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NAGEL ON ABSURDITY

By

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Philosophy

1998

ABSTRACT

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Thomas Nagel, in three works that span two decades, sets forth his views on human absurdity. This dissertation critically examines these views and arrives at five general conclusions.

The first concerns Nagel's criticisms of what he takes to be the "standard arguments for absurdity." In all, Nagel discusses four such arguments and offers what seem to be knock-down refutations of each. I argue, however, that upon reflection all of these refutations turn out to be wanting and, consequently, the so-called standard arguments for absurdity remain standing.

The second conclusion the dissertation reaches concerns the matter of interpretation. In the three works in which he discusses absurdity, Nagel suggests that human absurdity consists in a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension and reality. I argue, however, that what Nagel takes the pretension and reality to be changes over time, and even changes once within a single work. The result is that he ends up presenting a total of four doctrines of absurdity. I argue that he does so, despite the fact that he himself gives the impression that in all his writings on absurdity he presents but one doctrine, and despite the fact that none of his critics suggests that he offers four doctrines either.

The third conclusion the dissertation reaches has to do not with interpretation, but with evaluation. In the chapters I set out Nagel's four doctrines of absurdity, I also evaluate these doctrines. I argue that, though ingenious and alluring, each of the four doctrines fails to show that human existence is absurd.

In view of these first three conclusions, it may seem as though I do not think much, if anything, of what Nagel has to say about absurdity. However, as it turns out, I do believe Nagel has some things right. In particular, I think his notion of "conspicuous discrepancy" helps clarify the general concept of absurdity. This is the fourth conclusion the dissertation reaches. I explain that we may come to understand better the distinction between 'meaninglessness' and 'absurdity' with Nagel's notion of conspicuous discrepancy in mind. Further, we may, with this notion in mind, come to understand better cases in which propositions and sentences are absurd and cases in which they are not.

The fifth and final conclusion the dissertation arrives at is that while Nagel fails to establish a particular conspicuous discrepancy between pretension and reality, if he had, that probably would have been sufficient to show that our lives are absurd. In other words, this formal condition of existential absurdity does itself seem plausible. If so, we might try to think of particular clashes between pretensions and realities that Nagel himself has not considered in the effort to come up with a credible doctrine of absurdity which, though not Nagel's, is Nagelian. I end the dissertation by suggesting one such doctrine.

To my mother

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My deepest thanks to my dissertation advisor, Winston A. Wilkinson, without whose strong words of encouragement, gentle prodding, and friendship this work would remain incomplete. Heartfelt thanks also to my father and to my brothers, Rick, Steve, Dan, and Chris, for all their love and support. And last, but not least, thanks to my dear friend Nicole Mattis who has walked the valley with me every step of the way. Her great and constant affection has made this walk bearable.

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INTRODUCTION

You are a disembodied mind sent to observe the intelligent life on a planet in the Alpha Centauri system. Hovering over the planet, you watch its inhabitants engage in bizarre rituals. One such ritual involves the worship of a giant meteorite, which by its looks crashed into the planet at the dawn of Alpha Centaurian civilization. You find the meteorite ritual, not to mention all the rest, rather silly; for it is a long, physically demanding activity that the Alpha Centaurians seem to take quite seriously and repeat time and again—and it is all for the sake of a stupid rock! Floating high above, you say to yourself that you are thankful you are not an Alpha Centaurian. However, no sooner do you say this than you get an order to "synergize." The powers that be tell you they want a closer look; they really want to know what makes the Alpha Centaurian tick. They also tell you to plan on an indefinite stay. So before you know it, you find yourself inside the body of one of these weird creatures and a main participant in the middle of the meteorite ritual.

Well, you try to make the best of your lot. You reason there is really nothing you can do about it, so you might as well try to serve this primitive life-form who—in one sense, anyway—you now are. Thus in earnest you attempt to embrace the meteorite ritual. You try to empathize with this mind that is taking the ritual very seriously, and you try to connect with its body that is stepping here and there, swinging to and fro, and emitting strange rhythmic sounds. And at first you seem to succeed. You manage to think the rock is sacred and the ritual justified, and you actually come to feel nearly at one with your host mind.

This conversion, however, is short-lived. Before long the meteorite is just a meteorite again, and the ritual looks as odd as ever. Try as you might, you can no longer empathize with your host who continues to take the masquerade seriously, moving its body—and, for now at least, your body too—this way and that. Suddenly you feel as you once did at age thirteen when at a family wedding your older relative literally pulled you to the dance floor and made you polka against your will. Indeed, the Alpha Centaurian is dragging you along now, and you wonder how long you are going to have to put up with this ridiculous "dance." While cursing your fate, you, in a moment of giddiness, reflect on how the existence of this hybrid being, part Alpha Centaurian-part you, who is simultaneously caught up in the ritual and repulsed by it, must look to a disembodied mind hovering above the planet as you were a short time ago. One word comes to you: ABSURD.

Thomas Nagel, for one, would agree. That type of schizoid existence, he would say, is absurd. However, he would also say that human existence resembles it, so much, in fact, that human existence itself warrants the same label. No, Nagel does not believe we drag through our earthly rituals unenthusiastic aliens who inhabit our bodies. (The science fiction story is not a perfect analogy.) But he does think we drag through our ordinary lives an unenthusiastic part of our own selves. Just as the Alpha Centaurian takes the meteorite ritual very seriously, a part of us takes our mundane lives very seriously. At the same time, just as you in the story cannot take the meteorite ritual seriously, a part of us cannot take our mundane lives seriously. Consequently, we humans exist simultaneously engaged in and detached from our personal concerns, goals and projects; and this striking existential incongruity makes our lives absurd. In other words, part of us wants to polka and the other part does not. The first gets its way. We dance. But with one part(ner) dragging the other around, the dance is absurd.

What on earth, we might wonder, is Nagel talking about here? While we may think it plausible to say that *some* human lives are absurd, and absurd in virtue of an infliction of acute schizophrenia, clearly most of us do not suffer from this disease, nor, it would seem, from anything like it. What, then, are these antagonistic parts of us that Nagel alleges make our lives absurd? Are they in fact parts of us—all of us? If so, how exactly are they supposed to make our lives absurd? And do they? Can Nagel really support the bold claim that human existence is absurd?

This dissertation sets out to answer these questions, as well as a host of others that arise from reading Nagel's works on human absurdity. In these works, which span two decades, Nagel both produces arguments for absurdity (which in one way or another fit the general schema sketched above) and criticizes arguments for absurdity others have offered. This dissertation critically examines both his own arguments and his refutations of these other arguments, and hence is intended to be a comprehensive examination of this influential American philosopher's thoughts on absurdity. On its face, the dissertation's general conclusion will be negative. It will conclude that, while ingenious and alluring, Nagel's arguments for absurdity, as well as his criticisms of others, do not succeed in their present form. However, the dissertation will also attempt to show that Nagel has got some things right, that one may be able to build a more plausible theory of absurdity with these things in mind, and that, in any case, simply understanding his arguments and seeing exactly how and where they go wrong teaches us much about the subject of absurdity.

Of course if it were the case that Nagel's works on absurdity have already been sufficiently analyzed and evaluated, then motivation for this project would be wanting. But I do not think they have. Quite the contrary, I believe these works, viewed both individually and together, are as confusing as they are provocative and that neither Nagel nor his critics have adequately sorted them out. Nowhere is this confusion greater than in "The Absurd," Nagel's first work on absurdity, and in the ensuing commentaries.

Nagel writes as though he is offering one, and only one, argument for absurdity; and his critics in their responses write as though he gives only one argument as well. However, a closer reading of "The Absurd" reveals that Nagel unwittingly advances two arguments, and two which are actually logically incompatible. If this is true, then I believe it should be pointed out and explained, especially since the "The Absurd" appears in Nagel's popular book *Mortal Questions*, as well as in recent anthologies, and that the commentaries on "The Absurd" appear in popular journals, and one in an anthology itself.

Confusion over Nagel's case for human absurdity continues in another essay in *Mortal Questions*, "Subjectivity and Objectivity," the next essay in which he argues our lives are absurd. In this work, Nagel gives the impression he is simply reiterating his argument in the earlier work, for he never suggests anything to the contrary and spells out the argument in much the same terms. And his critics would seem to agree. They are silent about the argument in this later work, which suggests they, too, think the argument is the same. Once again, however, I believe what Nagel and his critics convey is misleading. I think a close reading of "Subjectivity and Objectivity" reveals that the argument Nagel presents is crucially different from both arguments in "The Absurd" and that, therefore, it amounts to a third doctrine of absurdity.

Nagel's third and final discussion of absurdity lies in *The View from Nowhere*, and the discussion there is confusing as well. As in "Subjectivity and Objectivity," Nagel writes as though his argument for human absurdity is the same as it has always been. He sets out the argument using much of the same language he did in the previous two works and does not give any indication his argument has changed. However, as I hope to show, the argument in fact has changed, and changed considerably. The main argument in *The View from Nowhere* is a brand new one, and represents a fourth doctrine of absurdity. This time, though, one of Nagel's critics does notice the change. The critic correctly points out that "Nagel considerably alters his early position." But despite this insight, the critic's analysis of the change is misleading in two respects. First, he acknowledges only

one other argument, when in fact there are three. And second, what he takes to be Nagel's main argument in *The View from Nowhere* turns out not to be.

Thus, I think there is plenty of work yet to be done in, first of all, understanding Nagel's case for human absurdity—which turns out actually to be four separate doctrines—and, then, in evaluating it—which must therefore include four distinct evaluations.

But that is not all. I believe there is also work to be done in understanding and evaluating Nagel's refutations of other arguments for absurdity. In "The Absurd," Nagel briefly explains four arguments which he calls "standard arguments for absurdity," and he just as briefly dismisses them as "patently inadequate." Interestingly, all that his refutations have elicited is one critic's passing remark that Nagel is quite right to conclude that two of the arguments are bad, and for the reasons Nagel gives. This remark, along with the absence of any others, suggests his critics believe his refutations are on the mark. However, I think that while at first glance they certainly appear to be knock-down refutations, closer inspection reveals they all are flawed and, consequently, all four of these so called standard arguments for absurdity deserve a second look.

I realize these three major claims of mine—(1) that Nagel actually presents four distinct doctrines of absurdity, (2) that none of them succeeds, and (3) that none of his refutations of other arguments for absurdity succeeds either—are quite bold. But I think they are defensible, and what I intend to do here is defend them. Once again, my hope is that Nagel's views on absurdity will be better understood and that the public discussion of absurdity, in general, will be advanced. To this end, I divide the dissertation into six chapters.

In chapter 1, I focus exclusively on Nagel's refutations of the four standard arguments for absurdity, which for convenience I call the Million Years Argument, the Size Argument, the Time Argument, and the Death Argument. I explain each of the arguments and Nagel's refutations, and then I show exactly where and how his refutations

go wrong. I conclude by suggesting that since the arguments withstand Nagel's criticisms, they warrant further examination.

I turn in chapter 2 to one of the two arguments for absurdity Nagel presents in "The Absurd," which I refer to as Nagel's first doctrine of absurdity. I first explain the general conditions which together Nagel believes are sufficient to make our lives absurd (conditions he seems to adhere to throughout his works), and afterward I show how the first doctrine does not meet all of these conditions and, consequently, does not establish that our lives are absurd.

In chapter 3, I discuss an alternative interpretation of Nagel's argument in "The Absurd" and draw from specific passages that support the interpretation. I suggest that while the alternative interpretation is logically at odds with the first doctrine (and so is a distinct doctrine of absurdity), the two do resemble each other and can easily be confused. And I point out that since the second doctrine avoids the objection to the first doctrine, the motivation was there for Nagel to confuse them. Finally, I show that, despite its advantage over the first doctrine, the second doctrine does not succeed either.

I turn to the essay "Subjectivity and Objectivity" in chapter 4. Citing specific text, I begin by showing how the argument for absurdity here must be significantly different from the two in "The Absurd," despite the resemblance and Nagel's not stating that it is different. Moreover, I explain why Nagel might have been motivated to alter his case for absurdity, which has to do with the fact that the third doctrine seems to avoid the main objection to the second doctrine (just as the second doctrine avoids the main objection to the first doctrine). Lastly, I argue that while it may escape the objection to the second doctrine, it does not escape another one and hence, like the two preceding doctrines, fails to establish that our lives are absurd.

In chapter 5, I examine Nagel's argument for absurdity in *The View from Nowhere*. I first attempt to reconcile the argument with one of the three doctrines in the earlier works. After failing, I am forced to conclude that, all appearances to the contrary, the

argument in this book is novel, and hence amounts to a fourth doctrine of absurdity. I then set out to explain this new doctrine. I first describe a particular argument, which one of Nagel's critics seems to think the book supports, but go on to argue that while there may be textual evidence for it, it is not Nagel's main argument. I then explain this main argument, which takes substantially more time to unfold than the others since it is much more subtle, involving an intricate theory of value that Nagel explains and defends over the course of several chapters. I conclude the chapter by evaluating the argument. I defend the position that, despite its being more compelling than the previous three doctrines, this fourth doctrine of absurdity is not compelling enough to persuade.

