# Absurdity, Incongruity and Laughter

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**Abstract**
In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus recommends scornful defiance in the face of our absurd, meaningless existence. Although Nagel agrees that human life possesses an absurd dimension, he objects to Camus' existentialist 'dramatics'. For Nagel, absurdity arises from the irreducible tension between our subjective and objective perspectives on life. In this paper I do two things: (i) critically reconstruct Camus' and Nagel's positions, and (ii) develop Nagel's critique of Camus in order to argue that humour is an appropriate response to absurdity.

> [W]hat will come of what I do today or tomorrow? What will come of my entire life? . . .[W]hy do I live? Why do I wish for anything, or do anything? . . .[I]s there any meaning in my life that will not be annihilated by the inevitability of death which awaits me?
>
> — Leo Tolstoy[1]

> She only kept her bed for the last two days, and continued to converse quietly with everyone to the last. Finally when she could no longer talk and was already in her death agony, she broke wind loudly. 'Good', she said, turning over, 'a woman who can fart is not dead'. Those were the last words she spoke.
>
> — Jean-Jacques Rousseau[2]

## 1. Introduction: Hare's existentialist

In a short semi-autobiographical essay, R.M. Hare recalls a Swiss exchange student visiting his family home. To help their young visitor settle in, the Hare's left a collection of French literature in his room, including an edition of Camus' *L'Etranger*. After a few days the boy's behaviour began to alter quite dramatically. Earlier in the week he had seemed energetic, pleasant and thoroughly

[1] Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession and Other Religious Writings* (London: Penguin, 1987), 35 (hereafter abbreviated *AC*).

[2] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions* (London: Penguin, 1953), 86 (hereafter abbreviated *TC*).

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'well-balanced'.[3] But now their guest had started smoking in his room, taking long solitary walks in a nearby field, and refusing to converse at dinner. What had happened? Hare explains:

> Since we were by this time rather worried about what could be on his mind, when he came back at about eleven o'clock we sat him down in an armchair and asked him what the trouble was. It appeared that he had been reading Camus's novel, and had become convinced that *nothing matters*. I do not remember the novel very well; but at the end of it, I think, the hero [Meursault], who is about to be executed for a murder in which he saw no particular point even when he committed it, shouts, with intense conviction, to the priest who is trying to get him to confess and receive absolution, 'Nothing matters'. It was this proposition of the truth of which our friend had become convinced: *Rien, rien n'avait d'importance*. (*NM*, 241–42)[4]

As a distinguished moral philosopher, Hare immediately thought that he 'ought to have something to say' that would be 'relevant' (242) to the boy's predicament. Motivated by this sense of intellectual responsibility, Hare thus raises a number of questions about Meursault's dramatic assertion. For example, he wonders what being '*completely* unconcerned about *everything*' could possibly amount to. Pathological cases aside,[5] are we not always in the process of 'doing something, choosing one thing rather than another'?[6] And is it not reasonable to suppose that 'these choices reveal what...[one] thinks matters'?[7] Moreover, there is something odd about exclaiming so adamantly that 'Nothing matters' if the

[3] R.M. Hare, 'Nothing Matters', in E.D. Klemke (ed.), *The Meaning of Life* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 242 (hereafter abbreviated *NM*).

[4] The passage Hare recalls can be found in Albert Camus, *The Outsider* (London: Penguin, 2000), 115–16 (hereafter abbreviated *TO*).

[5] Hare refers to psychological abnormality later (*NM*, 246).

[6] In fact, Meursault recognizes 'I'd lived in a certain way and I could just have well lived in a different way. I'd done this and I hadn't done that. I hadn't done one thing whereas I had done another'. His point is, 'So what?' (*TO*, 115). That we inevitably pursue one course of action over another does not, for Meursault, undermine the absurdity of life. On the contrary, the contingency of what we do and value is part of what *makes* our lives ultimately meaningless. Arguably then, Hare begs the question by using such activities as evidence *against* the purported absurdity of life.

[7] See also *NM*, 247.



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content of that assertion is believed by the speaker to be true. For 'if *nothing* really mattered to him. . .he would have been too bored to make this rather dramatic scene' (244).[8] Indifference would seem a more appropriate response here,[9] not only to Meursault's initial claim, but to the purported existential fact motivating that assertion. Likewise, Hare wonders what sense it makes to conceive of 'mattering' in such unrestricted terms. After all, many particular things matter to us, or matter contrastively more-or-less than other particular things. But asking whether *everything* 'matters' (or even whether any specific thing matters *absolutely*) is surely misleading.[10] As such, our inability to find an adequate rejoinder ought not to be taken as evidence that *nothing actually matters*, but rather that dramatic existential questions like 'What is the meaning of life?' or 'Does life matter?'[11] should be reformulated in more modest terms.[12] To restore the young student's faith in life's values,[13] Hare thus redirects his attention away from heady existential quandaries to the mundane realm of ordinary language. On Hare's diagnosis then, the boy's *real* problem was that, 'through philosophical naïveté, he took for a real moral problem what was not a moral problem at all, but a philosophical one'; that is, a 'problem to be solved, not by an agonising struggle with his soul, but by an attempt to understand what he was saying' (246).

[8] I am not convinced by this. There is a question why someone who is convinced that 'Nothing matters' would, as a matter of fact, say so (or why she would say *that* rather than *something else* or *nothing at all*). However, if *nothing* mattered, then paralysis is not the only option here; she might well shout 'Nothing matters' from the rooftops, just as she might declare *anything else*, wave her arms about or read Camus *just for the sake of it*. Only if one declares 'Nothing matters' with serious (non-ironic, non-indifferentist) intentions would it constitute a performative contradiction.

[9] On Pyrrhonian indifference see Bob Plant, *Wittgenstein and Levinas: ethical and religious thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), Ch 1 (hereafter abbreviated *W&L*).

[10] 'My friend had not understood that the function of the word "matters" is to express concern; he had thought mattering was something (some activity or process) that things did, rather like chattering' (*NM*, 246).

[11] Or Tolstoy's '[W]hy do I live? Why do I wish for anything, or do anything?' (*AC*, 35).

[12] We might cash-out these questions in terms of our purposes or goals, and the importance of potential (though not guaranteed) success in such endeavors.

[13] See *NM*, 247. I say 'values' (plural) because 'value' (singular) is liable to make us think that there *must* be just one underpinning quality that renders life *per se* 'valuable'.



