Sisyphus'.

Sisyphus's life seems relatable. When we step back from our lives, it appears we effectively keep doing the same thing over and over again. Sisyphus and the rock are analogous to a man and his tedious, repetitive work, but the rock is also life itself. Every day must be borne, and the reward for bearing it is another day.

Camus suggests that our seemingly cursed fate only seems horrible when we place it in contrast with something that would seem preferable. If we accept that there is no preferable alternative, then we can accept our fate without horror. Only then, Camus suggests, can we fully appreciate life, because we are accepting it without reservations. Therefore, Sisyphus is above his fate precisely because he has accepted it. His punishment is only horrible if he can dream for something better. If he does not, the gods have nothing to punish him with and he has conquered fate.

It is during the return to the plain, that pause in concerted effort, that Sisyphus most interests Camus. That time is when Sisyphus is most conscious. He is not distracted by the work but is fully facing the absurdity of his situation. At those moments, as he continues without breaking down, Camus exclaims, Sisyphus "is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his

rock” (2). The person who understands the absurdity of the human condition is strengthened by it.

“There is no higher destiny”, Camus declares (3). The absurd man is the master of his days. When he gazes backward over his life, he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him. So like Sisyphus and his rock, the whole seemingly unreasonable effort turns out to have meaning, because it constituted his life.

Camus further suggests that Sisyphus might even approach his unending task with joy. The moments of sorrow or melancholy come when he looks back at the world he's left behind, or when he hopes or wishes for happiness. When Sisyphus accepts his fate, however, the sorrow and melancholy of it vanish. Camus suggests that acknowledging "crushing truths" like the eternity and futility of his fate is enough to render them less crushing(2). Thus, even while we are convinced that all human meaning comes from human beings, and not from outside them, we are still able to be impressed by its meaning if we allow ourselves to be. Meaning and joy are inherent in our simple, yet heroically effortful, persistence if we allow ourselves it. “The rock is still rolling” (Camus 2). He refers to Edipus, who, despite having suffered so much, is able to "conclude that all is well (2)." Therefore Sisyphus can be happy in this absurd victory.

Camus strikes me as an odd but wonderful companion, that quirky but wise Uncle you like, who gets you and whose company you enjoy. Camus fully empathizes with our despair, yet cheers us on to live and even see happiness in our struggle; and this is what I like about him. His optimistic visage on the face of absurd reality is infectious and attractive to me.

Camus concludes that suicide tempts us with the illusory promise of freedom, but the only real freedom is to embrace the absurdity. We can only be truly happy, he suggests, when we accept our life and our fate as entirely our own—as the only thing we have and as the only thing we will ever be.

Camus vs Nagel

We have established that life is indeed absurd. Does this mean, we simply resign to this absurdity? Or do we be defiant in the face of this?

I present a distributed set of independent reasoning's supporting why I feel Nagel's views are inconsistent.

At the outset, I was personally buying into and slipping into Nagel's view of life. Upon further introspection though I find it to be a slippery slope into limbo not benefitting anyone. Who gains with quiet acceptance of absurdity in life and waiting meekly until inevitable death? No one. The barrier to doing the harder things is higher if one adopts Nagel's views. For instance, from my own personal example, I would go to the gym, stare at the equipment (and even once slept on the gym floor), thinking what's the point of all this? My action

doesn't matter, so why should I exert myself? That benefitted no one. So I reject Nagel's view.

Where would we be if Thomas Alva Edison subscribed to Nagel and found trying a different setup for the light bulb a 1000th time without success to be absurd, what would our existence be if Ben Franklin thought life is absurd and merely went about the mundane motions of life instead of discovering electricity.

I find active defiance more appealing. We have got this one precious life, make the most count. Life is not measured by the breaths we take, but by the moments which take our breath away (George Carlin). How beautiful! Life may be absurd, but we have consciousness, we experience things. So while, nothing eventually matters from a cosmic perspective, a quietist approach will keep us from passionately feeling, exploring, seeking happiness; things which are inherent to our souls.

I believe the function of life is to make it better. As I write this paper, in College library, I see another student watching a TED video in which a black guy is talking about leadership. This is possible because instead of resigning themselves to irony of life, Martin Luther King, with great enthusiasm and fervor, spread his message and two grad students at a dorm in Stanford dreamed up the greatest software company of our age. The spirit of not succumbing to calamity, of rising up after every fall, of acknowledging the absurdity but not meekly accepting it, is appealing to me.