In chapter 6, the concluding chapter, I discuss what we have learned about human absurdity as the result of studying Nagel's works on the subject. Beyond the two general conclusions drawn directly from the previous five chapters—that the four arguments for absurdity which Nagel criticizes are still viable arguments and should be looked into further, and that Nagel himself has not shown our lives are absurd—I suggest, first of all, that having studied his works we learn more about the concept of absurdity. In particular, we learn (1) a touchstone for determining whether things other than our lives, such as propositions and sentences, are absurd; and (2) how absurdity is related to the concept of meaninglessness. I suggest, moreover, that we learn the general conditions which Nagel proposes are together sufficient to make our lives absurd are indeed sufficient (even though he does not establish that all of them are met). And I suggest that we might go on and try to think of other ways in which our lives meet these conditions. In closing, I outline one such way. Thus I end the dissertation suggesting how we might use some of Nagel's insights to construct a new doctrine of absurdity, a Nagelian doctrine, more plausible than his own.

Before turning to the first chapter, I perhaps should make one last remark, lest some readers think both Nagel and I do not take advantage of some polemic moves they believe are readily available to us. The remark is that Nagel is a (nonreductive) physicalist

and that I assume this metaphysical view in critically examining his arguments. Therefore, all of the views and arguments discussed in this work, both Nagel's and mine, should be understood in the context of a conception of a universe in which immaterial minds, a God, and an afterlife do not exist, that is, in which we humans are wholly biological creatures who, like all other creatures, eventually die and deteriorate.

Are our lives, so conceived, absurd? Here is what Thomas Nagel thinks, and what I think in response.

CHAPTER 1

"BAD ARGUMENTS" FOR ABSURDITY

Thinkers from antiquity to the present have claimed that most of a person's deeds will be forgotten soon after they occur, and that all of a person's deeds will be forgotten eventually. More generally, they have claimed that the effects of one's deeds, if not very short lived, are sure to diminish with time and at some point vanish without a trace. The author of Ecclesiastes, in the fourth or third century B.C., states: "The men of old are not remembered, and those who follow will not be remembered by those who follow them. . . . The wise man is remembered no longer than the fool, for, as the passing days multiply, all will be forgotten." In the nineteenth century, Leo Tolstoy, after having reflected on these ancient words, reaffirms them: "My deeds, whatever they may be, will be forgotten sooner or later, and I myself will be no more." Bertrand Russell, in 1903, makes the same basic claim, and indicates as well *why* the effects of our actions are sure to vanish: "All the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and the whole temple of man's achievements must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins." And seven decades later Richard Taylor, perhaps even more eloquently than Russell, writes:

> We toil after goals, most of them—indeed every single one of them—of transitory significance and, having gained one of them, we immediately set forth for the next, as if that one had never been, with this next one being essentially more of the same. . . . And if we think that, unlike Sisyphus, these labors do have a point, that they culminate in something lasting and, independently of our own deep interests in them, very worthwhile, then we simply have not considered the thing closely enough. . . . Our achievements, even though they are often beautiful, are mostly bubbles; and those that do last, like the sand-swept pyramids, soon become mere curiosities while around them the rest of mankind continues its perpetual toting of rocks, only to see them roll

> down. Nations are built upon the bones of their founders and pioneers, but only to decay and crumble before long, their rubble then becoming the foundation for others directed to exactly the same fate. The picture of Sisyphus is the picture of existence of the individual man, great or unknown, of nations, of the race of men, and of the very life of the world."[1]

On its face, the claim that we all shall be forgotten and that all of the effects of our actions will dissipate, most of them very quickly, is both plausible and unsettling. We look at the names on our family trees and all but those at the tips of the branches are to us nothing more than that: names. Our great grandparents mean very little if anything to us, and those before them nothing at all. Similarly, we shall hardly mean a thing to our great grandchildren, and nothing to their contemporaries and everyone else after that time, including our own descendants. If this is indeed what will come of us, then why on earth do we go on leading busy, hectic, goal-oriented lives? This kind of life seems silly if we and our deeds will be forgotten. In the words of Tolstoy, our lives seem like "some kind of stupid and evil practical joke." They seem absurd.

In the first section of his essay "The Absurd," Thomas Nagel suggests that many people not only accept the claim that all of a person's deeds will be forgotten, but also infer from it, as the great Russian novelist apparently did at a point in his life, that their lives are absurd. Nagel then proceeds to show just why, despite its common appeal, the inference is a bad one. In fact, before he sets out his own argument for the absurdity of human existence, Nagel briefly explains and criticizes a total of four so called "standard arguments for absurdity." He judges all of them "patently inadequate" and insists "they *could* not really explain why life is absurd."[2] In this chapter I want to critically discuss

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[1]Eccles. 1: 11, 2: 16 NEB. Leo Tolstoy, *Confession*, trans. and intro. David Patterson (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1983), 30. Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship" in *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), quoted in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E. D. Klemke (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 56. Richard Taylor, "The Meaning of Life," in *Good and Evil* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1970), quoted in Klemke, 146.

[2]Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," *The Journal of Philosophy* 68 (October 1971): 716. Reprinted in Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 11. Also reprinted in E.D. Klemke, ed., *The Meaning of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 151; and Jonathan

Nagel's objections to the argument for absurdity sketched above, and his objections to the other three arguments as well. I shall try to show that none of the objections succeeds and that all four arguments therefore warrant further examination.

Million Years Argument

I shall begin with the argument sketched above, which for convenience I shall refer to as the Million Years Argument. Here is how Nagel presents it:

1. Nothing we do now will matter in a million years.
2. Therefore, our lives are absurd.[3]

Before turning to Nagel's criticisms of the argument, I want to make a few comments about his particular formulation of it. To begin, his formulation taken at face value states only that people who exist now lead absurd lives. It is clear, however, that the subject 'we' in the formulation refers to all human beings, past, present, and future. If it did not, but referred only to those of us who are alive in this latter part of the twentieth century, the argument would not be an argument for the absurdity of human existence *as such*, which of course denotes all human beings. Similarly, the first time reference 'now' does not refer only to the latter part of the twentieth century, but to any given point in time. Thus Nagel's formulation of the argument just as easily could have read, and perhaps more exactly should have read:

1. Nothing *a person* does at *a particular point in time* will matter a million years *from that time*.
2. Therefore, *human existence* is absurd.

Just the same, the second time reference 'a million years' is not special either. One could replace a million years with, say, 13,567,024 years, or even a mere three hundred thousand, and the force of the argument may well remain the same. What seems to be

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Westphal and Carl Levenson, eds., *Life and Death* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 86. Hereafter all page numbers refer to *Mortal Questions*.

[3]Ibid., 11.

important is that the interval between one's present actions and the future time is such that the effects of these actions are blotted out before that future time, or at least are insignificant at and forever after that time. In fact, the argument's defenders could do away with a reference to a specific time altogether and simply state that a person's actions will at some time become insignificant, or as the popular phrase goes "eventually amount to nothing," insofar as their effects will at some point cease to make a difference.

Finally, the argument as Nagel presents it appears to be an enthymeme. That is, it seems he has left at least one premiss implicit, for it is quite a logical leap to go from the proposition that nothing we do now will matter in a million years to the proposition that our lives are absurd. Perhaps none of our actions will matter in a million years. So what? Why would this fact, if it is one, make our lives absurd? It stands to reason that if the Million Years Argument is really an argument which many people advance in one form or another, then at least one other premiss must be a part of it, one which narrows the wide gap between the conclusion and the one premise Nagel states. What might that connecting premiss be?

Nagel does not immediately address this question. The reason might have to do with his thinking the logic of the first premiss already gives him enough ammunition to stop the argument dead in its tracks. In what seems to amount to a preemptive strike on the Million Years Argument, Nagel writes:

> But if that [nothing we do now will matter in a million years] is true, then by the same token, nothing that will be the case in a million years matters now. In particular, it does not matter now that in a million years nothing we do now will matter. [And anything that does not matter to us now certainly cannot make our lives absurd.][4]

If this refutation is not tongue-twisting, it is at least a little difficult to keep straight, so putting it in standard form might be helpful:

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[4]Ibid., 11.

1. If nothing we do now will matter in a million years, then (by the same token) nothing that will be the case in a million years matters now.
2. If nothing that will be the case in a million years matters now, then it does not matter now that in a million years nothing we do now will matter.
3. Nothing we do now will matter in a million years.
4. Therefore, it does not matter now that in a million years nothing we do now will matter. (And anything that does not matter to us now certainly cannot make our lives absurd).

The basic idea of the refutation seems to be this. Since all our actions, and in particular those we deem important, will not have any significant effect on the world in a million years, we would be senseless to concern ourselves with anything that will be the case at that distant time. Among the things that will be the case in a million years is *the fact that our actions now (around the twentieth century) do not matter*. Therefore, we do not have any reason to concern ourselves with this fact now. And any fact that is of no concern of ours cannot make our lives absurd.

While I find Nagel's refutation ingenious, I think it is flawed. The first premiss appears to be false. Consider the fact that many things which will be the case in a million years are the case now, were the case ten thousand years ago, and will be the case thirteen days from today. Indeed, many things that will be the case a million years from now have always been, and will always be, the case. Clear and uncontroversial examples are conceptual and mathematical truths. In a million years, it will be the case that all bachelors are unmarried adult males and that $2 + 2 = 4$. But these propositions are true at all times, past, present, and future. Their truth value supervenes on all time periods.

Consider next the one thing that will be the case in a million years which Nagel believes ultimately undermines the Million Years Argument: the fact that none of our actions (around the twentieth century) matters. According to Nagel, since nothing now will matter then, nothing then could matter now, including the fact that none of our actions now matters then. However, Nagel fails to see that if it is indeed true that in a million years none of our actions will matter, then this truth, like conceptual and mathematical truths, obtains now too. It is true today, as it will be true a million years

from today, that nothing we do now matters then. But if the proposition that nothing we do now matters then is true both today and in a million years, then the antecedent of the first premiss of the refutation (nothing we do now will matter in a million years) only implies that the *one instance of the proposition a million years from now* could not matter to us; it does not show that the *instance of the proposition today* does not matter to us, let alone could not matter to us. That is to say, it is still an open question whether the present instance of the proposition matters to us. Some people, perhaps many, apparently believe that this instance of the proposition does matter now—and its doing so is precisely what makes their lives, all of our lives, absurd. In sum, the consequent of the first premiss of the refutation (nothing that will be the case in a million years matters now) is not implied by the antecedent (nothing we do now will matter in a million years), and hence the refutation as it stands is not sound.[5]

Immediately after his first refutation of the Million Years Argument, Nagel offers a second refutation, which, as we shall see, turns out to be better than the first. He argues:

> Even if what we did now *were* going to matter in a million years, how could that keep our present concerns from being absurd? If their mattering now is not enough to accomplish that, how would it help if they mattered a million years from now?
>
> Whether what we do now will matter in a million years could make the crucial difference only if its mattering in a million years depended on its mattering, period. But then to deny that whatever happens now will matter in a million years is to beg the question against its mattering, period; for in that sense one cannot know that it will not matter in a million years whether (for example) someone now is happy or miserable, without knowing that it does not matter, period.[6]

To understand this refutation properly, we need first to recognize and keep in mind three key concepts: our actions that matter now, our actions that matter in a million years,

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[5]It is surprising Nagel overlooked this objection in view of his earlier defense of tenseless truths in the first book he wrote. See Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 58–76.

[6]Nagel, "The Absurd," 11.

and our actions that matter, period. The term 'matter' appears in all three concepts, and since Nagel does not specify otherwise, we can only assume he means the same thing in each case, which seems to be 'importance.' Thus when he speaks of our actions mattering now, he means they are important now; when he speaks of them mattering in a million years, he means they are important then; and when he speaks of them mattering, period, he means they are important, period.[7] As for the term 'matter(ing), period,' Nagel probably has in mind 'objectively important,' that is, important without regard to time, place, or what anyone thinks.

Now then, earlier I asked about possible suppressed premisses that allow the Million Years Argument to move logically from the one explicit premiss (nothing we do now will matter in a million years) to the conclusion (our lives are absurd). In the second refutation, Nagel in effect adds premisses to the argument. He seems to think, as is reflected in the above passage, that the argument's proponents assume three things: (1) that our actions' being objectively important (i.e., mattering, period) is necessary and sufficient to keep our lives from being absurd; (2) that our actions' being important now (i.e., mattering now) but not in a million years is not sufficient for their being objectively important (and hence would not keep our lives from being absurd); and (3) that our actions' being important in a million years (i.e., mattering in a million years) is at least necessary for their being objectively important (and hence may keep our lives from being absurd). Given Nagel is correct, the Million Years Argument becomes:

1. If our lives are not absurd, then our actions are objectively important.
2. If our actions are objectively important, then they will be important in a million years.
3. Our actions will not be important in a million years.
4. Therefore, our lives are absurd.

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[7]One might propose that by 'matter' Nagel consistently means 'has an impact.' However, that is doubtful, for it is hard to make any sense of the expression 'our actions have an impact, period.'

As it turns out, Nagel in the second refutation exploits the new second premiss (or the third assumption stated above the argument). He believes this premiss is false and consequently the argument is unsound. First, he assumes with (supposedly) the proponents of the Million Years Argument that our actions' being important now is not sufficient for their being objectively important, that something else is required to make them objectively important. Then he asks rhetorically how our actions' being important in a million years could be that something. Let actions$_1$ be those actions of ours that are important now but will *not* be important in a million years. Let actions$_2$ be our actions that are important now and *will* be important in a million years. Why would actions$_2$ be objectively important, but not actions$_1$? How could our actions' being important in a million years save them from being objectively unimportant, if their being important only now is not enough to save them from being objectively unimportant? Why, in other words, does their being important down the road make the crucial difference? Nagel seems to finish off the Million Years Argument when in the second paragraph of the refutation he brings to our attention the fact that if our actions were to be important in a million years, that would *already presuppose* they are objectively important. The truth of this claim is clear, he would say, when we consider that if our actions were not objectively important, then they could not be important at any time, not now, not in a million years. Therefore, our actions' being important in a million years certainly is not a necessary condition of their being objectively important.