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I have begun with this curious incident, not because Hare provides unassailable objections to absurdism (nor even because he offers a reliable therapy for existential angst), but rather because it is funny.[14] Let me put this in a less frivolous way. Hare's essay is interesting, not because of its potential to convince us by argument that 'something matters', but because it is capable of arousing an important type of life-affirming response; namely, comic laughter.[15] There are, I think, three interconnected reasons why Hare's essay is itself comical: (i) *The student's affected response to Camus' novel*. That upon reading *L'Etranger* the boy immediately took up smoking is a charming detail. The image of this gloomy adolescent, pacing around a field, drawing heavily on each cigarette (etc.), all combine to form a wonderfully stereotypical portrait of 'existential angst'. (ii) *The way his anxiety arises and how it is subsequently treated*. The boy's conclusion that 'Nothing matters' was provoked by reading Camus' *L'Etranger*. Now, this is a very short text. It also lacks (albeit intentionally) narrative depth and character development; in particular, the motivations behind Meursault's actions remain largely obscure. It is striking then that the boy's transformation from being eminently 'well-balanced' to a state of cosmic distress was remarkably quick. Likewise, it required only a small dose of ordinary-language philosophy to relieve this (apparently) crushing angst. Hare may well be right that the boy was not a 'hypocrite' (246), but his crisis *was* shallow. Someone who proclaims their religiosity on the sole basis of having just read Aquinas or Swinburne, or who declares their undying love for a different person every other day, should not be taken too seriously in matters of faith or love. Much the same can be said about Hare's little existentialist. (All three are worthy of laughter; albeit a gentle, humane sort of laughter.) (iii) *Hare's reaction to the boy's angst*. What I have in mind here is Hare's conclusion that, simply in virtue of being 'a moral philosopher' (242),

[14] It also resembles early scenes from Allen's *Annie Hall*; specifically Alvy Singer's conversation with Dr Flicker (Woody Allen, *Four Films of Woody Allen* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 4–5). The correlation between this and Hare's account is unsurprising given Allen's preoccupation with 'existential' themes (Woody Allen, *Woody Allen on Woody Allen: in conversation with Stig Björkman* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 209, 211–12, 225). For a very British parody of existentialism (amongst other things) see Tony Hancock's 1960 film *The Rebel*.

[15] I am not claiming that laughter is the *only* appropriate response to absurdity. Likewise, I specify *comic* laughter to distinguish it from (e.g.) nervous laughter, laughter caused by laughing-gas or tickling. I am also presupposing that comic laughter is, at least in part, life-affirming rather than life-contesting or life-questioning.



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he had some special responsibility and ability to help the boy. Now, as a proximate human being Hare might have had some such responsibility. But it is unclear why being a *philosopher* – 'moral' or otherwise – should add anything by way of duty or expertise.[16] As a matter of fact, of course, Hare *did* manage to persuade the student that asserting 'Nothing matters' requires considerable clarification. And in doing this Hare used the tools immediately available; namely, ordinary-language analysis. But many other things would doubtless have helped the boy just as effectively; forming a jazz trio, attending Bible classes, or falling in love with the girl next door. Williams is surely right when he remarks of someone asking 'Give me a reason for doing anything; everything is meaningless':

> It is very unclear that we can in fact give the man who asks it a reason – that, starting from so far down, we could *argue* him into caring about something. We might indeed 'give him a reason' in the sense of finding something that he is prepared to care about, but that is not inducing him to care by reasoning, and it is very doubtful whether there could be any such thing. What he needs is help, or hope, not reasonings.[17]

Such 'help' or 'hope' may fall within the remit of religion, but it does not belong to philosophy – at least, not in its contemporary, professionalized incarnation.

Nothing I am going to say in what follows hinges on whether Hare's essay *really is* funny. (I assume that there is no fact of that matter.) The objective of this paper is to argue that laughter constitutes an appropriate response to the 'absurd' tension between human aspiration and disappointment.[18] To do this I am going to focus primarily on Camus and Nagel.

[16] This claim will be more or less contentious depending on one's meta-philosophical views. I will not argue the point here.

[17] Bernard Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1972), 17; see also 23–24; *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1993), 22–29. As Hare's 'treatment' was successful, I think we should conclude that the boy's 'illness' was not very serious. If the boy had been *genuinely* sceptical about why 'anything matters' then, to borrow Wittgenstein's phrase, 'I shouldn't know what it would mean to try to convince him...[otherwise]. And if I had said something, and that had removed his doubt, I should not know how or why' (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), §257).

[18] Although I suspect that laughter is the *right* response to absurdity, in this paper I am only interested in explaining why laughter is a *legitimate* response. For an account of the relationship between humor and nihilism



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## 2. Camus' absurdism

In *L'Etranger*, shortly before his execution, Meursault refers to the 'benign indifference of the world' (*TO*, 117). This, in condensed form, is what Camus thinks makes human life absurd. In order to unpack this, however, we need to turn to *The Myth of Sisyphus*, for it is here that Camus provides his most detailed account of absurdity. I will first offer a brief synopsis of Camus' general account, and then highlight a couple of salient features.

Whether Camus' assertion that suicide and the meaning of life constitute the 'most urgent of [philosophical] questions'[19] is highly debatable. (It is trivially true that staying alive is a condition of possibility for doing anything – philosophy included.) Still, it will be useful to identify from where he thinks their urgency arises. Echoing the above passage from *L'Etranger*, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus refers to the 'primitive hostility of the world', and likewise to the 'inhuman' quality of the natural and cultural environment. This 'strangeness of the world', he insists, 'is the absurd'. More helpfully, Camus provides a number of illustrations of the ways human life 'secrete[s] the inhuman' (*MOS*, 19). These roughly divide into three categories:

(i) *Finitude*. Like Tolstoy,[20] Camus locates part of the absurdity of human existence in 'death and the attitude we have toward it'. More precisely, he notes that, despite the certainty of death, for the most part we live 'as if no one "knew" '(19) about our inevitable, fatal 'destiny' and its cosmic 'uselessness' (20).[21] Without the traditional assurances of religion, 'man feels alien, a stranger'. For not only are we denied the 'hope of a promised land' (heavenly or earthly), we are also 'deprived of the memory of a lost home' – a prelapsarian innocence, for example. (Of course, such nostalgia is invariably accompanied by the promissory note that one can regain an equivalent state in the future.) The 'divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting', is, according to Camus, 'properly the feeling of absurdity' (13). Although I do not want to beat Camus with the customary philosophical sticks, there is something worth noting

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see John Marmysz, *Laughing at Nothing: Humor as a Response to Nihilism* (Albany: SUNY, 2003) (hereafter abbreviated *LAN*).

