

# PHILOSOPHY 101

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# NAGEL ON THE ABSURD

# SITUATIONAL ABSURDITY

*In ordinary life a situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality (Nagel 1971, 718)*

# THE ABSURDITY OF LIFE

*The sense that life as a whole is absurd arises when we perceive, perhaps dimly, an inflated pretension or aspiration which is inseparable from the continuation of human life and which makes its absurdity inescapable, short of escape from life itself (718).*

- Life is absurd when there is a *persistent* and *inescapable* mismatch between the aspirations of life and the conditions under which it is lived

# BAD ARGUMENTS FOR ABSURDITY OF LIFE

## 1. Scale

- Spatial or temporal scales trivialize our activities

## 2. Death

- Death interrupts any justification for our actions

## 3. Purpose

- There is no larger plan of which we are a part

# THE SCALE ARGUMENT

1. If life is to have meaning then its meaning/point must be lasting
2. But nothing we do now will matter in a million years
3.  $\therefore$  Life has no meaning/point

## AGAINST THE SCALE ARGUMENT

- If time scale is the issue then it is also true that what happens in a million years doesn't matter to us now
- If timescale isn't the issue then it must be because nothing matters *now*, but why think that is true?



# THE DEATH ARGUMENT

1. If life is to have meaning then its meaning/point must be lasting
  2. But all our activities and relationships cease when we die
  3.  $\therefore$  Life has no meaning/point
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- The fact that our lives are finite entails that we have no justification/reason for our actions

## AGAINST THE DEATH ARGUMENT

- Not all reasons for action depend on their connection to a later sequence of activities
  - reason to take medicine for a headache
  - reason to avoid pain in others
- The chain of justification must end somewhere, so why not *within* one's life?

# THE PURPOSE ARGUMENT

1. Meaning *within* one's life depends on one's life *as a whole* having purpose
2. Life as a whole has no purpose
3.  $\therefore$  There is no meaning/point to anything, even *within* one's life

*The thought that you'll be dead in two hundred years is just a way of seeing your life embedded in a larger context, so that the point of smaller things inside it seems not to be enough-seems to leave a larger question unanswered. But what if your life as a whole did have a point in relation to something larger? Would that mean that it wasn't meaningless after all? (Nagel 1987, 97)*

## AGAINST THE PURPOSE ARGUMENT

- If one's life has a purpose because it helps bring about  $X$  we can still ask whether  $X$  has a purpose
- The same reasoning that makes our lives problematic makes any purpose into which our lives fit equally problematic

## GOD AND PURPOSE

- If God has a purpose in creating the universe (including us) wouldn't that be enough to make life meaningful?
  - we can still question the point of God's actions
  - we may not be able to understand the point of God's actions

# NAGEL'S ARGUMENT FOR ABSURDITY

*We cannot live human lives without energy and attention, nor without making choices which show that we take some things more seriously than others. Yet we have always available a point of view outside the particular form of our lives, from which the seriousness appears gratuitous. These two inescapable viewpoints collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd. It is absurd because we ignore the doubts that we know cannot be settled, continuing to live with nearly undiminished seriousness in spite of them (719)*

1. Subjectively, we must take our lives and the choices we make as 'serious' and non-arbitrary
2. Objectively, we also recognize that our choices are ultimately 'non-serious' or arbitrary
3. The subjective and the objective cannot be reconciled & cannot be avoided
4.  $\therefore$  There is a persistent and inescapable mismatch between the conditions of life (the objective) and the conditions under which it is lived (the subjective)
5.  $\therefore$  Life is absurd

# ABSURDITY AS THE HUMAN CONDITION

*I would argue that absurdity is one of the most human things about us: a manifestation of our most advanced and interesting characteristics...if a sense of the absurd is a way of perceiving our true situation...then what reason can we have to resent or escape it? ...If sub specie aeternitatis 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. (Nagel, 726-7)*



- Recognition of the absurdity of life is distinctly human
  - Absurdity requires the capacity for self-reflection (mice don't have absurd lives)
- We should deal with absurdity through irony
  - Taking one's life less seriously will make it less absurd/more livable
  - Is this position psychologically plausible?
  - Is irony a viable stance to take towards life?