Defenders of the Million Years Argument might respond by insisting that Nagel distorts their argument insofar as he defines the term 'matter' as 'importance' wherever it is used. They may insist that the term in fact only means 'importance' in the locution 'matter, period.' In the locutions 'matter now' and 'matter in a million years,' it means 'has an impact' or 'makes a difference.' Thus to say of our actions that they *matter, period*, is to say that they are *objectively important*. But to say of them that they *matter now* is to say that they *have an impact now* (or *make a difference now*), and to say they

will *matter in a million years* is to say that they will *have an impact then* (or *make a difference then*).[8] The real dialectic of the Million Years Argument, then, is that since none of our actions will have a bearing on what happens in a million years, such actions do not objectively matter, and hence our lives are absurd. In standard form:

1. If our lives are not absurd, then our actions are objectively important.
2. If our actions are objectively important, then they will *have an impact* in a million years.
3. Our actions will not *have an impact* in a million years.
4. Therefore, our lives are absurd.

In Nagel's formulation of the argument (in particular, the second premiss), (a) our actions' being objectively important depends on (b) our actions' being important in a million years. Nagel in effect points out that this dependency relation is backwards: '(a)' does not depend on '(b)'; rather '(b)' depends on '(a).' If '(a)' were to depend on '(b),' then it would be logically possible that our actions will be important in a million years, even though they are not objectively important—which is absurd. The Million Years Argument fails, Nagel concludes, due to this confusion regarding dependency. However, what the objection to this refutation points out is that Nagel is wrong to think the argument hinges on the premiss that '(a)' depends on '(b).' Instead, it hinges on the premiss that '(a)' depends on *(c) our actions having an impact in a million years*. And there is nothing backwards about this dependency relation. There is nothing absurd about the logical possibility that our actions will causally influence what will happen in a million years, even though they are not objectively important. This possibility makes perfect sense.

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[8] I think there is a common sense in which the two expressions 'has an impact' and 'makes a difference' are synonymous, which is why I include both of them here. However, hereafter I shall only use 'has an impact' because I think 'makes a difference' can mean 'importance' too, as I believe it does in the following question, which does not appear to be vacuous: Does it make a difference whether Diemer writes a book when her doing so will have no impact on the world? As for the expression 'has an impact,' I take it to mean roughly 'is causally efficacious.' So to say that my actions will have an impact in a million years, is to say roughly that they will causally influence what happens at that time.

Still, Nagel may question whether our actions' having an impact long after they take place, such as in a million years, is really a necessary condition of their being objectively important, or their mattering, period. That is, he might accept the reformulation of the Million Years Argument that its defenders may insist upon, and yet ask the same rhetorical questions that in part made up his original refutation: "Even if what we did now *were* going to matter [have an impact] in a million years, how could that keep our present concerns from being absurd? If their mattering [having an impact] now is not enough to accomplish that, how would it help if they mattered [had an impact] a million years from now?" To this Nagel might add: that a number of Bosnian Muslims are tortured by Serbian soldiers today may not causally effect what occurs in a million years, or even a hundred years, but it still might be objectively important.

I think this response to the objection does place the onus on the defenders of the Million Years Argument to explain exactly why our actions' having an impact long after we are dead is what is necessary to make these actions objectively important, and hence perhaps to keep our lives from being absurd. In fact, I think the argument's defenders really have their work cut out for them if they are committed to arguing, for example, that the Serbian acts of torture mentioned above are unimportant unless they will make a lasting impact on the world. It looks as if, then, Nagel's refutation succeeds after all.

However, we need to ask whether the proponents of the Million Years Argument are in fact committed to arguing that '*all* actions are objectively important only if the actions will make a lasting impact on the world'? It seems the argument's defenders might agree that actions of certain kinds are objectively important whether or not their effects on the world endure, but insist that actions of other kinds are objectively important only if their effects do endure. The formulation of the argument reflecting this suggestion would be:

1. If our lives are not absurd, then *certain actions of ours* are objectively important.
2. If *certain actions of ours* are objectively important, then they will have an impact on what happens in a million years.
3. *Certain actions of ours* will not have an impact on what happens in a million years.
4. Therefore, our lives are absurd.[9]

I can imagine the proponents of the Million Years Argument defending the new second premiss by arguing in the following manner.[10] If the objective importance of actions of certain kinds had nothing to do with making an enduring impact on the world, then the question of whether the accomplishment of a task will make such an impact would be irrelevant in judging whether one should take up the task in the first place. However, we usually regard such a question relevant, and often one that will determine whether we take up the task. For example, this spring Sam, the manager of a high-rise apartment complex, does not enlist his workers to wash the windows of the complex, even though he instructed them to do this every previous spring since he has worked there. He does not have them wash the windows this year because the city has recently condemned the building, and all tenants must be out of their apartments by July. Sam reasons: "It wouldn't make much difference if we went ahead and washed the windows now, since the

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[9]Interestingly, Nagel sixteen years later, in *What Does It All Mean*, presents a version of the Million Years Argument that reflects the principal change made in this reformulation and that made in the previous one. Referring to the argument, he writes: "The idea seems to be that we are in some kind of rat race, struggling to achieve our goals and make something of our lives, but that this makes sense only if those achievements will be permanent. But they won't be. Even if you produce a great work of literature which continues to be read thousands of years from now, eventually the solar system will cool or the universe will wind down or collapse, and all trace of your efforts will vanish. In any case, we can't hope for even a fraction of this sort of immortality." Here Nagel speaks specifically of our "goals" and "achievements," and uses as an example a "work of literature." He does not speak of *all* our actions and does not seem to mean all of them. Moreover, he suggests that a necessary condition of these goals or achievements making sense is that they have at least a "fraction . . . of immortality," which is, I think, quite similar to 'having a lasting impact.' Thomas Nagel, *What Does It All Mean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 96.

[10]The first premiss is a new, and bolder, one too, and hence in need of support. While I believe it is a defensible premiss, I shall not sketch here what I think a defense would look like.

renters would only benefit from the clean windows for a few weeks." Sam thinks washing the windows now is unimportant because doing so will not have a lasting effect.

As it turns out, Sam has a sister named Sally who is a novelist and who has recently been abducted by men from a radical religious sect who have been offended by her books. Sally, with the nearly completed manuscript of her next book in hand, is being held in a basement room, and she has been told by her abductors that in two weeks, on a religiously symbolic day for them, they will have to kill her and destroy the manuscript, but that she can go right ahead and finish it, seeing that no one will ever read it. Sally is convinced the religious fanatics are insane and that they will kill her, and when left alone for the first time, she contemplates whether she should finish the book. She reasons: "My completing this book would not be important because as soon as I do so the book will be destroyed; the finished manuscript will not have a chance to make any lasting impact on the world, so there is no sense in putting pen to paper."

Why do painters and other artists devote themselves to their work? Why do filmmakers, actors, poets, novelists, essayists, politicians, teachers, and scientists devote themselves to their work? To survive, to get instant gratification, to be famous—yes, all of these answers are generally true. However, in many cases there lies another, more fundamental motivation: to make a lasting impact on the world. It seems to be a matter of fact that people, rightly or wrongly, associate the importance of their lives with having a lasting effect on the world. Many people would claim that Aristotle and Jesus and Darwin and Einstein were all great men, that their lives were really important. What is the basis of such a claim? The answer appears to be the fact that each of these men has made a big difference.

I think the two contrived examples involving Sam and Sally, the statement concerning what motivates many people to do the work they do, and the rationale for the claim about the famous men do not establish that the objective importance of actions of certain kinds is determined by whether they will have a lasting impact on the world.

Nevertheless, I do believe they suggest that we, as a matter of fact, often determine whether actions are objectively important by asking if they will have such an impact. If so, then it is not obvious (contrary to what Nagel believes as indicated by his rhetorical questions in the refutation) that the objective importance of all actions is not determined by whether they will have an impact on the world for a long time. It may turn out in the end that the Million Years Argument does not establish that human life is absurd, but what Nagel writes in "The Absurd" is not enough to undermine it.

Size and Time Arguments

The second and third arguments for absurdity that Nagel criticizes involve size and time respectively. In my estimation, both arguments withstand his objections, at least as far as these objections go. Here are the two arguments along with the objections:

> What we say to convey the absurdity of our lives often has to do with space or time: we are tiny specks in the infinite vastness of the universe; our lives are mere instants even on a geological time scale, let alone a cosmic one; we will all be dead any minute. But of course none of these evident facts can be what *makes* life absurd, if it is absurd. 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? And if our lives are absurd given our present size, why would they be any less absurd if we filled the universe (either because we were larger or because the universe was smaller)?[11]

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[11]Nagel, "The Absurd," 11–12. Years later in "Birth, Death, and the Meaning of Life," Nagel writes: "But taken far enough, . . . [the objective view] will undermine . . . [subjective, everyday] aims: to see myself objectively as a small, contingent, and exceedingly temporary organic bubble in the universal soup produces an attitude approaching indifference." It would appear Nagel here is contradicting his view in "The Absurd"; however, in the next paragraph in "Birth, Death, and the Meaning of Life," he states: "Some of the attitudes that lead to these conflicts [between the subjective and objective views] may be mistaken. . . ." While Nagel does not specify the particular mistaken attitudes, I think we can assume that he means attitudes concerning our small size and short life span and hence that his positions in the two essays are the same. Steven Luper-Foy, one of Nagel's critics, agrees. Also, Luper-Foy believes Nagel's objections to the two arguments for absurdity are right on the mark. Luper-Foy expresses the objections in this way: "Yet our size and longevity cannot really make us absurd. For if we thought of ourselves as small absurd creatures, wouldn't a great increase in our size simply lead us to think of ourselves as gigantic absurd creatures?" While Luper-Foy's rhetorical question only concerns our size, we can charitably insert for him a similar rhetorical question having to do with longevity, which no doubt he has in mind: "For if we thought of ourselves as short-living absurd creatures, wouldn't a great increase in our life span simply lead us to think of ourselves as long-living absurd creatures?" Thomas Nagel, "Birth, Death, and the Meaning of Life," in *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986),

To refute the Size Argument, Nagel constructs a simple *reductio ad absurdum* argument. He assumes the truth of the Size Argument's major claim (our present size makes our lives absurd) and infers from it the obviously false claim that if we were bigger our lives would no longer be absurd, or at least would be less so. (It is obviously false that our lives would lose their absurdity, if we suddenly grew five, ten, forty, one thousand, or any number of feet.) Of course if the major claim of the Size Argument implies a proposition that is obviously false, the major claim itself must be false. Therefore, Nagel concludes, if our lives are in some way fundamentally absurd, the reason cannot be that none of us is over eight feet tall.

While I shall stop short of arguing that the claim 'if we were bigger our lives would no longer be absurd' is true, I do want to argue that the claim is not obviously false, and that hence Nagel's simple *reductio* as it stands is wanting.[12] In making my case, I would like, first, to point out why the claim at issue may *appear* obviously false. Two principal reasons come to mind, which concern forms of inference we may naturally and unwittingly use to reach our verdict.

The first form of inference involves a kind of mathematical reasoning. Multiplying zero by any number, no matter how high, of course gets us nothing more than zero. Similarly, multiplying zero significance to our lives, at between two and eight feet, by any number of feet still gets us zero significance. In mathematical notation: 0 (significance at 5'8") × 8,000 (feet tall) = 0 (significance). We conclude by this mathematical reasoning that if in fact our lives have no significance (and hence are absurd), then our present size cannot be what makes the crucial difference.

The second form of inference we might use to reach the *reductio* verdict involves generalizing from an instance or a few instances. We imagine ourselves two or three or

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210. Steven Luper-Foy, "The Absurdity of Life," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52 (March 1992): 86.

[12]For the basic point of the following objection, I am indebted to Win Wilkinson.

four feet taller than we are and infer that since it is ridiculous to think our lives would lose their absurdity if we stood a few feet taller (granting they are absurd now), the general claim that 'if we were bigger our lives would no longer be absurd' must be false. Once again we conclude that our present size cannot be what makes our lives absurd if in fact they are absurd.

Regarding the first form of inference, I want to suggest that using mathematical reasoning against the Size Argument is arbitrary, and hence inappropriate. It seems the Size Argument is comprised of two major claims: (1) our lives would be significant were we greater in size; and (2) if our lives were significant, they would not be fundamentally absurd. Now we certainly guarantee the falsity of claim '(1)' by multiplying our present zero significance at, say, six feet by any number of feet greater than that. However, there is no independent justification for using multiplication. Doing so is in fact as arbitrary as using addition instead, which conversely may appear to support the *truth* of claim '(1)': 0 (significance at 5'8") + 8,000 (feet tall) = 8,000 (significance). In sum, while we may be tempted to use a mathematical function in association with the Size Argument insofar as the argument itself has to do with numbers, using such a function, either to make or to break the argument, is fallacious.

Equally erroneous is the second form of inference. In this inference (whereby we infer from the claim that 'growing a few feet would not add a lick of significance to our lives' the more general claim that 'growing *any* number of feet would not make our lives any less insignificant'), we generalize too hastily. If our inference is to be at all cogent, we need to consider instances that are dissimilar—or at the very least one instance that is radically dissimilar—to the homogeneous ones on which we have focused our attention.