[19] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1971), 11 (hereafter abbreviated *MOS*).

[20] See *AC*, 28–31, 32–33, 35, 43.

[21] Camus also refers to the 'uselessness of suffering' (*MOS*, 13).



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here. While he acknowledges that the 'body shrinks from annihilation', Camus adds the following qualification: 'We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking' (14). Now, characterising our bodily drive to life as an acquired 'habit' obscures the fact that human beings – like other organic life – *naturally* strive for life. This requires as little deliberation for us as it does for oak trees, viruses, starfish or tigers. Thus, when Camus laments the 'absence of any profound reason for living' (13),[22] one might reasonably retort that such 'reasons' are largely unnecessary. There is a crucial asymmetry here between life and death, for although each of us will indeed eventually die, one usually needs reasons to *take* one's own life, but not to *carry on* living. Obviously, illness and misfortune can provide one with 'reasons' to opt for death. Still, such cases are relatively exceptional. And even then, one's instinctive drive for life must often be overcome by one's conscious desire for death. So, for the most part, we simply do not need 'reasons' for living, and it therefore makes little sense to bemoan their absence.[23]

(ii) *Knowledge*. Camus has little faith in philosophical knowledge; indeed, he thinks 'universal reason, practical or ethical. . .are enough to make a decent man laugh' (24). Although the natural sciences promise knowledge of a more tangible sort, Camus is similarly underwhelmed. Science may well describe and 'classify' the world, 'enumerate its laws' and 'take apart its mechanism', but just as our 'hope increases' the scientist proceeds to

> . . .tell me of an invisible planetary system in which electrons gravitate around a nucleus. You explain this world to me with an image. I realise then that you have been reduced to poetry: I shall never know. Have I the time to become indignant? You have already changed theories. So that science that was to teach me everything ends up in a hypothesis, that lucidity founders in metaphor, that uncertainty is resolved in a work of art. (23)

For Camus then, our knowledge of the world is inescapably limited to what we can understand 'only in human terms'; of what 'meaning' the world has outside our all-too-human perspective, knowledge is 'impossible' (45). Our 'appetite for the absolute and for unity' on

[22] See also *MOS*, 11.

[23] One could make the same objection against Tolstoy's claim that religious '[f]aith is a knowledge of the meaning of human life, the consequence of which is that man does not kill himself but lives. . .If he did not believe that there was something he must live for he would not live. . .Without faith it is impossible to live' (*AC*, 54).



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the one hand, and the 'impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle' (45–46) on the other,[24] likewise constitute absurdity.

(iii) *Repetition*. Sisyphus, we will recall, was condemned by the gods to endlessly rolling a rock up a mountain, for 'there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labour' (96). Because Sisyphus applies himself to this task of 'accomplishing nothing', Camus considers him the archetypal 'absurd hero'. If there is tragedy in this myth, then it is 'because its hero is conscious' of the hopeless futility of his assignment. (The narrative would lose its force if Sisyphus had the cognitive capacities of a fruit-fly.) But Camus suggests that the 'workman of to-day' similarly 'works every day of his life at the same tasks and his fate is no less absurd'.[25] Again, the tragedy here lies in those 'rare moments' when the worker becomes 'conscious' (97) of this fact. In Sisyphus we are therefore presented with the absurdity of repetition, and here Camus draws attention to human behaviour in both a narrow and broader sense. More narrowly, he emphasises the 'mechanical aspects' of human 'gestures', for this 'meaningless pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them'. Camus illustrates this as follows: 'A man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him, but you see his incomprehensible dumb show: you wonder why he is alive...[this] is also the absurd' (19).[26] More broadly, repetition is manifest in our daily routines: 'Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm' is sometimes interrupted by a 'why?', and the 'weariness' that 'comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life' (18).[27] That we are continually at the mercy of contingency is further evidence of the absurd. Indeed, Camus believes that the ordinary phenomenon of (sincerely) 'replying "nothing" when asked what one is thinking about' neatly 'symbolizes that odd state of soul in which the void becomes

[24] See also Camus' remarks on self-knowledge (*MOS*, 22), and our 'nostalgia for unity' and 'appetite for the absolute' (21).

[25] One obvious difference is the *endlessness* of Sisyphus' task. But, as previously noted, for Camus human finitude offers little solace in the face of absurdity.

[26] The absurdity arising from *overfamiliarity* also seems important to Camus (*MOS*, 19).

[27] Camus also thinks that it is absurd that even our greatest achievements and most memorable experiences often begin in extremely mundane situations (*MOS*, 17).



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eloquent'; that is, where the routine activities of daily life are 'broken'. This again is a 'sign of absurdity' (17–18). In these circumstances our ordinary 'stage scenery masked by habit' (19) collapses.[28]

These are three central themes in Camus' diagnosis. But equally interesting are the following, more general, remarks:

> There are absurd marriages, challenges, rancours, silences, wars and even peace-treaties. For each of them the absurdity springs from a comparison. I am thus justified in saying that the feeling of absurdity does not spring from the mere scrutiny of a fact or an impression but that it bursts from the comparison between a bare fact and a certain reality, between an action and the world that transcends it. The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation. . .[T]he Absurd is not in man. . .nor in the world, but in their presence together. (30)

Earlier, Camus thus makes a crucial qualification: 'I said that the world is absurd, but I was too hasty. This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd in the confrontation of this irrational and wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world' (24).[29] If absurdity lies neither in the external world nor in us, then it is misleading to insist that '[t]he worm is in man's heart' (12). Rather, absurdity arises at the *juncture* of the world and human experience; it is *relational* – neither purely objective *nor* subjective. To see the importance of this, let us now turn to Nagel.

## 3. Nagel on absurdity

Like most of Nagel's work,[30] the relation between objective and subjective perspectives is central to his treatment of absurdity. It is a curious fact then that, although he refers to *The Myth of*

[28] See *MOS*, 18.

[29] And similarly: 'The absurd is born of this confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world' (*MOS*, 29). Again, this is misleading. One might rather say that the world is neither reasonable *nor* unreasonable; just as trees, tables, the sea, twilight and walking are neither reasonable *nor* unreasonable.

[30] See Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge UK: Canto, 1991), Ch. 14 (hereafter abbreviated *MQ*); *The View From Nowhere* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) (hereafter abbreviated *VFN*); Anita Avramides, 'Thomas Nagel: The View from Nowhere', in J. Shand (ed.),



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*Sisyphus*,[31] Nagel's treatment of Camus is terse and impressionistic. (Indeed, as we will see, Nagel shares more with Camus than he cares to notice.) How then does Nagel account for the absurd?

