

Philosophy 101

The Absurd, Knowledge & Skepticism

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Nagel on the Absurd

The Absurdity of Life

- 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 Purpose Argument

- ① Life has purpose only if it is part of some larger purpose or plan
- ② There is no larger purpose or plan
- ③ \therefore Life has no purpose/is absurd

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 purpose *in* 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 may not be able to understand the point of God's actions
 - we can still question 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)

Nagel's Argument for Absurdity

- 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 There is a persistent and inescapable mismatch between the subjective and objective
- ④ \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)

Absurdity as the Human Condition

- 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?

Knowledge of the External World

Descartes's Project

- What, if anything, is certain?

I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last.

Descartes's Project

- Our knowledge consists of propositions
 - 'The last day of class is the 1st of May'
 - ' $2 + 2 = 4$ '
 - 'The person reading this sentence is not dreaming right now'

Descartes's Project

- We can 'know' these propositions with a greater or lesser degree of certainty
 - Restrict use of 'know' only for those propositions of whose truth we are certain — 'scientific knowledge' (*scientia*)
 - Logic
 - Mathematics
 - Anything else?

Epistemic Foundationalism

Epistemic Foundationalism: the structure of our knowledge is like a building—what we know can be divided into a foundation and a superstructure, the latter resting upon the former. Knowledge belonging to the foundation is basic. Knowledge belonging to the superstructure is nonbasic and depends on the foundation

The Method of Doubt

[To accomplish the goal of determining which of my judgments are absolutely certain] Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false. So, for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt (12)

The Method of Doubt

Three Kinds of Doxastic Attitude

We can take one of three different attitudes towards a proposition:

- ① Accept the proposition — Belief
- ② Deny the proposition — Disbelief
- ③ Suspend judgment — Neither believe nor disbelieve

The Method of Doubt

The Method of Doubt

DOUBT: We must suspend judgment concerning any proposition whose truth is not known with absolute certainty

The Method of Doubt

And to do this I will not need to run through [my beliefs] all individually, which would be an endless task. Once the foundations of a building are undermined, anything built on them collapses of its own accord; so I will go straight for the basic principles on which all my former beliefs rested (12)

The Method of Doubt

- ① Assume foundationalism about knowledge
- ② Apply DOUBT to the foundations of knowledge
- ③ See if any of the propositions constituting those foundations pass DOUBT

The Stages of Doubt

- ① Sense-Perception
- ② Dreams
- ③ An all-powerful deceiver

The Problem with Perception

Whatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses. But from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once (12)

The Problem with Perception

- The *possibility* of deception is enough to force us to suspend judgment concerning the truth of many claims made on the basis of sense-perception