What, then, do we observe when we go ahead and consider dissimilar instances? With this question, we have, I think, arrived at the crux of the merit of Nagel's *reductio* against the Size Argument. Is it still patently false that our lives would be less insignificant were we to grow as tall as, say, the Eiffel Tower? Without relying on either of the two

fallacious inferences above, we might still be tempted, I suppose, to answer in the affirmative. "Nine hundred eighty-four feet tall—so what? If my life is absurd now, it would be just the same at that height." But would it really? Consider again one of the major claims of the Million Years Argument: that a sufficient condition of a person's life being significant is this person's making a lasting impact on the world. Now if this claim is true, then it is not at all obviously false that our lives would be less insignificant were we to grow as tall as the Eiffel Tower. Imagine what you could do towering at 984 feet, what impact you could have on the world! And let us not stop at a modest 984 feet in our imagination. Let us take up Nagel's suggestion in the last sentence of the passage quoted above and have you "fill the universe." At this size moving mountains would be for you mere child's play. It goes without saying that you, spanner of the universe, could make quite a lasting impact on the world.

Of course I have not just made a case for the Size Argument. To do that, I would need to support the two controversial claims on which the argument I have made depends: (1) a sufficient condition of a person's life being significant is this person's making a lasting impact on the world; and (2) a person's life being significant prevents it from being fundamentally absurd. However, my intent was not to establish the soundness of the Size Argument; it was only to make a case against Nagel's offhand dismissal of it. If our lives are not fundamentally absurd so long as they are significant, and if our lives are significant so long as we make an enduring impression on the world, then our relatively small size may indeed be what makes our lives absurd, or at least contributes to their being absurd. Before he is justified in dismissing the Size Argument, Nagel needs to show that one of these two claims is probably false.

The other argument, which I shall refer to as the Time Argument, similarly does not go down as easily as Nagel thinks it does. Nagel again employs a *reductio ad absurdum* argument: he uses the Time Argument's conclusion (our finite life span makes our lives absurd) as a premiss and deduces the conclusion that if we were immortal, that

would eliminate, or at least mitigate, the absurdity in our lives. Again, Nagel takes the conclusion to be obviously false, asking rhetorically: "Would not a life that is absurd if it lasts seventy years be infinitely absurd if it lasted through eternity?" It is tempting to go along with Nagel and answer "yes," just as it is easy to think that a manic depressive's depression would become everlasting if he became immortal. However, if we stop to think about the manic depressive, we might see that if his awareness of his finitude is what causes his lifelong despair, then it does not follow that his depression would be everlasting if he became everlasting. Immortal, and cognizant of this fact, his depression might well end then and there. Similarly, if it is our mortality that makes our lives absurd (or at least significantly contributes to their absurdity), then Nagel is quite incorrect in stating that our lives would be "infinitely absurd if [we] lasted through eternity." Before his refutation will succeed, he needs to establish that our finitude does not make our finite lives absurd, contrary to what many people may believe. Consequently, the Time Argument remains standing.

Death Argument

The fourth and final "patently inadequate" argument Nagel discusses just so happens to be an argument that explicitly attributes the absurdity of our lives to our mortality. Thus if Nagel can refute this argument, and it is the best argument linking absurdity to death, then his criticism of the Time Argument will be as good as gold. I shall call the final argument the Death Argument, and here it is, first in Nagel's own words and then in standard form:

> Because we are going to die, all chains of justification must leave off in mid-air: one studies and works to earn money to pay for clothing, housing, entertainment, food, to sustain oneself from year to year, perhaps to support a family and pursue a career—but to what final end? All of it is an elaborate journey leading nowhere.[13]

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[13]Nagel, "The Absurd," 12.

1. If something precludes all the actions to which we commit ourselves day in and day out from being worthwhile, or justified, then we can appropriately describe our existence as going nowhere, and hence absurd.
2. Something—namely, our dying—does preclude all the actions to which we commit ourselves day in and day out from being worthwhile.
3. Therefore, we can appropriately describe our existence as absurd.

Now to refute this argument, we need only come up with one action whose doing is worthwhile, or "justified," despite the inevitable onslaught of death. And this is precisely one of the two moves Nagel makes against the argument. In fact, he presents more than one worthwhile action: notwithstanding our mortality, it is worthwhile to take aspirin when we have a headache, to go see an appealing art exhibit, to prevent a little boy or girl from putting his or her hand on a hot stove. The reasons it takes to justify these actions do not conflict with the fact of our mortality. We take aspirin to relieve a headache; we attend the art exhibit because it gives us pleasure; we grab the child's arm before it touches the burner because we care about the well-being of children. These reasons simply reflect the kind of creature we are, and they themselves are sufficient to justify the actions. Contrary to what the defenders of the Death Argument believe, no further reasons are needed to justify these reasons, and hence to justify the actions. In Nagel's words: "Chains of justification come repeatedly to an end within life."[14]

I find this refutation of the Death Argument plausible—but only as Nagel's own interpretation of the argument goes, which I think represents a version of the argument that is significantly weaker than another he might have presented. When in the passage above Nagel attributes to the proponents of the argument the claim that "*all* chains of justification must leave off in mid-air" (my italics), that is tantamount to characterizing these people as committed to the view that none of our actions is intrinsically worthwhile. For if some of our actions were intrinsically worthwhile, then by definition they would

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[14]Ibid., 12. The claim that justifications legitimately come to an end within life seems to contradict a claim Nagel later makes in "The Absurd," one on which his own doctrine of absurdity hinges. In fact, one of Nagel's critics uses the claim that justifications legitimately come to an end within life against Nagel's doctrine of absurdity. I shall take up this issue in chapter 3.

demand no justification outside themselves, and the premiss that death precludes *all* actions from being worthwhile (the second premiss of the argument above) clearly would be false. However, it seems the proponents of the Death Argument can agree with Nagel that some of our actions are intrinsically worthwhile and still run their argument. They would argue that death leaves enough of our actions *that are not intrinsically worthwhile* unjustified so as to render our lives absurd.

What might these actions be? Interestingly, Nagel mentions some good candidates in presenting his version of the Death Argument: "studying and working to pay for clothing, housing, entertainment, food, to sustain oneself from year to year, perhaps to support a family and pursue a career." Indeed, we spend much of our childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood in school working to prepare ourselves for more work, for at least a forty-hour work week that will characterize much of the rest of our lives. (And never mind the drudgery: the continual grocery shopping and the dishes and the laundry and the yard work.) Now what does all *this* work give us? It perhaps enables us to enjoy some intrinsically worthwhile activities. However, with the exception of a small minority of us, most of the money we trade for our labor we use merely to sustain ourselves from day to day. With this money we buy things that are not intrinsically worthwhile, such as food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and health care. After forty or so years at our jobs we might be able to stop working and enjoy ourselves; but, alas, at this time our minds and bodies begin to degenerate, and we shall only enjoy a relatively short period of time before death denies us any more reward for our years and years of nearly ceaseless toil. Yes, we may at first think most of our actions that are not intrinsically worthwhile are worth doing. "Hard work often pays off," we say. However, if we do not limit our perspective to the short term but instead look further, we see that death plucks the fruits of our labor off the tree of life before they are ripe. In viewing the typical mortal human life and life span, we cannot help but judge that hard work does not

pay off, or so say the defenders of this version of the Death Argument. And they conclude that this cold fact makes human existence absurd.

While this second version of the Death Argument is certainly open to criticism, I think it is far more plausible than Nagel's version of the argument, if only because it is more modest than his version. Since, then, he does not address the stronger of the two, he has not in my estimation refuted the Death Argument.

Nagel does add another refutation to his case against the Death Argument, but its strength, like the first, extends only as far as his weak version of the argument. He writes: "Through its misrepresentation of the process of justification, the argument makes a vacuous demand. It insists that the reasons available within life are incomplete, but suggests thereby that all reasons that come to an end are incomplete. This makes it impossible to supply any reasons at all."[15] That is to say, if the Death Argument's proponents claim, as they seem to, that a "finite chain of reasons cannot justify anything," they would seem also to claim that activities can be justified by something outside themselves. Otherwise, why would they find death crucial? However, if they claim that an activity can be justified by something outside itself, and demand that it must be, then the claim is false and the demand "vacuous." For if everything that is justified must be justified by something outside itself, then an infinite regress of justifications results, and an infinite regress of justifications justifies nothing. In short, the defenders of the Death Argument imply a condition of justification that actually rules out the possibility of justification altogether, rendering that condition, and the argument itself, incoherent.[16]

But why, we might ask Nagel, does their insisting that "the reasons available within life are incomplete" suggest that they think "all reasons that come to an end are incomplete"? We need not attribute to the proponents of the Death Argument the claim

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[15]Ibid., 13.

[16]Ibid., 12–13.

that *a finite chain of reasons cannot justify anything* (a claim that would strongly suggest they believe an infinite chain would justify, given the fact that they think death is important). We need only attribute to them the claim that *the particular finite chains of justification within a human life* cannot justify anything, or the even more modest claim that reflects the second version of the argument I gave above: that *the particular finite chains of justification within a human life* are not enough to justify *that life*. Neither of these two claims suggests the proponents of the Death Argument think that an infinite chain would justify; and if they do not think that, their argument avoids the incoherence that Nagel attributes to it.

Conclusion

I have tried to show that Nagel's refutations of the so called standard arguments for human absurdity do not succeed as they stand. The first refutation of the Million Years Argument fails because Nagel does not recognize that there are timeless facts. And although successful in burden shifting, the second refutation of the Million Years Argument does not undermine it. The refutation of the Size Argument completely ignores two plausible claims that, if true, would make the argument formidable, that a life is significant if it makes a lasting impact on the world and that a significant life escapes being a fundamentally absurd one. Consequently, Nagel's curt dismissal of the argument is unwarranted. As for the refutation of the Time Argument, it fails because it depends on a major claim Nagel does not support: that our dying cannot make our lives absurd. Finally, the refutation of the Death Argument gives Nagel a chance to support the major claim behind the refutation of the Time Argument (and hence perhaps make that refutation plausible), but he squanders the opportunity by presenting a weak version of the Death Argument.

Does, then, the eventual inconsequentiality of our actions make our lives absurd? Does our relatively puny size? Our short life span? Our mortality? Does one of these

things at least contribute to the absurdity of our lives? While I do not think my case against Nagel's refutations of the Million Years Argument, the Size Argument, the Time Argument, and the Death Argument gives us reason to believe the answer to any of the questions is "yes," I do think it gives us reason to believe the questions are good ones—much better, anyway, than Nagel makes them out to be. If so, the four arguments for absurdity warrant further investigation.

CHAPTER 2

THE FIRST DOCTRINE

Nagel, as we have seen, believes the Million Years Argument, the Size Argument, the Time Argument, and the Death Argument all fail to establish that human existence is absurd. However, after having shown why these arguments do not succeed, he goes on to state in "The Absurd" that they do "attempt to express something that is difficult to state, but fundamentally correct." The alleged facts of human existence on which the bad arguments turn, Nagel tells us, stand out as the result of stepping back and viewing our lives far removed from them. From a detached and distant viewpoint, we human beings look puny, our life spans very short, and our deeds insignificant—indeed human existence as a whole looks puny, short, and insignificant. Now while the absurdity of human existence cannot be inferred from any one of these particular observations, it can in part be inferred from another observation from this viewpoint. Nagel concludes that though incorrectly articulated, the absurdity the defenders of the bad arguments feel is both real and justified.[1] He then sets out what he takes to be the proper expression of this feeling, the correct doctrine of absurdity. The purpose of this chapter is to unfold, and then evaluate, this doctrine.

The Doctrine at a Glance

In making his case for the absurdity of our lives, Nagel begins by establishing what in general terms would have to be true for human existence to be absurd. To this end, he

[1]Nagel, "The Absurd," 13, 21.

first draws our attention away from our lives as such and turns it to particular situations within our lives that we are apt to call absurd: "someone 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." According to Nagel, these situations are absurd precisely because they involve a "conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality."[2] Nagel unfortunately does not elaborate here, but I think we can make a good guess as to what he has in mind. To begin, we should recognize that the term 'pretension' has two connotations, one expressed by 'pretentiousness' and the other 'allegation.' To be pretentious is to make a claim, either implicitly or explicitly, "to some distinction, importance, dignity, or excellence." To allege is simply "to assert without proof."[3] Now given the nature of the examples, Nagel by pretension probably means pretentiousness. The speechgiver, the board members of the philanthropic foundation, the lover, and the knight all believe and act as if they are participants of what are commonly regarded as situations of some distinction, importance, dignity, or excellence. More simply, we might say, each person believes and acts as if he or she is a participant in what is commonly regarded as a *sensible* and *serious* type of situation. This is the pretension. However, some aspect of each situation prevents it from being a true instance of that sensible and serious type of situation: the motion has already been passed; the president-elect is a notorious criminal; the voice on the other end of the line is a recording; the knight loses his trousers. This is the reality. Consequently, each situation involves a discrepancy between pretension and reality.[4]

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[2]Ibid., 13.

[3]*Webster's New World Dictionary*, 3d college ed.

[4]This explanation of the quotation seems to reflect the following statement Nagel makes later in the essay: "In ordinary life, to be sure, we do not judge a situation absurd unless we have in mind some standards of seriousness, significance, or harmony with which the [situation we judge] absurd can be contrasted" (Nagel, "The Absurd," 18).