The first thing worth noting is that, while Nagel finds the sort of 'bad arguments' (*MQ*, 21) employed by absurdists unconvincing,[32] he is emphatic that 'they attempt to express something that is difficult to state, but fundamentally correct' (13). What is 'correct' is, briefly stated, their endeavour to describe the tension between life as it is experienced from the individual's point of view, and one's ability to see the world and one's place therein from 'nowhere in particular' (208).[33] What interests Nagel is not merely the way absurdity arises in ordinary situations, but the deeper 'philosophical sense of absurdity'; that is, the universal way 'pretension and reality inevitably clash for us all'. This, Nagel insists, occurs in the 'collision 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' (13).[34]

Unlike other animals, human beings do not live 'on impulse' (14), guided only by instinct and appearances. ('A mouse. . .is not absurd, because he lacks the capacities for self-consciousness and self-transcendence that would enable him to see that he is only a mouse' (21).)[35] Of course, many human activities are unreflectively

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*Central Works of Philosophy 5: The Twentieth Century, Quine and After* (Bucks: Acumen, 2006), 227ff.

[31] See *MQ*, 17, 22 note.

[32] Nagel deals explicitly with the absurdist's appeals to the minuteness of humanity compared with the vastness of the universe and the history of the earth (*MQ*, 11–12, 21), and likewise that death is both inevitable and terminates the 'chains of justification' (12) within life (Thomas Nagel, *What Does it all Mean?* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 96, 100 (hereafter abbreviated *WAM*)). On the purported insignificance of finite human life in the context of infinity see also *AC*, 36.

[33] Although the 'pursuit of objectivity. . .involves a transcendence of the self', this 'must be distinguished from a different kind of transcendence by which one enters imaginatively into other subjective points of view' (*MQ*, 209).

[34] Nagel relates absurdity to epistemological scepticism (*MQ*, 18–20, 23).

[35] Tolstoy similarly remarks: '[I]t is only my position that is absurd' (*AC*, 47). However, he here has in mind a contrast between the learned (like himself) and the 'vast masses of simple folk' who 'continue to live' (47–48; see also 50) in a metaphysically unperturbed state.



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motivated by habit or natural reactions. But human life is also shaped by our intentional plans and projects, hopes and aspirations. In short, 'we *pursue* our lives', and this means that we inevitably 'take ourselves seriously'.[36] Here Nagel is in agreement with Hare: 'We cannot live human lives without energy and attention, nor without making choices which show that we take some things more seriously than others'. But this is not the whole story, for 'we have always available a point of view outside the particular forms of our lives, from which the seriousness appears gratuitous. These two inescapable viewpoints collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd' (14). This 'special capacity' of human beings to 'step back and survey themselves, and the lives to which they are committed' is not something we can relinquish or indefinitely suspend,[37] for even when we (objectively) 'see ourselves from outside', we do not *completely* abandon the subjective view. Seeing one's own life in the context of (e.g.) human evolution or the history of Europe will foreground the contingency, relative insignificance and arbitrariness of one's personal loves and likes, pleasures, pains and deepest desires. That is, we will here perceive ourselves as 'arbitrary, idiosyncratic, highly specific occupants of the world, one of countless possible forms of life' (21). But taking this imaginative leap does not fundamentally 'disengage us from [subjective] life' (15);[38] rather, it is the *coexistence* of these two perspectives (their 'collision within ourselves' (17)) that constitutes 'our absurdity' (15).[39] This then is why Nagel distances himself from what he sees as Camus' existentialist 'dramatics' (23), and specifically the latter's response to absurdity in terms of 'defiance...scorn' or 'shaking a

[36] 'Leading a human life is a full-time occupation, to which everyone devotes decades of intense concern' (*MQ*, 15).

[37] Nagel thus insists: '[W]e cannot refuse [the transcendental view] consciously, for to do that we would have to be aware of the viewpoint we were refusing. The only way to avoid the relevant self-consciousness would be either never to attain it or to forget it – neither of which can be achieved by the will' (*MQ*, 21). (He does not rule out entirely that someone could live by animal 'impulse' and thereby render their life 'less absurd' (22) – something attempted by the ancient Pyrrhonists (*W&L*, Ch 1).) The alternative is to try and shed one's subjective view – something pursued by 'certain Oriental religions' (*MQ*, 21). But even this requires that 'one take oneself [minimally] seriously' (22).

[38] See also *MQ*, 17, 19, 20–21.

[39] See also *MQ*, 196–97. This 'collision' is also why Nagel rejects attempts at 'reduction', 'elimination' and 'annexation' of the subjective dimension of human life (210–11). Thus, the 'objective picture' is inherently 'partial' (212).



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fist at the world' (22).[40] According to Nagel, Camus' rebellious brand of absurdism arises from misplaced disappointment. Camus presupposes that *if only* the world was not indifferent to human needs, then all would be well. In other words, our absurd condition is an unfortunate, regrettable fact; it *just so happens* that there is an unbridgeable lacuna between us and the world.[41] Nagel rejects this assumption, and the lamentation it validates, because he does not find such a world remotely 'conceivable'. Why not? Because in a world where there was not even the *possibility* of 'unsettlable doubts' (17) we would no longer be describing a world populated by *human beings*. For Nagel then, the friction between objective and subjective perspectives, and the experience of absurdity that often ensues, is part of what it means to be human; it is simply 'the way we are put together' (17–18). As such 'absurdity is one of the most human things about us: a manifestation of our most advanced and interesting characteristics' (23).[42] Camus' 'distress', 'defiance' (22) and 'agony' are therefore *fundamentally* misplaced, for how can we meaningfully 'resent or escape' (23) what constitutes *who we are*?

Before proceeding, I would like to highlight two things about Nagel's account: (i) It is striking that the examples he provides of mundane absurdity are all, broadly, *amusing*: '[S]omeone gives a complicated speech in support of a motion that has already been passed; a notorious criminal is made president of a major philanthropic foundation; you declare your love over the telephone to a recorded announcement; as you are being knighted, your pants fall down' (13). (ii) In keeping with this, Nagel not only makes passing reference to the 'comical' (15), he ends his diagnosis by recommending that we 'approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair' (23).[43] Now, insofar as this latter claim has Camus as its target, it is slightly misleading, for his conclusions are not as gloomy as Nagel suggests. For example, when in *L'Etranger* Meursault reflects on the 'benign indifference of the world', he nevertheless judges that his subjective life had been 'happy', and that even while awaiting

[40] Camus' response strikes Nagel as overly 'romantic and slightly self-pitying' (*MQ*, 22).