I also wanted, to bring to light, what I feel is an inconsistency in Nagel's argument inspired from an internet article by Rivka Weinberg(opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/why-life-is-absurd/). Nagel argues, in favor of longer life being more absurd, that "For suppose we lived forever; would not a life that is absurd if it lasts seventy years be infinitely absurd if it lasted through eternity?"(717). Rivka disagrees with this conclusion and makes a simple reasoning to prove it. Consider a hunger strike for a cause important to you. Consider first a one-hour hunger strike. The point of a hunger strike is to show that one feels so strongly about something that one is willing to suffer a lack of nourishment for a long time in order to make a point. If you only "starve" for an hour, you have not made your point. Your one-hour hunger strike is absurd because it is too short. If you lengthened it to one month or one year, you might be taken more seriously. If life is absurd because it's short, it might potentially be less absurd if it were suitably longer. I feel Nagel is mistaken in scaling up absurdness with the duration of our existence.

The philosophers who have come to regard that life is indeed absurd (existentialists), have themselves lead fulfilling lives, or by any measure, more opulent lives than most of us. This should hint at the fact that these highly intelligent people embraced the absurdity and made the most of it rather than throw up their hands in despair and retreat to a recluse vegetative state (or commit suicide).

I doing a philosophy course is, in a way, absurd, given my current career path. When asked about this by my understandably flummoxed friends, I defend the absurdity with a passionate discourse about the importance of liberal arts in general and of philosophy in particular, instead of a shrug of ironic helplessness. So an instance of absurdity (taking this course) within an absurdity (my life) is better defended, in my view, through a passionate embrace of the absurdity.

I also happened to throw around this prompt at a party, hoping to sample what the word on the street is about life. I was able to quickly convince my friends there of life's absurdity and then upon providing the dichotomy of Nagel's and Camus's views found a recurring theme. My friends were naturally more inclined to lean towards Camus than Nagel. I suspect the reason was that Camus makes us feel alive, while Nagel will likely appeal to people without the fire of life, perhaps older people. This is reflected in how Camus lived his life in a flamboyant manner, socially popular; which to me is attractive and inspiring. It's due to the active defiant commitment to certain ways of life, are we able to do and enjoy so much right now. I took an Uber back from the party and reached home safely and economically, despite the wee hours, this is the outcome of a defiant embrace of life from Travis Kalanick (Uber CEO).

The smartest people I know obviously are, I suspect, familiar with the absurdity of life. Elon Musk (Tesla), Peter Thiel (PayPal) et al, yet they approach life with a certain panache and encourage other people to 'move fast and break things' (Mark Zuckerberg) publicly which would indicate, this is the approach to life they endorse.

Having an ironic acceptance of dichotomy of our seriousness about life and frivolity of life itself will, in my opinion, make us less productive; and be counter to my belief that the function of life is to make itself better.

Conclusion and Wrap up

I have a vision of the quietest Nagel's guy who sits at the cafe alone eating a Bagel and smirks at everyone, thinking how foolish we are going about our mundane meaningless living with such seriousness, while Camus's guy is a Larry Page (Google) who sits at the next table planning to change the world. We need more of the latter. Change is hard, new things are hard and I see it much harder to come from Nagel's quietist approach. Nagel views will fill the world with mediocrity, and strip away ambition, desire for fundamental change. I have an animosity towards mediocrity, and hence by extension towards Nagel's quietist acceptance of absurdity.

I wonder if Nagel has tried to apply his philosophy in himself and how he feels when he writes, without doubt having to toil/pull all-nighters. I feel like Nagel could be potentially viewed as a hypocrite and doesn't practice what he preaches.

Human's life absorption with itself and self-preservation is getting us where we are going; now while it's meaningfulness is debatable, the Camus's of the world are leading and taking us there, while the Nagel's depart from earth without turning over a stone.

Nagel's view is pessimistic relative to Camus's. This would drive us to sorrow. We all strive for happiness. We would like to avoid sorrow. So we should reject Nagel.

I have an analogy of life which I would like to put forth. Life is like food. Like we ingest food, we are brought into this world and eventually like excretion we will dissolve into nothingness. Does it mean while eating we feel ironic? No, most of us enjoy it in the moment. The irony that the food that I am eating is going to leave my body soon doesn't stop me from having it, and it would be ridiculous at that point to stop eating realizing its futility.

Our world is changing, people, now more than ever before, have more control over what they are doing with their lives and are increasingly being encouraged, powered by open exchange of ideas, to pursue paths through via which they can derive meaning and fulfilment. It will become incredibly harder then to justify Nagel's view when we are able to choose meaningfully from among a plethora of choices.

Closing arguments

Life is absurd.

Therefore Life is not inherently or explicitly meaningful.

Meaningful life is necessary to feel fulfilled.

Everyone wants to feel fulfilled.

Hence everyone will want a meaningful life.

But since life doesn't have meaning, no one can have a meaningful life.

Now one has 2 choices. 1) Change the benchmark for feeling fulfilled and feel fulfilled anyway deriving a subjective meaning from life (enthusiastic embrace of absurdity [Camus]).
2) Quietly accept this irony and go on about your lives [Nagel].

Clearly option '1' will better serve the need of everyone to feel fulfilled. Hence, from the above statements I propose that we will want to enthusiastically embrace the absurdity of life and regard it as meaningful in our own ways.