It is important to bear in mind that Nagel sees these situations as involving not just any discrepancy between pretension and reality, but a *conspicuous* one, and that only situations which involve a *conspicuous* discrepancy are absurd.[5] He again does not elaborate, but perhaps he would say that a discrepancy between pretension and reality is conspicuous whenever the aspect of a simulating situation that precludes it from being a token of the type of sensible and serious situation it simulates is so deviant that it makes the simulating situation a complete mockery of the serious and sensible type of situation, and so makes the simulating situation ridiculous. The speechgiver gives a passionate speech in support of a motion that has already been passed. That is absurd. Why? Because the situation is ridiculous. And it is ridiculous because it makes a complete mockery of an otherwise sensible and serious situation.

Nagel next turns to certain *lives* that are absurd. While he does not give any examples, he seems to be thinking here of the severely delusional or insane: a four-foot three-inch Tibetan woman who strives her whole life to play in the NBA; an American man who spends his life persuading other United States citizens to declare independence from Britain; the legendary Don Quixote. On Nagel's view, certain lives that are absurd are such for the same basic reason absurd situations are absurd: these lives involve a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality. He might say that just as absurd situations are mockeries of sensible and serious situations, these lives pretend to be as sensible and serious as our own when in fact they are ridiculous.

Of course some absurd situations within lives, along with a small number of lives themselves which stand out as being absurd, do not make human existence *as such* absurd. Consequently, we need to distinguish the sense in which situations and some lives are absurd (what Nagel refers to as "conventional" absurdity) from another sense in which all

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[5]Terms that Nagel considers synonyms of 'conspicuous discrepancy' and that he uses in his texts are 'clash,' 'collision,' and 'contrast.' On occasion, I shall use them too.

our lives are absurd (what he calls "philosophical" absurdity). Lives are absurd conventionally when, according to Nagel, "it is usually possible to imagine some change [other than suicide] that would remove the absurdity." We could perhaps send the Tibetan woman and American man to psychotherapists and get them to abandon their life-long pursuits and take up reasonable ones as we have; and, to be sure, the speechgiver's absurd situation will end soon enough on its own, if not even sooner with the help of his colleagues. In contrast, when lives are absurd in the philosophical sense the absurdity is "universal" and "inescapable, short of escape from life itself."[6] Thus an appropriate example of a life that is absurd in this sense is *any* human life. It is this sense of absurdity, not the conventional sense, that Nagel reminds us he means when he argues that our lives are absurd.

However, Nagel does not discuss the conventional sense of absurdity only to contrast it with the philosophical sense and thereby clarify his object of inquiry. His initial aim in making his case, as I mentioned at the start, is to determine what in general would have to obtain for human existence to be absurd. By considering simple instances of conventional absurdity, he believes he arrives at what in general would make human existence absurd: a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality.[7] Now having to his satisfaction established this condition (as well as clarified his object of inquiry), Nagel is ready to state the central claim of his doctrine of absurdity:

> If there is a philosophical sense of absurdity, . . . it must arise from the perception of something universal—some respect in which pretension and reality inevitably clash for us all. This condition is supplied . . . by the collision between the

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[6]Ibid., 13.

[7]Although he does not think it is significant, Nagel does suggest one difference between the two senses of absurdity. With conventional absurdity there is a sensible and serious context with which to contrast the pretension, whereas with philosophical absurdity no such context "can be discovered" (Ibid., 18). I happen to think this difference is important and shall discuss it in detail later in the chapter.

> 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.[8]

The pretension is that we all take many things seriously, especially our own lives (that is, aspects of ourselves that define us: our deeds, personality, relationships, social standing, ethnicity, nationality, political and religious affiliation, and the like). The reality is that the seriousness of these things is arbitrary, or open to doubt. Such a discrepancy is conspicuous. Therefore, our lives are absurd. While this basic dialectic is pretty clear given the preceding discussion of conventional absurdity, much of its content needs to be fleshed out. I want to begin this task by making three general points about the doctrine, after which I shall explain it, and them, in more detail.

First, what Nagel here contends makes our lives absurd is not a clash between ourselves and the world. Our lives are not absurd because, say, we cannot help wanting and seeking a rational universe (pretension and aspiration within) when the universe is in fact dumb and disorderly (reality without), as Camus would have us believe.[9] No, "the absurdity of our situation derives not from a collision between our expectations and the world, but from a collision within ourselves."[10] In particular, it derives from the clash between *our propensity* to take things seriously and *our being aware* of the fact that the seriousness of these things is arbitrary, or open to doubt—both of which are within us.

Second, the fact that absurdity arises from a discrepancy within us implies two things. The first is that not only are our present lives absurd, but our lives in any other world would be absurd. If absurdity arises from a collision within us, no change outside

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[8]Ibid., 13.

[9]"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 is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world." Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus," in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 21. Camus devotes the entire essay to an articulation of the absurd and the proper response to it.

[10]Nagel, "The Absurd," 17.

us would make a difference. Even in a person-friendly Christian heaven our lives would be absurd. The second thing implied by the fact that absurdity arises from a discrepancy within us—specifically, from the clash between a certain propensity and a certain awareness—is that our lives would not be absurd if we did not have either the propensity or the awareness. As it turns out, ants and mice and other nonhuman animals enjoy immunity from absurdity. While they might appropriately be described as having a propensity to take things seriously,[11] they surely do not have the capacity to be aware that the seriousness of these things is arbitrary, or open to doubt. Hence their lives are not absurd.[12]

Third, the central claim quoted above unfortunately lends itself to two interpretations. These interpretations hinge on whether (1) we know only that we have no reason to believe there is anything to be serious about (a skeptical view) or (2) we know that there is nothing to be serious about (a bolder, nonskeptical view). While it may seem from the above passage that the first interpretation is the correct one, statements Nagel goes on to make in the essay appear to support the second interpretation. These statements focus on the *arbitrariness* of taking seriously the things we do and suggest that such arbitrariness means these things unquestionably are not appropriate objects of seriousness, rather than just being questionably serious. The apparent discrepancy here calls for a thorough examination, for the two interpretations represent nothing less than two distinct doctrines of absurdity. While in the remainder of this chapter I shall assume the skeptical view is the correct one, I shall concentrate on the nonskeptical view in the

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[11]Jeffrey Gordon suggests that, despite appearances to the contrary, they do not really have this propensity: "These creatures have, in reality, *no view* of their lives and are thus in fact *incapable* of passionate devotion to them." Jeffrey Gordon, "Nagel or Camus on the Absurd?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65 (1984): 19.

[12]Nagel, "The Absurd," 21, 23.

next chapter and afterward remark on whether we are justified in attributing to Nagel one of the two interpretations.

Now, as has been indicated, our propensity to take things seriously constitutes the pretension of the conspicuous discrepancy. While Nagel never actually calls the pretension a *propensity*, the term seems to reflect most accurately what he has in mind. It encompasses both *our regularly believing* that certain things should be taken seriously and *our regularly acting* on this belief. Moreover, the text makes clear that Nagel thinks that believing certain things should be taken seriously implies believing these things really do matter, or are objectively important. We can, then, alternatively describe the pretension as involving the belief that things matter. Finally, Nagel associates the pretension with what he calls "the internal perspective," one of two general perspectives from which we view ourselves and the world. The internal perspective is our generally unreflective, everyday viewpoint, and from it we believe things matter and act on this belief.

Discrepant with this pretension is a certain reality: the fact that we have no reason to take things seriously, or "no reason to believe that anything matters" and no reason to act on the belief.[13] As a reality, as a fact, the proposition that we have no reason to take things seriously is, of course, true; and we recognize its truth after reasoning from the "external perspective," the other perspective from which we view ourselves and the world. In contrast to the internal perspective, the external perspective is reflective and detached; and, epistemically speaking, it is the "superior" one, at least in determining whether anything is in fact important.[14] Therefore, just as pretension is associated with the internal perspective, reality is associated with the external perspective. In fact, Nagel at times describes the collision which constitutes our absurdity as one between the two viewpoints

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[13]Ibid., 23.

[14]Ibid., 22.

themselves: "These two inescapable viewpoints collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd."[15]

Now as this quotation suggests, we would be incorrect to think that the collision between pretension and reality makes our lives absurd. The reason is that the collision constituting our absurdity supposedly lies within us, and the reality—the fact that we have no reason to believe anything matters—is clearly not something within us. What, then, is the collision that makes our lives absurd, if not that between our propensity to take things seriously and the fact that we have no reason to do so? The answer is the collision between the pretension and the *awareness* of the reality, a collision which *is* wholly within us. While this awareness may appear to be extraneous to Nagel's general condition of absurdity (a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension and reality), it actually is not. *Our being aware* of the reality is just what, on his view, makes the discrepancy between pretension and reality *conspicuous*. We are *aware* that we in fact have no reason to believe things matter, yet at the same time we believe, and act on the belief, that they do. It is this clash, and not the other, that strikes us as ridiculous and hence makes our lives absurd.[16]

Of course our lives would not be absurd if we could avoid the collision. However, that is not possible. Insofar as we are reflective, rational beings and the proposition that we have no reason to believe anything matters is the product of sound reasoning, the awareness of this proposition is unavoidable. And insofar as we are constitutionally incapable of ceasing to act on the belief that things matter—a fact that manifests itself in how seriously we all take our lives—the pretension is unavoidable as well. It is, then, because of this inescapable conspicuous discrepancy within us that we are forced to

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[15]Ibid., 14.

[16]Later in the chapter I shall discuss at length this "awareness condition," including Quentin Smith's view that it is not a part of the doctrine.

conclude that we are truly absurd in the philosophical sense. As Nagel sums up our predicament: "Humans have the special capacity to step back and survey themselves, and the lives to which they are committed, with that detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand. Without developing the illusion that they are able to escape from their highly specific and idiosyncratic position, they can view it *sub specie aeternitatis*—and the view is at once sobering and comical."[17]

Several questions arise at this point. What exactly does Nagel mean by the internal and external perspectives? Why is value skepticism the conclusion of the external perspective, and is this conclusion really warranted? Is it true that we all take our lives seriously, and if so, are we really incapable of changing our ways? And just why would the conspicuous discrepancy, and hence absurdity, remain in any other world? Nagel addresses these questions, and his answers both clarify his doctrine of absurdity and constitute his defense of it. We should, then, look at these answers before considering the plausibility of the doctrine.

The Doctrine Up Closer and Defended

Nagel characterizes the external perspective as the viewpoint "without presuppositions," implying that he sees the internal perspective as the viewpoint with presuppositions.[18] To say we see the world, including ourselves, with presuppositions, is perhaps to say we hold positive beliefs (that is, beliefs that do not express skepticism) about it whose truth we take for granted. In contrast, to say we view the world without presuppositions is to say we do not possess any such beliefs about it. Consider three people: Lymon, Amelia, and Marvin. Lymon lives his life unreflectively, never questioning the beliefs his parents inculcated in him. Amelia does reflect on her beliefs and, in view of

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[17]Ibid., 15.

[18]Ibid., 20–21.

new observations and insights, renounces some of them from time to time and replaces them with others, although she has never questioned the veracity of all her beliefs. Marvin is much like Amelia, except he does not take *any* of his beliefs for granted; he has critically reflected on them all. Now both Lymon and Amelia represent the internal perspective, Lymon purely so insofar as he has never critically evaluated any of his beliefs. The two of them pre-reflectively make judgments about the world based on positive beliefs about it which they have never questioned, that is, based on presuppositions. Marvin, on the other hand, does not assume any of his beliefs is true. If he makes any judgment about the world, it is based on justified beliefs. His radical reflective perspective without presuppositions, calling all positive beliefs into question, is none other than the external perspective. Metaphors Nagel uses to describe this viewpoint are "*sub specie aeternitatis*" and "nebula's-eye view."[19]

Given that these two perspectives make some sense, why do we conclude, and why are we justified in concluding, from the external perspective that we have no reason to believe anything matters? The reason, according to Nagel, is this: "We step back to find that the whole system of justification and criticism which controls our choices and supports our claims to rationality, rests on responses and habits that we never question, that we should not know how to defend without circularity. . . . If they [our usual standards of what is important] are called into question we can justify them only by reference to themselves, uselessly."[20]

From the internal perspective we judge that certain things do not matter relative to other things. Relative to my getting a college degree, not getting a trout after a day of fishing does not matter. This is not to say I think leaving the stream with an empty creel does not matter. Sometimes I am upset walking back to the truck with nothing in my

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[19]Ibid., 15, 21, 23.

[20]Ibid., 15, 17.

creel—especially if a fishing buddy has something in his. However, when I later reflect on my attitude and behavior, I am embarrassed that I let an activity such as fishing affect me in the way that it did; that is, I am embarrassed that I took it "so seriously." This judgment stems from comparing my fishing performance to perhaps some other performances of mine that at this level of reflection I think really do matter, such as earning a college degree. The reasons I had for taking fishing seriously seem to me bad ones from this wider context.

Well, I learn from this bit of philosophical reflection. Before long I may similarly call into question my reasons for thinking earning a college degree is important, and ultimately my reasons for believing *anything* I think is important. At this point I shall not compare what, after the deepest reflection, I *consider* really important with "what is *really* important."[21] No, I do not find any such objective value. All I can conclude is that I do not have any reason to believe anything really matters. In other words, I cannot step outside my system of beliefs, *look outside it*, and discover what, if anything, really matters; however, I can step outside my belief system, *look back upon it*, and affirm—with epistemic warrant—that the supposed good reasons to which I appeal from the internal perspective to support my beliefs about what matters are considered good by me only because I—a particular creature put together in a particular way—consider them good. I can also affirm, and, again, am justified in doing so, that I am condemned to circular reasoning in defending what ultimately matters and that such reasoning is perfectly worthless.