[41] See also Marmysz on the presuppositions of nihilism (*LAN*, 155ff).

[42] The 'transcendental step is natural to…humans' (*MQ*, 21). Nagel refers to our 'natural responses' and remarks that '[w]hat sustains us, in belief as in action, is not reason or justification, but something more basic than these' (20). He also refers to Hume in this context (20 note).

[43] Nagel refers to 'irony' earlier, though adds that irony does not 'enable us to escape the absurd' (*MQ*, 20). I return to this later.



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execution he 'was still happy' (*TO*, 117). Likewise, and as Nagel repeatedly notes, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus maintains that there is 'no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn' (the 'absurd man. . .silences all the idols'). But what Nagel does not properly acknowledge is that Camus here talks of a certain 'joy' (*MOS*, 98), and even imagines Sisyphus himself 'happy', despite his interminably futile task.[44] Admittedly, it is unclear what such happiness amounts to. We might conclude that whatever sort of happiness is possible under these conditions it would be rather shallow; not even the contentment of having accumulated the 'greatest quantity of experiences', even though 'all experiences' are essentially 'unimportant' (54). Alternatively, we might reasonably envisage a heroic, defiant, *non*-comedic laughter; as one can be said to laugh through gritted teeth. There is a genuine ambiguity here that is compounded further by Camus' insistence that we should not indulge in frivolous 'joking' (14) about such existentially weighty matters. Still, it is an important ambiguity, and one that Nagel overlooks. I will not attempt to make Camus' account more convincing than it is. What I do want to consider is the possibility of an absurdist, not merely being 'happy' (in Camus' ambiguous sense), but positively *laughing*. That is, I want to explore how a comedic response to the absurdity of the human condition might be justified. To do this I first want to say something about laughter and incongruity.

## 4. Incongruity and laughter

Although very few philosophers have deemed humour worthy of sustained treatment, a number have remarked on (e.g.) the nature of laughter. For example, Hobbes characterises laughter as laughter-*at* the misfortunes and 'imperfections of other men'.[45] On this 'superiority' account then there would be nothing more amusing than visiting one's local hospital.[46] (The position need not rule out self-laughter, for our *present* self can take a wry look at our *past* self.) Hobbes usefully identifies one type of laughter, but as a general theory it is not very promising. Like Hobbes,

[44] See *MOS*, 99.

[45] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 38.

[46] See Francis Hutcheson, 'Thoughts on Laughter', in G. Graham (ed.), *Scottish Philosophy: Selected Readings 1690–1960* (Exeter: Imprint, 2004), 29.



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Kant does not offer a fully developed account. However, he remarks that 'Something absurd. . .must be present in whatever is to raise a hearty convulsive laugh. *Laughter is an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing*'.[47] Ordinary examples of our expectations being 'reduced to nothing' are easily found. (Frantically pulling at a door that requires pushing, or excitedly opening a gift-wrapped box to discover it contains only a series of smaller gift-wrapped boxes.)[48] But more interesting here is Kant's claim that there is something *absurd* about such incongruities. A more detailed account of the relation between incongruity and humour can be found in Bergson's *Le Rire*. Here Bergson makes a number of interrelated claims about the nature and function of laughter. Most contentiously perhaps, he insists that human beings are both the exclusive subjects *and* objects of laughter.[49] More plausibly, we are told that laughter depends upon a 'momentary anesthesia of the heart' (*LMC*, 5). Likewise, Bergson thinks that laughter involves a tacit 'complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary' (6), and this intersubjective dimension has a regulative social function. That is to say, laughter is a 'corrective' (87) or chastising '*social gesture*' (20)[50] directed at the '*inelasticity* of character, of mind and even of body' (19)[51] – something society cannot tolerate. Whatever the plausibility of this latter claim, it highlights Bergson's central preoccupation; namely, that '*mechanical inelasticity*' (10)[52] or the appearance of 'automatism' (16) in

[47] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 161 (hereafter abbreviated *CJ*).

[48] Seeing *another's* expectation being 'reduced to nothing' can also provoke laughter, even when that frustration is rather less than funny *for* the other. For examples of comic incongruity see George Orwell, *Collected Essays* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), 208; Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 48–49; Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1984), 233 (hereafter abbreviated *BLF*); *TC*, 86.

[49] See Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (London: Macmillan, 1911), 3–4 (hereafter abbreviated *LMC*). See also George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Volume 3: As I Please, 1943–1945* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1970), 327.

[50] See also *LMC*, 197ff. On a more Hobbesian note, Bergson remarks: 'In laughter we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate, and consequently correct our neighbour, if not in his will, at least in his deed' (136).

[51] See also *LMC*, 138.

[52] See also *LMC*, 20.



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human behavior is what provokes comic laughter: '*The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine*' (29). Bergson's point here is that normal human behavior – non-linguistic or otherwise – has a naturally 'supple' (130) character. (For example, facial expressions do not normally lurch from one to another in a staccato fashion.) Interestingly, Wittgenstein similarly observes: 'If a man's bodily expression of sorrow and joy alternated, say with the ticking of a clock, here we should not have the characteristic formation of the pattern of sorrow or of the pattern of joy'.[53] Indeed, were we to encounter someone whose facial expressions had 'just five positions' that 'snap[ped] straight from one to another',[54] we would lose our hermeneutic footing. There are, therefore, typical human behaviors (the 'common behavior of mankind' (*PI*, §206)) that constitute the natural backdrop to intersubjective understanding (amongst other things). While Wittgenstein's interest here is rather broader than Bergson's, it is in keeping with the latter's suggestion that stunted, random or excessively repetitive behaviors[55] make us laugh insofar as they diverge from the fluidity of normal human behavior. Insofar as Bergson's account hinges on the disparity between our worldly expectations (for normal, 'supple' behavior) and what actually transpires (stunted, repetitive behavior), it can be described, like Kant's, as an 'incongruity' account.[56]

For Bergson then, the 'fundamental law of life' is the 'negation of repetition' (*LMC*, 32). In other words, a 'really living life should never repeat itself', for 'wherever there is repetition or complete similarity, we always suspect some mechanism at work behind the living' (34).[57] (The qualification '*complete* similarity' is important, for a degree of behavioral repetition and predictability is necessary for others to be intelligible.) This basic idea finds expression in a number of much broader claims. For example, extending his account beyond *mere* bodily behavior, Bergson writes: '*Any*

[53] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), 174 (hereafter abbreviated *PI*).

[54] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), §527. See also *LMC*, 32, 24–25, 30–31.

[55] For example, an 'ingrained twitching' or 'fixed grimace' (*LMC*, 24).

[56] Though in some repetitive behaviour we suspect 'sickness and infirmity', 'mental deficiency' or 'insanity' (*LMC*, 18; see also 185).

[57] See also *LMC*, 37, 57, 58, 77, 109.



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*arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement*' (69), and likewise that the 'ceremonial side of social life' always includes a 'latent comic element' (44). (These comic possibilities only require us to focus 'attention...on the ceremonial element' while simultaneously 'neglect[ing] its matter' (45).)[58] Clearly, Bergson's concern here is with human behaviour broadly construed. But what is especially relevant for us is the way he extends the point even further:

> All that is serious in life comes from our freedom. The feelings we have matured, the passions we have brooded over, the actions we have weighed, decided upon, and carried through, in short, all that comes from us and is our very own, these are the things that give life its ofttimes dramatic and generally grave aspect. What, then, is requisite to transform all this into a comedy? Merely to fancy that our seeming freedom conceals the strings of a dancing-jack...So there is not a real, a serious, or even a dramatic scene that fancy cannot render comic by simply calling forth this image. (79)

By 'looking on life as a repeating mechanism' (101) with sufficient imaginative effort, we are capable of seeing the comic dimension of *all* our activities; not only our personal lives, but the historical-cultural permutations of humanity *as a whole*.[59] (This is a markedly

[58] There is something comic, though not trivial, in Wittgenstein's remark: 'If fleas developed a rite, it would be based on the dog' (Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*', in C.G. Luckhardt (ed.), *Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives* (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1996), 73 (hereafter abbreviated *RFG*); see also Bob Plant, 'The Confessing Animal in Foucault and Wittgenstein', *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (December 2006), 543ff.

[59] 'Now step aside, look upon life as a disinterested spectator: many a drama will turn into a comedy' (*LMC*, 5). Morreall also emphasises the 'distanced' attitude needed for laughter (John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: SUNY, 1983), 122–23 (hereafter abbreviated *TLS*)). More specifically: 'If we simply shift to a more cosmic perspective than we usually adopt, then not only our present concerns but the whole history of our species looks insignificant...[A]ny incongruity can be funny...[t]he human condition itself is funny' (*TLS*, 124). Interestingly, at the end of his analysis, Morreall refers to Camus' claim that suicide is the most fundamental philosophical question, and suggests: 'We can even treat the question of suicide with a sense of humour' (129).



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Nietzschean thought.[60]) So, whereas Camus maintains that there is 'no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn' (*MOS*, 98), Bergson raises a different possibility; namely, that there is no fate that cannot be rendered *laughable*. Perhaps then, laughter truly 'makes a mockery of everything'.[61]

Bergson's allusions to imaginatively abstracting oneself from ordinary life have important correlations – and some instructive tensions – with Nagel's absurdism. In the remainder of the paper I will address these, and in doing so explain more fully what Nagel offers us by way of a (comic) response to absurdity.

## 5. The human condition

Morreall suggests that possessing 'a sense of humour doesn't simply provide us with occasional moments of refreshment in life's struggles', but also 'gives us an approach to life as a whole' (*TLS*,

[60] There are obvious correlations here with Nietzsche's affirmation of the 'eternal recurrence'. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), §341; *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage, 1968), §1053ff; *Beyond Good and Evil* (London: Penguin, 1990), §56; *Ecce Homo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 36–38, 50–51; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1972), 176–78, 231–33 (hereafter abbreviated *TSZ*). For a particularly interesting reading of this see Alexander Nehamas, 'The Eternal Recurrence', in J. Richardson and B. Leiter (eds), *Nietzsche: Oxford Readings in Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 118ff.

[61] Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, 'The Laughter of Being', *MLN*, Vol. 102, No. 4 (September 1987), 748 (hereafter abbreviated *TLB*). After all, 'if my existence is nothing more than an unspeakable farce, an improbable gag lost in the immensity of the universe, why not laugh at it…?' (*TLB*, 738). See also Tolstoy's remarks on life seeming to be 'some kind of stupid and evil joke' (*AC*, 31). Borch-Jacobsen's comments are in-keeping with Nietzsche's Zarathustrian laughter: 'He who climbs upon the highest mountains laughs at all tragedies, real or imaginary' (*TSZ*, 68; see also John Lippitt, 'Nietzsche, Zarathustra and the Status of Laughter', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (January 1992) (hereafter abbreviated *NZL*); 'Existential Laughter', *Cogito* (Spring 1996) (hereafter abbreviated *EXL*)). Freud similarly maintains that the meaning behind humour is this: ' "Look! here is the world, which seems dangerous! It is nothing but a game for children – just worth making a jest about!" '(Sigmund Freud, 'Humor', in *Art and Literature: The Penguin Freud Library, Volume 14* (London: Penguin, 1985), 432–33). Kundera describes a quasi-Nietzschean laughter in *BLF*, 61–62.



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121).[62] On the face of it, this sounds attractive. However, if such a humorous attitude requires our (albeit temporary) disengagement from the concrete concerns of life, then in many situations viewing the lives of *others* in Bergson's 'disinterested' (*LMC*, 5) way would raise moral problems.[63] Moreover, it is unclear that taking a 'transcendental' (*MQ*, 21) view even of *one's own* life is always possible; notably when experiencing extreme pain or pleasure.[64] Bergson, it seems to me, presents the subjective and objective viewpoints as overly dichotomous possibilities. It is here, however, that Nagel offers a valuable corrective. To 'look upon life as a disinterested spectator' (*LMC*, 5) cannot merely amount to looking upon human life as one might observe leaves blowing in the wind. Such phenomena might be fascinating, and even strangely beautiful, but it is hard to see how they could be *funny*.[65] If there is something comic about viewing human life from an objective, 'disinterested' perspective, then this is only because one thereby retains a sense that what one is imagining is *human life*, with all its subjective richness. To view human life *as if* it was (e.g.) simply a huge automated machine will provoke laughter only insofar as one does *not* come to think that human life *really is* just such an apparatus. What Nagel describes as the 'clash between internal and external views of human life' (*MQ*, 207) is not then a conflict between two *fundamentally* separate

[62] See also *EXL*, 69. Wittgenstein also refers to humour as 'a way of looking at the world' (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 78).