Nagel believes this skeptical conclusion about mattering "resembles" skepticism about the external world, which he also thinks is irrefutable.[22] The external perspective,

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[21]Ibid., 17.

[22]Nagel states in a footnote: "I am aware that skepticism about the external world is widely thought to have been refuted, but I have remained convinced of its irrefutability since being exposed at Berkeley to Thompson Clarke's largely unpublished ideas on the subject" (Ibid., 19). Clark may have voiced these ideas in an essay (to which Nagel refers in "Moral Luck") published one year after "The

he thinks, produces both the knowledge claim that we do not have any good reason to believe anything about the world around us and the knowledge claim that we do not have any good reason to believe anything about value, and it produces both skepticisms in much the same way. He writes:

> Both epistemological skepticism and a sense of the absurd can be reached via initial doubts posed within systems of evidence and justification that we accept, and can be stated without violence to our ordinary concepts. We can ask not only why we should believe there is a floor under us, but also why we should believe the evidence of our senses at all—and at some point the framable questions will have outlasted the answers. Similarly, we can ask not only why we should take aspirin, but why we should take trouble over our own comfort at all. The fact that we shall take the aspirin without waiting for an answer to this last question does not show that it is an unreal question. We shall also continue to believe there is a floor under us without waiting for an answer to the other question. In both cases it is this unsupported natural confidence that generates skeptical doubts; so it cannot be used to settle them.[23]

Now, what about the third question: do we really have a propensity to take things seriously, and if so, why could we not simply abandon it if we were convinced it was unwarranted? (If we could abandon it, the conspicuous discrepancy would be escapable, and consequently human existence would not be absurd.) In answering this question, Nagel encourages us to recognize the extent to which the average person takes his or her life and other things seriously: "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 a full-time occupation, to which everyone devotes decades of intense concern."[24] We might, too, recall my fishing behavior I mentioned above—and I should add to the story

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Absurd." Thompson Clarke, "The Legacy of Skepticism," *Journal of Philosophy*, 69 (1972): 754–69. Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck" in *Mortal Questions*, 24–38.

[23]Nagel, "The Absurd," 19.

[24]Ibid., 15.

that while I am eventually embarrassed at being ill-tempered over not catching any trout, I might well be crabby the next time I leave the stream empty-handed.

While Nagel's point that most of us do take our lives and other things seriously may seem plausible enough, to establish the universal claim that human existence is absurd, he needs to show that "we *cannot* live human lives without energy and attention, nor without making choices which show that we take some things more seriously than others."[25] We might doubt that he can establish this bold claim, especially in view of serious devotees of some Buddhist and Hindu sects whose main aim, put negatively, is complete detachment from worldly concerns (or what would seem to amount to the annihilation of the internal perspective) and who more or less appear to succeed in this endeavor. However, the term '*serious* devotees' might betray a pretense that even these people cannot escape, for, as Nagel suggests: "Insofar as this self-etiolation is the result of effort, will-power, asceticism, and so forth, it requires that one take oneself seriously as an individual—that one be willing to take considerable trouble to avoid being creaturely and absurd. Thus one may undermine the aim of unworldliness by pursuing it too vigorously."[26] Having said this, Nagel does concede it is possible that some persons live *less* absurdly than the rest of us, and perhaps Buddhist or Hindu devotees are the paradigm cases. Notwithstanding, he believes the universal claim that human existence is absurd holds.

Finally, exactly why would the collision between the internal and external perspectives (and hence absurdity) remain in any other world with us in it? Nagel's answer to this question seems to be simply that we recognize that the best defense we could give in support of our lives mattering in any given world would be a defense whose merit, in

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[25]Ibid., 14. Emphasis mine.

[26]Ibid., 22. This statement brings to mind Nietzsche's claim that Schopenhauer's asceticism was not a counter-example to the will to power but, just the opposite, a manifestation of it.

the end, would only amount to *our being satisfied* with the defense. He has us consider "the kingdom, power and glory of God," and he says:

> It is as legitimate to find ultimate justification there as to find it earlier, among the details of individual life. But this does not alter the fact that justifications come to an end when we are content to have them end—when we do not find it necessary to look any further. If we can step back from the purposes of individual life and doubt their point, we can step back also from the . . . kingdom, power, and glory of God, and put all these things into question in the same way. What seems to us to confer meaning, justification, significance, does so in virtue of the fact that we need no more reasons after a certain point. . . .
>
> . . . There does not appear to be any conceivable world (containing us) about which unsettlable doubts could not arise.[27]

Nagel's basic idea appears to be that just as we can doubt the importance and seriousness of our earthly lives, we could as easily call into question the importance and seriousness of our lives in any possible other life, including any afterlife. Consider the possibility that Christianity is true. Imagine Jesus returns to the earth in the year 2000. Although we, or at least some of us, may have grounds to worry about our standing in the eyes of the Lord, we nevertheless put these worries aside and begin to rejoice at the prospect of a glorious afterlife. We happily say to ourselves and to each other, "I'll be with the people I love, forever—and no more pain and suffering!" However, when we get around to reflecting on this revelation, we recognize that we rejoice just because of the way we have been put together; had we been constituted differently, we may have met Jesus's second coming, and all that it means, with despair or laughter or indifference. With

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[27]Ibid., 16–17. Some of Nagel's critics believe that his argument here contradicts his objection to one of the four so called "bad arguments" for human absurdity he discusses earlier in the essay, the argument I labeled the Death Argument in chapter 1. Ironically, one of these commentators, Jeffrey Gordon, gives an objection to Nagel's doctrine of absurdity that appears to be essentially Nagel's objection to the Death Argument. (I discuss Gordon's objection below.) Ironic also is the similarity between this passage and ones in Nagel's most recent book, *The Last Word*, such as: "Since all justifications come to an end with what the people who accept them find acceptable and not in need of further justification, no conclusion, it is thought, can claim validity beyond the community whose acceptance validates it." The irony is that in *The Last Word* Nagel sets out to undermine the argument expressed in this quotation, the very argument on which his doctrine of absurdity in "The Absurd" seems to depend. Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4–5.

this truth we come to realize the possibility that the importance and seriousness with which we regard Christianity is only skin deep, that is, not objectively warranted. While we may try to convince ourselves, and ask Jesus and God to convince us, of the importance and seriousness of Christianity, we shall understand that what counts as *convincing* may be contingent on the particular way we are made up. In other words, all possible justifications would be from within our own particular system of beliefs, and so they could not be used independently to justify our high regard for Christianity. Our doubts would be, as Nagel says, "unsettlable."[28]

This concludes my presentation of one interpretation of Nagel's doctrine. In sum, we humans are creatures who naturally view ourselves and the world both from the inside and from the outside. From the inside our lives and other things appear important, and consequently we take them seriously. However, from the outside we see that we have no reason to believe anything is important, and hence no reason to take anything seriously. In leading serious lives without any good reason, we resemble the intense, ceaseless struggle of an ant trying to get to the top of a sand heap, whose endeavor strikes us as somewhat silly. Yet unlike the ant, we are *aware* that our ant-like behavior lacks justification, and in the face of this awareness we carry on in the same serious way. This difference makes our lives more than somewhat silly; it makes them downright ridiculous. It makes them absurd. And our lives would be absurd in any other world we inhabited, for the external view of ourselves and the world would always be at hand. In any world this view would

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[28]We might question why our doubts would be unsettlable when it seems we could ask God, an omniscient being, about these doubts. Perhaps, then, when Nagel writes that "there does not appear to be any conceivable world (containing us) about which unsettlable doubts could not arise," he means 'conceivable world (containing us *and not containing an omniscient being*).' If not, then this part of his doctrine seems implausible. It does, that is, unless the basic interpretation of Nagel's doctrine that is being presented in this chapter is off the mark. I have mentioned that in the next chapter I shall present an alternative interpretation of the doctrine. Perhaps that interpretation will make more sense of Nagel's unqualified claim that "there does not appear to be any conceivable world (containing us) about which unsettlable doubt could not arise." We shall see.

generate the same doubt as to the objectivity of value, as well as the realization that this doubt cannot be stifled noncircularly.

The Awareness Condition

Now what about the plausibility of Nagel's doctrine of absurdity? It seems that possible objections fall into one of two categories. One category contains objections to Nagel's general conditions of absurdity; the other contains objections that do not contest his general conditions but question whether those conditions are met. I shall start by considering an objection that falls in the first category and then turn to one belonging to the second.

Richard Taylor, in an essay on the meaning of life, discusses the life-cycle of the glow worm as a potential paradigm of meaningless existence. This blind creature lives on the walls and ceilings of dark caverns in New Zealand, and its life consists of attracting insects by its glowing tail, entangling them in a thin, gooey filament it discharges, and eating them. After months of this single activity it metamorphoses into a winged adult and within a few days mates, lays eggs, and dies, often from being eaten by a larval glow worm. Taylor writes: "This has been going on for millions and millions of years, and to no end other than that the same meaningless cycle may continue for another millions of years."[29]

We might well think the glow worm's life is a paradigm not only of meaningless existence but also of absurd existence. However, Nagel appears to maintain that a necessary condition of absurdity is self-consciousness, and if that is correct the glow worm's life *cannot* be absurd. Is an awareness condition truly a part of Nagel's doctrine? If so, when exactly is the condition met; and is Nagel, or anyone who would include some

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[29]Taylor, 145.

kind of awareness condition, correct—must a creature really be self-conscious and aware of certain aspects of its life for its life to be absurd?

Not all of Nagel's critics agree that he maintains that an awareness of a certain kind is necessary for our lives to be absurd. Quentin Smith, for example, criticizes Jonathan Westphal and Christopher Cherry's first counter-example to Nagel's doctrine, which involves a man devoted to music whose lifestyle does not permit him to take up the external perspective. Westphal and Cherry contend that such a life is for the man "not to entertain the thought, or not to be able to entertain it, that music might ultimately be insignificant. . . . It is for him to be absorbed in music. His absorption destroys the skeptical or external perspective, and renders it flimsy, or meaningless, or absurd." Smith points out that the counter-example shows that the man is "*psychologically* immune from the external perspective, in the sense that he does not adopt or is not psychologically capable of adopting this perspective." However, Smith argues that "such psychological immunity is irrelevant to Nagel's theory, which implies only that no person is *logically* immune from the external perspective."[30]

Does any textual evidence support Smith's interpretation of the doctrine? In his discussion of conventional absurdity, Nagel does appear to suggest that absurdity can exist prior to any kind of awareness. He states that "we are not always willing or able to extricate ourselves from a position whose absurdity has become clear to us."[31] By 'absurdity becoming clear' he apparently means 'becoming aware of absurdity'; and if that is true, his view seems to be that awareness does not in part *make* a situation absurd, but only makes an already absurd situation *clear* to someone that it is absurd, which is to say

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[30]Jonathan Westphal and Christopher Cherry, "Is Life Absurd?" in *Life and Death*, 99. The essay first appeared in *Philosophy* 65 (1990): 199–203. Quentin Smith, "Concerning the Absurdity of Life," *Philosophy* 66 (1991), 119–20.

[31]Nagel, "The Absurd," 13.

that an awareness condition is not a part of the doctrine. Smith would appear to be correct.

However, statements Nagel makes later in the essay clearly contradict this view. He states, for example, that "a sense of the absurd is a way of perceiving our true situation (*even though the situation is not absurd until the perception arises*)."[32] In addition, he argues:

> [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. If that *did* happen, his life would become absurd, since self-awareness would not make him cease to be a mouse and would not enable him to rise above his mousely strivings. Bringing his new-found self-consciousness with him, he would have to return to his meager yet frantic life, full of doubts that he was unable to answer, but also full of purposes that he was unable to abandon.[33]

In yet another place, Nagel states that our absurdity lies "not in the fact that . . . an external view [from which all the contingency and specificity of our aims and pursuits become clear] can be taken of us, but in the fact that we ourselves can take it, without ceasing to be the persons whose ultimate concerns are so coolly regarded."[34] His point here seems to be that some other creature recognizing the fact which the external perspective reveals—or that plain fact alone, absent *any* perceiver—would not be sufficient to make our lives absurd. It is crucial the fact gets recognized, and it is *we* who recognize it. Finally, Nagel at one point entertains possible ways in which we might avoid absurdity. One such way, he suggests, would be to avoid the external perspective and the "relevant self-consciousness" produced by it. In accepting such avoidance as a legitimate way to escape absurdity, he again clearly seems to espouse self-consciousness as a

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[32]Ibid., 23. Emphasis mine.

[33]Ibid., 21.