[63] An example of this can be found in Orson Welles' *The Third Man*, where Harry Lime (a murderous fraudster) and Holly Martins share a Big Wheel ride. As they ascend, Martins asks Lime 'Have you ever seen any of your victims?', to which Lime responds: 'Victims? Don't be melodramatic'. He then invites Martins to look at the people below: 'Would you really feel any pity if one of those dots stopped moving forever? If I offered you £20,000 for every dot that stopped, would you really...tell me to keep my money or would you calculate how many dots you could afford to spare? ...Nobody thinks in terms of human beings; Governments don't, why should we?'.

[64] Such experiences reduce us to our embodied being-here so as to make any sort of 'transcendental step' unattainable. For an account of extreme pain in this regard see Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits* (London: Granta, 1999), 21–40.

[65] On a related point, Bergson maintains: 'A landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly; it will never be laughable' (*LMC*, 3).



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viewpoints.[66] Rather, the experience of absurdity arises 'because the same individual' is simultaneously 'the occupant of both viewpoints' (208) – albeit in varying degrees. Given that looking at worldly events objectively will only have a comic effect if we are simultaneously viewing these events subjectively, then we should not think of laughter as *essentially* 'disinterested'. As such, the 'anaesthesia of the heart' Bergson thinks necessary for comic laughter is not only 'momentary' (*LMC*, 5), but also inherently *partial*.[67]

Nagel's absurdism manifests a more general philosophical worry; namely, that if we 'shut out of existence' (*MQ*, 212) *either* subjective or objective perspectives, we will thereby distort the nature of reality.[68] Doing justice to this tense 'coexistence' between subjective and objective viewpoints is crucial, not for merely pragmatic reasons, but because it is an 'irreducible fact of life'.[69] Hence Nagel considers

[66] 'Although I shall speak of the subjective viewpoint and the objective viewpoint, this is just shorthand, for there are not two such viewpoints...Instead, there is a polarity...The opposition between subjective and objective can arise at any place on the spectrum where one point of view claims dominance over another' (*MQ*, 206).

[67] See *MQ*, 212. Far from being incompatible with sensitivity toward others, such other-sensitivity is prerequisite for cosmic laughter to be possible in the first place. Assuming that moral constraints are required here, the aforementioned 'sensitivity' will not *in itself* provide them. Nevertheless, such sensitivity is the background condition for any subsequent moral limits we might want to impose. I would therefore describe this sensitivity as 'minimally moral'.

[68] 'We are thoroughly material beings that are unable to *be* that materiality. Such is the curse of reflection, but such also is the source of our dignity. Humour is the daily bread of that dignity' (Simon Critchley, *On Humor* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 109 (hereafter abbreviated *OH*)).

[69] '[I]f my existence is nothing more than an unspeakable farce, an improbable gag lost in the immensity of the universe, why not laugh at it...Since we cannot escape pain and anguish, let's at least learn to relativise them, by observing ourselves from without, or, more properly, from above...Let's act, in other words, *as if* we could raise ourselves above our precious self, *as if* we could, just for the time of an improbable grace period, make fun of this shabby finitude' (*TLB*, 738). Of Nietzschean laughter, Alderman similarly remarks: 'Through fear we pretend to be what we are not – absolute, certain, eternal. Through fear we insist that our most illusory pretensions be taken as reality itself. Only, this human comedy says in effect, by lying insistently can we take ourselves seriously enough to accept ourselves. But this apparent seriousness is really only a solemn evasion: unable to accept the light, temporal character of our creations we weigh them down with pretensions to eternality, universality, and



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the 'aim of eventual unification' between these perspectives to be fundamentally 'misplaced' (213). This then explains why he objects so strongly to Camus' 'dramatics' (23),[70] for on Nagel's account, ontological-epistemic despair is unwarranted, as is begrudging acceptance of our all-too-human lot. Such responses only make sense if we suppose that the harmonisation of subjective and objective viewpoints is, at least in principle, possible. In other words, were things constituted in such a way as to *prohibit* the collision of subjective and objective perspectives (assuming this is even imaginable), we would no longer be envisaging a world populated by *human beings*.[71]

## 6. Defiance or laughter?

What then does the above offer by way of a response to those daunting existential questions with which I began? If we recall, Hare's

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absoluteness...Zarathrusta's laughter is then a form of criticism which silences and liberates...[us from] solemnity, dogmatism, and ponderousness' (Harold Alderman, *Nietzsche's Gift* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1977), 54). Nagel would presumably here insist that taking such a view from 'above' is *already* part of the human condition.

[70] Solomon criticises Camus for having exaggerated metaphysical 'expectations' (Robert C. Solomon, *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1993), 38 (hereafter abbreviated *PASS*)), even accusing him of being 'a traumatized atheist' (*PASS*, 40; see also 41). Thus, Solomon concludes, Camus' 'literary genius enables him to paint this ghastly scenario in heroic colours; but we must see it for what it is. It is a degrading, spiteful, and hopeless version of the Christian denigration of man – as petty and helpless, virtually crushed by the weight of his guilt and his punishment, virtuously salvaging his last crumb of self-respect through resentment, scorn [and] silent defiance' (45).

[71] This, I think, is what Critchley is getting at when he claims that 'humour recalls us to the modesty and limitedness of the human condition, a limitedness that calls not for tragic affirmation but comic *acknowledgement*, not heroic authenticity but a laughable inauthenticity' (Simon Critchley, *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity: Essays on Levinas, Derrida and Contemporary French Thought* (London and New York: Verso: 1999), 224 (hereafter abbreviated *EPS*)). He goes on: 'The extraordinary thing about comedy is that it returns us to the very ordinariness of the ordinary, it returns us to the familiar by making it fantastic. Comedy might be said to provide us with *an oblique phenomenology of the ordinary*' (*EPS*, 235–36). See also Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London and New York: Verso, 2007), 77–87.



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approach is essentially deflationary. In highlighting the grammatical-conceptual peculiarities of such questions as 'Does life matter?' and 'What is the meaning of life?' he returns us to the purported safety of ordinary language. By doing this, Hare hopes, these sorts of questions can be shown to be pseudo-questions, or at least significantly malformed. This therapeutic strategy might well be effective, but only, I suggested, if the existential anxieties driving those questions are of a particularly shallow sort (like those of Hare's young existentialist). Alternatively, we might accept that life is meaningless, but opt for Camus' defiance in the face of such absurdity. This response, however, presupposes that there is something here that warrants defiance. Shaking one's fist at the world (metaphorically or otherwise) may have some cathartic value, but it will misfire if such dramatics aspire to anything more than *mere* emotional outburst. In this sense, Camus' existential scorn is not unlike (literally) punching one's pillow in rage, kicking one's chair in frustration, or cursing the rain. The crucial difference, of course, is that none of us think that pillows, chairs or rain are strictly *blameworthy*.[72] In his existentialist 'dramatics', however, Camus assumes that there is an object towards which defiance can be meaningfully directed. Still, his response is not as patently ridiculous as blaming one's pillow, furniture or the weather. This brings us to the third possible response. Nagel thus grants that there is *something* about human life that generates absurdity. What he denies, however, is that this is lamentable or deserving of heroic posturing. It is simply a fact about human nature – something that distinguishes (most of) us from other animals – that we see our lives both from a subjective, first-person perspective, and also from an objective, third-person point of view. Because we exist on this perspectival continuum, overemphasis on either extremity will inevitably misrepresent the reality of human life.[73] As Nagel remarks elsewhere, the problem here is that we have 'an incurable tendency to take ourselves seriously' in the sense that '[w]e want to matter to ourselves "from the outside" '(*WAM*, 101).[74] The sort of absurdity Camus identifies thus arises from the

[72] See Wittgenstein's remarks on 'Instinct-actions' (*RFG*, 72).

[73] We naturally shuttle between subjective and objective perspectives. Indeed, becoming overly preoccupied with either extreme would undermine our normal coping strategies. One might even suppose that *exclusive* fixation on either subjective or objective perspectives would be symptomatic of certain psychological disorders.

[74] Although Lippitt identifies significant correlations between Nagel and Nietzsche on taking a humorous attitude toward life *per se* (*NZL*, 46),



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'collision within ourselves' (*MQ*, 17) of these viewpoints; e.g., when our own death, loves, losses and passions strike us as being of epic (subjective) importance *and simultaneously* of trivial (objective) significance.[75] The experience of absurdity is not therefore due to some epistemic failing or contingent ontological rupture between us and the external world – which would then, in principle, justify lamentation or revolt. Rather, the experience of absurdity is what makes us *the kind of creatures we are*.

Whereas Camus advocates heroic insolence in the face of life's absurdities, I have suggested that Nagel's account raises the possibility of other types of response here; specifically, comic laughter.[76] Indeed, Nagel helps us to identify something comic within both the heroics Camus promotes *and* deflationary strategies like Hare's.

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he objects to the 'ease with which Nagel appears to think we can escape the absurdity of our existence', whereas Nietzsche 'has no such allusions as to the difficulty of the task' (47). (Interestingly, elsewhere Lippitt expresses concern both about the *possibility* of Zarathustrian laughter, and whether, insofar as it is willed, it remains '*defiant*. . .[as it] symbolizes a determination to "affirm" in the face of despair' (*EXL*, 70).) Lippett's former accusation is plausible. However, it is notable that he proceeds to claim that Nietzsche highlights a 'vitally important point: that the tragic and the comic are not polar opposites, or mutually exclusive, but subtly and sometimes almost paradoxically inter-linked modes of experience' (*NZL*, 48; see also *EXL*, 64). It seems to me, however, that under the rubric of the 'subjective' and 'objective' perspectives, Nagel says much the same thing. As such, there is no obvious reason to suppose that Nagelian laughter is *easy*.

[75] See *VFN*, Ch XI. In 'A Lecture on Ethics' Wittgenstein envisages an omniscient being documenting 'in a big book' all the 'movements of all the bodies in the world dead or alive', including 'all the states of mind of all human beings that ever lived'. In other words, this 'world-book' would contain a thoroughly objective 'description of the world'. Wittgenstein then claims that within this book there would be 'nothing that we could call an *ethical* judgment', for all of its 'propositions [would] stand on the same level' (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1993), 39). We might similarly say that within such a book there would be nothing *comic*, but only events viewed from the objective perspective. For there to be something comic here Wittgenstein's world-book would (somehow) have to capture the 'collision' (*MQ*, 17) between our 'pretension and reality' (13).

[76] At the very least, *smiling* is an appropriate response to the absurd. Although Critchley prefers this to the explosive contagiousness of laughter (*OH*, 107–9, 111), I see no reason to think that smiling is inherently superior to laughter; after all, *both* can be inane.



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What I mean is this: The incongruity generated by the 'irreducible' (213) collision of subjective and objective perspectives is what prompts us to raise daunting existential questions in the first place. That is to say, we are simply the kind of animal that naturally asks 'What is the meaning of life?' and 'Does life matter?'. We are also, simultaneously, the kind of animal that cannot find satisfactory answers to these sorts of questions[77] – not, however, because we are too dumb, shallow or lethargic. In short, living at the juncture of subjective and objective perspectives, we human beings just *cannot help* repeatedly asking *unanswerable questions*.[78] Now, in one sense, this is a curious activity for any creature to engage in. Indeed, if viewed subjectively, such a prospect may seem rather depressing. But that, of course, is not the only perspective available to us; it is just one extreme on the perspectival 'spectrum' (206). We should not forget that this predicament can *itself* be viewed from a more objective, disinterested point of view. From this latter perspective then, the fact that questions such as 'What is the meaning of life?' and 'Does life matter?' are both irresistible *and* futile can legitimately be met with comic laughter rather than existential bemoaning or revolt. Recalling Kant's formulation that '*Laughter is an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing*' (*CJ*, 161), we might therefore say that we here have explanatory 'expectations' that are constantly 'reduced to nothing', and *this* is enough to provoke laughter. Indeed, that we continue to have such explanatory expectations, and yet also continue to be disappointed by our failure, is even more cause for a humorous response.[79]

None of what I have suggested implies that laughter provides a *solution*[80] to – or convenient 'escape' (*MQ*, 20) from – the absurd. After

[77] Whatever his ambiguities, we should recall that Camus insists that 'the Absurd is not in man...nor in the world, but in *their presence together*' (*MOS*, 30 my emphasis), and likewise: 'The absurd is born of this *confrontation* between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world' (29 my emphasis).

[78] This might explain why the problem of scepticism continually returns, despite philosophers' repeated attempts to refute, deflate or ignore it (*MQ*, 18–20, 23).

[79] '[T]he incongruity between order and disorder, by the same token between man, who always seeks order, and the disorderly realities of the empirical world...discloses a central truth about the human condition: *Man is in a state of comic discrepancy with respect to the order of the universe*' (Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 34).

[80] See *NM*, 246.



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all, Nagel gives us good reason to think that *that* would be a fundamentally misguided hope to begin with. Acknowledging the *appropriateness* of laughter does, however, offer a way of living with the experience of absurdity if and when it arises.[81] Perhaps that is as much as we can (seriously) hope for.

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