[34]Ibid., 15.

necessary condition of absurdity.[35] It turns out, then, that the weight of evidence is against Smith. Despite the one apparent counter-statement, the most plausible interpretation would seem to be that Nagel believes a certain self-awareness is a necessary condition of absurdity.[36]

Let us be clear, however, about the actual awareness to which Nagel refers. It would be incorrect to take, as it seems Steven Luper-Foy does, the relevant awareness to be that of the discrepancy between pretension and reality. Luper-Foy writes:

> Earlier Nagel told us that creatures capable of skepticism can see that there is no reason to be serious, yet they cannot help but be, so that there is a discrepancy between pretension and reality. Now Nagel wants to add that the *existence* of this discrepancy is not enough to make us absurd. We are absurd only if we *see* the discrepancy. But why on earth not call the discrepancy itself absurdity? Why would what we see *sub specie aeternitatis* strike us as absurd unless what we were seeing was our absurdity?[37]

Luper-Foy fails to recognize that what in fact we crucially "see" *sub specie aeternitatis* is, as he himself writes in the first sentence of the passage, "that there is no reason to be serious"—that is, the *reality* of the discrepancy between pretension and reality, not, as he claims in the passage, the *discrepancy* itself. Consequently, Luper-Foy fails to recognize as well that our seeing this reality is what makes the discrepancy

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[35]Incidentally, Nagel believes we cannot *consciously* avoid the external perspective, "for to do that we would have to be aware of the viewpoint we were refusing to adopt." However, we could avoid it, he says, by not acquiring it in the first place or by forgetting it (Ibid., 21).

[36]Jeffrey Gordon, Steven Luper-Foy, and I.J.H. Williams all agree (although, as I explain below, it is not clear that the latter two fully understand Nagel's awareness condition). Gordon states: "If human beings never actually employed their capacity for viewing their lives in their arbitrariness, then there would *be* no absurdity. . . . Nagel thus commits himself to the paradoxical view that the life of the person who never perceives the arbitrariness of our human condition is *not* absurd" (Gordon, 19). Luper-Foy writes in a footnote: "The *existence* of this discrepancy [between pretension and reality] is not enough to make us absurd. We are absurd only if we *see* the discrepancy" (Luper-Foy, 99). And Williams remarks on Nagel's passage about the mouse: "The life of a mouse is not absurd. This is because a mouse lacks 'the capacities for self-consciousness and self-transcendence that would enable him to see that he is only a mouse.' Because a person is self-conscious he is able to see that he is only a man and therefore that his life is absurd" (I.J.H. Williams, "Scepticism and The Absurd," *Philosophical Investigations* 9 [1986]: 312–313).

[37]Ibid., 99, footnote 30.

conspicuous, not, as he thinks, our seeing the discrepancy. Now after gaining this essential insight from the external perspective, we might from the same perspective also observe the conspicuous discrepancy between it and a pretension of ours—and, if we are good Nagelians, acknowledge that we lead absurd lives. This second awareness, however, is not necessary to make our lives absurd. Incidentally, the nonessential second awareness is what Nagel refers to when he states that "we are not always willing or able to extricate ourselves from a position whose absurdity has become clear to us." Thus this statement, which above I offered as a counter-example to Nagel's countenancing an awareness condition, turns out not to be a counter-example at all. That a situation we are in is absurd before we are aware it is absurd is perfectly consistent with Nagel's awareness condition.

In sum, the awareness to which Nagel refers is that of a reality, not of absurdity, and such an awareness turns the discrepancy between this reality and a pretension of ours into a conspicuous one, and hence makes our lives absurd. The awareness makes the discrepancy conspicuous, in part, because it produces a certain justified belief (that we have no reason to believe anything matters) that contradicts another belief of ours (that things matter), the latter of which we continue to hold and act on despite the former. Thus the awareness is crucial because without it that contradiction would not obtain, as it does not in the case of the ant or mouse.

Is, then, Nagel's awareness condition, or any similar condition for that matter, truly a necessary condition of absurdity? Nagel does little more than assert his awareness condition, so we can only anticipate what he might have argued on its behalf, and then evaluate that. In this effort, we might return to his examples of conventional absurdity whose simplicity he used to establish the general condition of absurdity. We may remember that the first example involves a speechgiver who gives a long, passionate speech in support of a motion that has already been passed. Even though Nagel never says, we can assume (given Nagel's awareness condition) that the speechgiver is *aware* he

has absolutely no reason to believe the motion has not passed. Now the question arises: would not there be a significant difference between, on the one hand, this speechgiver's situation and, on the other, another speechgiver's situation that is the same except for the fact that this speechgiver is *not aware* she has absolutely no reason to believe the motion has not passed? We might imagine, in the first case, the speechgiver in the back chambers acknowledging to himself that for all he knows a vote has been taken on the motion and then, despite that acknowledgment, opening the door to the legislative hall, parading to the podium, and passionately giving his speech. "How absurd!" we would probably exclaim. Then we might imagine, in the second case, the speechgiver in the back chambers ready to give her speech, but not in the least aware that she has no reason to believe the motion has not been passed. (She might think, wrongly, that she has reason to believe it has not passed, or she might not have given the matter of its status any thought.) Again, would we be as quick to declare "How absurd!" about her situation? It seems that glaring ridiculousness, that utter nonsense, of the first situation does not characterize the second situation—and it seems the reason has to do with what the first speechgiver is aware of and what the second speechgiver is not. Similarly, regarding philosophical absurdity, the glaring ridiculousness that stems from (1) knowing we have absolutely no reason to believe anything matters while at the same time (2) believing and acting as if things do matter, would seem to be absent if instead of condition '(1)' obtaining *we did not recognize* that we have absolutely no reason to believe anything matters. Therefore, it appears that awareness of there being no reason to believe anything matters is a necessary condition of absurdity.

I find some of the reasoning in this argument persuasive. I agree that the two speechgiving situations are not equally ridiculous and that the reason has to do with what each speechgiver knows or does not know about his or her situation. Similarly, in considering another example Nagel gives, I would agree that the situation of the lover who declares his love over the phone to a recorder, quite aware he has no reason to

believe the voice on the other end of the line is really his beloved, is more absurd than, say, the similar situation where the caller thinks (wrongly) that she has reason to believe the voice is really her beloved.

However, in saying all of this, I only mean to say that awareness of the sort Nagel has in mind can *heighten* the absurdity of certain situations which are already absurd, and can perhaps make *some* situations absurd which otherwise would not be. I do not mean to suggest that I believe awareness is a necessary condition of absurdity. I do not believe it is.[38] To my mind, the situations involving the second speechgiver and second caller are ridiculous, so I think the thought experiments undermine, rather than support, the view that awareness is a necessary condition of absurdity. Jeffrey Gordon, for one, would agree, as he makes the same point using the example of the legendary naked emperor: "If the naked emperor were aware of his nakedness, but felt compelled to appear thus in public nonetheless, this would surely be absurd. But he is no less a figure of absurdity when he persists in the belief that he is clothed."[39] Now, admittedly, my view that the second speechgiver's and second caller's situations are ridiculous is based on nothing much more than intuition. In the case of the second speechgiver, I simply imagine a woman giving a long, passionate speech in support of an already passed motion, unaware of the fact that she has no reason to believe the motion has not been passed, and I find the situation ridiculous. That is all. However, I do not believe this basis of my judgment is grounds for criticism. I cannot think of some better criterion that could be used to decide

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[38]While Gordon, Luper-Foy, and Smith neither acknowledge nor deny my view that awareness can make certain situations absurd which otherwise would not be or that awareness may heighten absurdity, they do all maintain that awareness is not a necessary condition of absurdity. I have already discussed Luper-Foy's argument above. As for Smith, he does not give an argument (see Smith, 119–20). Gordon's discussion is by far the most substantial, although he couches it in an interpretation of Nagel's basic doctrine that differs from the one I have been presenting (see Gordon, 18–20).

[39]Ibid., 19.

the matter. As for the plausibility of the judgment itself, that I suppose would depend on whether my intuition is a common one. My hunch is that it is.

However, one might complain that my intuition, whether a common one or not, must be off the mark, for it implies that a lawmaker sitting quietly in his chair thinking—wrongly, as it turns out—that a motion has not already been passed is the principal subject in an absurd situation. It implies that the situation is absurd because a clash exists between pretension and reality: (1) his *claim* that it has not yet been passed versus (2) the *fact* that it has. However, to say this lawmaker's situation is absurd is surely incorrect. Falsely believing something does not in itself constitute absurdity. Something more is needed, and that something is, as Nagel maintains, awareness of the fact.

The problem with this objection is that the objector has significantly changed the situation. If by pretension we mean a claim "to some distinction, importance, dignity, or excellence" (as I have indicated I believe Nagel means by the term), then the new situation the objector describes involves no pretension. Unlike the first two speechgivers, who display pretentiousness in giving their serious speeches, the lawmaker sitting quietly in the chair wrongly thinking the motion has not passed is not making a claim, either implicitly or explicitly, to some distinction, importance, dignity, or excellence—he is not "playing the fool," as we say. Consequently, in this new situation there is no discrepancy between pretension and reality, and *ipso facto* no absurdity. My intuition, then, does not imply that this lawmaker's situation is absurd.

I think there is another good objection to Nagel's awareness condition, but it is a different kind of objection. It does not show that the awareness condition is not a necessary condition of absurdity, but rather shows that if it were, human existence would not be absurd, which is to say that the condition is self-defeating for Nagel or anyone else who would argue both that awareness is a requirement of absurdity and that our lives are absurd. The objection is simply that if awareness of the kind Nagel has in mind is in fact a necessary condition of absurdity, then the phenomenon of absurdity would be like that of a

backache: some people are victims of it all the time; some people are victims only from time to time; and others elude it altogether. But of course this view of absurdity contradicts the thesis that human existence as such is absurd. Thus Nagel and others like him cannot at the same time maintain that awareness is a necessary condition of absurdity and that human existence is absurd.

To escape the horns of this dilemma Nagel apparently would have to argue that the backache analogy is really a disanalogy. He, at the very least, would have to maintain that (1) *most of us* have become aware of the fact that we have no reason to believe anything matters and (2) most of us are *much of the time* aware of the fact. However, I do not see how he could successfully defend these two claims. Regarding the first, I doubt my friends who are not philosophers have seriously questioned the objective importance of everything they consider important. I doubt, for instance, that these friends have seriously questioned the importance of (to borrow one of Nagel's own examples) preventing a child from putting his or her hand on a hot stove. And my best guess is that more people than not have never questioned, in a wholesale manner, the seriousness of all the things they take seriously—*let alone gone one step further and concluded that they in fact have no reason to take anything seriously*. Now even if I were mistaken about the first claim, the second claim suggests that we are usually aware of the fact that we have no reason to believe anything matters when we are at work, when we play and watch sports, when we listen to music, when we have sex. That we are for the most part aware of the fact at these times is, to my mind, patently false.

If Nagel's awareness condition is as self-destructive as I think this objection makes it out to be, then perhaps I have not interpreted it correctly, despite that straightforward statement in the essay which supports my interpretation ("The situation is not absurd until the perception arises. . . ."). Maybe 'being aware of the reality' means only one have the *capacity* to be aware of the reality. The passage about the mouse is consistent with this interpretation: a mouse avoids absurdity "because he lacks the *capacities* for self-

consciousness and self-transcendence" (emphasis mine). Also, when Nagel states that our absurdity lies "not in the fact that such an external view can be taken of us, but in the fact that we ourselves *can* take it" (emphasis mine), he seems to be suggesting that only potential awareness, not actual awareness, is necessary for absurdity.

Despite these statements, the alternative interpretation of the awareness condition seems to throw the baby out with the bath water.[40] Central to Nagel's doctrine, we know, is the view that "the absurdity of our situation derives not from a collision between our expectations and the world, but from a collision within ourselves." This inner collision involves a propensity to believe, and to act on the belief, that certain things matter and an awareness that in fact we have no reason to believe anything matters. The alternative interpretation would in effect eliminate the awareness, which would in turn prevent the essential inner collision from occurring. No inner conspicuous discrepancy would *actually* arise from our only *potentially* recognizing that we have no reason to believe anything matters. And nowhere does Nagel state that a *potential* conspicuous discrepancy is sufficient for absurdity. Moreover, if the alternative interpretation of the awareness condition were what Nagel has in mind, then he would refuse to consider the question of whether we humans can avoid being aware of the reality. But he considers just this question in the following passage:

> Given that the transcendental step is natural to us humans, can we avoid absurdity by refusing to take that step and remaining entirely within our sublunar lives? Well, we cannot refuse consciously, for to do that we would have to be aware of the viewpoint we were refusing to adopt. 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.[41]

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[40]Gordon, too, interprets Nagel's awareness condition not as a capacity to be aware, but actual awareness, as is indicated by the passage I cited earlier: "If human beings never actually employed their capacity for viewing their lives in their arbitrariness, then there would *be* no absurdity. . . . Nagel thus commits himself to the paradoxical view that the life of the person who never perceives the arbitrariness of our human condition is *not* absurd" (Gordon, 19).

[41]Nagel, "The Absurd," 21. Interestingly, Nagel here shies away from denying that awareness can be avoided.

One might still ask: what if Nagel *had* intended the alternative interpretation of the awareness condition? A *potential* conspicuous discrepancy between pretension and reality plagues our minds but not a mouse's, and that is why our lives are absurd and a mouse's is not. Further, this criterion of absurdity squares nicely with the intuition that the second speechgiver's situation is absurd despite she not being cognizant of the fact that she has no reason to believe the motion has not passed. She has the *potential* to recognize the fact—and that is what is crucial.

As interesting as this new doctrine of absurdity might be, I do not find it any more plausible than the one I have been attributing to Nagel. For suppose the second speechgiver we have been imagining gets into a bad car accident while driving home from the hall where she had just delivered her speech. She survives the accident but suffers such severe brain damage that she no longer has the capacity to understand the simple idea of a motion's having been passed. However, she does still understand the notion of giving a speech in support of a motion, and in fact the first thing she wants to do when she is up and around is give that same lengthy, passionate speech she gave right before her accident—and that is what she does. Now if we find her first speechgiving situation absurd, do we not also find her second one so? In the first case she has the ability to discover the motion already passed; in the second case she does not. Why is this difference crucial? The second situation still mocks a sensible and serious situation; it is still ridiculous. It is equally absurd, is it not?

If, then, awareness is not a necessary condition of absurdity, are we justified in dismissing Nagel's doctrine? Gordon, for one, does not think so. He states that "at worst, Nagel . . . [is] guilty of confusing the matter [of absurdity] by misplaced emphasis."[42] What he means by this is that Nagel does not need to stress, and hence should not have stressed, the *awareness* of a supposed reality; if Nagel can establish that reality alone, this

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[42]Gordon, 20.

might well constitute a discrepancy, and one that is conspicuous enough to make our lives absurd. I think Gordon is correct here. To refute the doctrine, we need, it seems, to show either (1) that Nagel has not established at least one side of the supposed discrepancy (the reality or the pretension) or (2) that the discrepancy is not conspicuous. In contrast to the objection to the awareness condition, which belongs to the category of objections that criticize Nagel's general conditions of absurdity themselves, both of these objections fall into the category of objections that purport to show his general conditions of absurdity are not met. I shall in the remainder of this chapter advance the second objection. In the second half of chapter 3, I shall present the first objection in response to an alternative interpretation of the doctrine in "The Absurd."

Conspicuousness

I would like to begin with an objection Jeffrey Gordon raises. Even though I shall end up criticizing it, I think it helps put my own objection into context. Also, while Gordon does not consistently interpret Nagel's doctrine as I have above, his objection does seem to be directed at this interpretation. He questions Nagel's claim that we have no reason to believe anything matters. According to Gordon, while it is *logically possible* that our ultimate concerns are really unimportant, we do have reason to believe they are important. Apparently for Gordon this reason amounts to these concerns of ours being practically beyond doubt. Could we genuinely doubt that "children ought to be protected from fire," that "justice is preferable to tyranny"? Could we ever be truly skeptical of the "importance of the lives of those we love as to require some higher validation of our judgment," of the "importance of friendship"? Gordon contends that "in a world such as this one, we should say, peopled by beings such as we ourselves, certain concerns remain unassailably valid, and this will be evident to any conceivable consciousness whose judgment we can respect." Thus at the very least the burden of proof concerning the truth

of value skepticism lies heavy on the shoulders of Nagel and fellow value skeptics, and as long as this is so, taking our lives seriously is not ridiculous and hence not absurd.[43]

This objection may appear ironic, for it looks like an elaboration of Nagel's own objection to one of the four "bad arguments" for absurdity he discusses earlier in the essay, the one I labeled the Death Argument. There, we might recall, Nagel states: "Chains of justification come repeatedly to an end within life. . . . No further justification is needed to make it reasonable to take aspirin for a headache, attend an exhibition of the work of a painter one admires, or stop a child from putting his hand on a hot stove." Of course if these actions of ours are intrinsically justified, if their objective value is self-evident, if they are, as Nagel puts it, "self-justifying," then the claim that we have no reason to believe anything matters is false, and so is Nagel's own doctrine of absurdity.[44] In the last section of chapter 3, I shall discuss this apparent inconsistency, which some of Nagel's critics, including Gordon, find vexing.

Nagel's apparent inconsistency aside, is Gordon's objection plausible? One possible Nagelian response might be that it begs the question against the conclusion of Nagel's argument for absurdity. Nagel might suggest Gordon's claim that certain concerns of ours are indubitable is actually a product of the internal perspective and therefore is perfectly worthless in deciding whether these concerns really do matter. Had Gordon not forgotten the important distinction between the two perspectives, he would have recognized that just as the external perspective generates skepticism concerning the existence of the material world, so too does it produce value skepticism; and just as our firm conviction coming from the internal perspective that a material world exists does not shake the logic of epistemological skepticism, so too our strong intuition from the internal perspective that certain concerns of ours matter fails to do any damage to the conclusion

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[43]Ibid., 23–25.

[44]Nagel, "The Absurd," 12.

reached from the external perspective that we ultimately have no reason to believe these concerns really do matter.

I find this possible Nagelian response plausible enough to put a certain burden of proof on Gordon's shoulders. It seems to me Gordon needs to show that our unshakable confidence that certain concerns of ours really do matter does not merely stem from the internal perspective but somehow epistemically transcends it so as to legitimately discredit the value skepticism produced by the external perspective. If he does not establish that, then he needs to attack Nagel's view of the dichotomous perspectives or at least Nagel's contention that the external perspective is epistemically superior to the internal perspective. If he does not attack these things, then he needs to argue that the external perspective does not yield value skepticism. Perhaps he can make one of these moves, but he does not. Thus I think his case against Nagel's doctrine is wanting.

Must, then, a refutation of Nagel's doctrine involve making one of these ambitious moves? I do not think so. I believe there is an easier way to refute it. I think we can grant Nagel value skepticism yet deny his conclusion that our lives are absurd. The objection is that the discrepancy between pretension (believing and acting as if our lives matter) and reality (having no reason to believe anything matters) is not *conspicuous*, and hence Nagel has not shown that our lives are absurd.

To see this, consider once more Nagel's examples of absurd situations within life. In all those cases, the propositions describing the realities do not express *skepticism* toward the claims constituting the pretensions; rather, the propositions describing the realities express *outright rejection* of those claims. The reality in the case of the speechgiver is that the speech cannot influence the passage of the bill since the bill has already been passed, and hence the situation *is not* (not 'may not be') the sensible and serious one the speechgiver purports it to be. In the case of the board members of the philanthropic foundation electing a president, the reality is that the person they elect undermines the foundation because he is a notorious criminal, and hence the situation *is*

not (not 'may not be') the sensible and serious one they purport it to be. The reality in the case of the lover declaring his love over the phone is that the declaration is useless since the voice on the other end of the line is a recorder, and hence the situation *is not* (not 'may not be') the sensible and serious one he purports it to be. And in the case of the man being knighted, the reality is that the man looks ignoble because his pants are down, and hence the situation *is not* (not 'may not be') the sensible and serious one he purports it to be.

The proposition describing the reality in the pretension-reality collision that supposedly makes our lives absurd, however, expresses only skepticism, not rejection, regarding the claim constituting the pretension. We claim that our lives and other things are important, and the reality is (only) that we do not have any reason to believe anything is important, not that nothing is important. While Nagel acknowledges this disanalogy, he asserts that it is insignificant as far as the conspicuousness of a discrepancy is concerned:

> In ordinary life, to be sure, we do not judge a situation absurd unless we have in mind some standards of seriousness, significance, or harmony with which the absurd can be contrasted. This contrast is not implied by the philosophical judgment of absurdity, and that might be thought to make the concept unsuitable for the expression of such judgments. This is not so, however, for the philosophical judgment depends on another contrast which makes it a natural extension from more ordinary cases. It departs from them only in contrasting the pretensions of life with a larger context in which *no* standards can be discovered, rather than with a context from which alternative, overriding standards may be applied.[45]

I submit, however, that the disanalogy between philosophical absurdity and conventional absurdity is crucial. While the kind of reality that signifies skepticism about facts of the world when contrasted with a pretension that signifies nonskepticism about these facts constitutes a discrepancy, it does not constitute a *conspicuous* one.

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[45]Ibid., 18.

Perhaps a good way to see the truth of this claim is to alter one of those cases of conventional absurdity so that it reflects the kind of reality involved in philosophical absurdity and then to judge whether the situation is absurd. For example, we might imagine that instead of knowing the motion has already passed, the speechgiver and we do not know its status. Moreover, for some reason or other no evidence is available to any of us that would support the truth of the matter, not available to the speechgiver or to us the observers and judges of absurdity. If this were the case, then the operative reality of the speechgiving situation would be: there is no reason to believe that the motion has not passed (on a par, epistemically, with the reality that there is no reason to believe anything matters). Now the legislator goes ahead and gives his speech, and the question arises: is this situation absurd? Of course the answer to which Nagel is committed is that *regardless of the motion's actual status, the situation is absurd.* The speechgiver believes and acts as if the motion has not passed and the reality of the situation is that he has no reason to believe it has not passed. Such a discrepancy between pretension and reality, Nagel would say, is conspicuous. But is it really?

If ridiculousness is, as I have suggested, a touchstone of conspicuousness, then the discrepancy between pretension and reality in this case is not conspicuous. The reason is this. The speechgiver evidently cares a great deal about the motion's passage, and it is possible the motion has not already passed. Given these two facts, delivering the speech makes sense; and if it makes sense, the situation is not absurd. In fact, I believe we would have more reason to call ridiculous the alternative situation of the speechgiver having refrained from delivering the speech (although I think we would stop well short of calling it ridiculous), for giving the speech makes more sense than not giving it. Again, the speechgiver is passionate about the motion's passage, and it may not have already passed.

I hasten to underscore that I am not asserting that the situation is *not* absurd. The correct answer to the question of whether the situation is absurd is that *it may be absurd or it may not be*. Whether it is absurd depends on the fact of the matter about the motion.

If the motion has already been passed, then the situation is absurd; if the motion has not, then the situation is not absurd. It may appear as though I am being inconsistent here. Above I denied that the speechgiving situation involved a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension and reality; but now I seem to be allowing the possibility of just such a discrepancy, since I am saying the situation might be absurd. However, I do not think these two positions are inconsistent. When above I denied the conspicuousness of the discrepancy, that discrepancy involved one particular pretension-reality pair. In now suggesting that the discrepancy may be conspicuous, I have in mind another, distinct pretension-reality pair. The pretensions in each pair are the same, but the realities are different. In the first pair, the reality is that there is no reason to believe the motion has not passed. In the second pair, the reality is that the motion has already passed. Of course the reality in the second pair is only a *possible* reality—by hypothesis we do not, and physically cannot, know (given our predicament) whether the motion has already been passed—which is why (1) we cannot use it to establish that the speechgiver's situation *is* absurd, while (2) we can use it to show that the situation *may* be absurd. Therefore, appearances to the contrary, the claim that the discrepancy in the speechgiver's situation is not conspicuous (with respect to the first pretension-reality pair) but may be conspicuous (with respect to the second pair) is consistent.

I think the analysis of this situation within life, albeit a fanciful situation, shows just why Nagel has not established that our life situation is absurd, or would be in any world with us in it. If Nagel's value skepticism is correct, we are like the speechgiver who, while not having any reason to believe the motion has not passed, does not have any reason to believe it *has* passed, and further has no way to collect any evidence on the matter. We do not have any reason to believe anything matters or any reason to believe nothing does—and for all we know no way to build a case either way. Because of this epistemological predicament, acting on the belief that certain things do matter makes sense, hence is not ridiculous, and so cannot be used to establish that our lives are absurd.

In other words, insofar as the logic of the external perspective on the flip-side is that *we do not have any reason to believe that nothing matters*, any kind of practical directive we might receive from the external perspective would *not* be to the effect that we must detach ourselves from our everyday concerns. That directive would only come from an external perspective that was nonskeptical about whether anything matters, one that asserted that nothing matters. Therefore, the discrepancy between pretension and reality (skeptical about mattering) is not conspicuous, which is to say that although our lives might be absurd, we cannot assert that they are.

Nagel might respond to this objection by pointing out that we do not believe our projects and lives matter to the same degree that, say, we might believe candidate Kealy will win a very tight election. Our belief that things matter is not a lukewarm belief. Rather, we believe our projects and lives and other things matter *with confidence*, a confidence that is unwarranted given the value skepticism of the external perspective. Nagel might say that if we were not so confident in this belief, perhaps the human condition would not be an absurd one; but we are confident, and our confidence betrays itself in the intense way we conduct our lives. Again, as he points out:

> [Human beings] spend enormous quantities of energy, risk, and calculation on the details. 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 a full-time occupation, to which everyone devotes decades of intense concern.

While I basically agree with this characterization of human beings, I do not agree with the view that "intense concern" about our actions and lives in general presupposes we are *confident* that our actions and lives matter. That is to say, I think it is consistent that we take our projects, and lives in general, seriously while believing only tepidly that they really matter, and I believe people do in fact act and think this way. Many religious people, for example, lead very serious religious lives, while being at the same time very

skeptical about the truth of their convictions. Philosophers William James and Soren Kierkegaard quickly come to mind. Such lives find expression in the phrase 'a life based on a leap of faith.'[46]

I would concede to Nagel, if in fact the above objection reflects his view, that there are a number of people who are quite confident that their lives matter and who take themselves very seriously; and if value skepticism is justified, then there may indeed be something ridiculous about them—especially if they are aware that value skepticism is justified—even if it turns out their lives do matter. But of course these examples would only support the claim that some human lives are absurd, not all. In Nagel's parlance, they support only conventional absurdity, not philosophical absurdity. I conclude that, though ingenious, Nagel's doctrine of the absurdity of human existence, under the above interpretation, is implausible.

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[46]Steven Luper-Foy may be making the same basic point when he asks and answers the following question: "Must the discrepancy occur in the lives of value skeptics? . . . So long as people do not *aspire* to value things only under the impetus of a justification for valuing, they can be value skeptics and valuers without discrepancy. People need have no illusion about the fact that their lives consist in pursuing ends which have no further grounds" (Luper-Foy, 96). Although Randolph Feezell's language in what follows suggests an external perspective nonskeptical about mattering, he, too, seems to be making a point similar to mine: "How can one *act* as if one is serious, that is live *as if* things have some transparent significance and justification, all the while denying it? A good example of this arises in sports. Between the extreme attitudes described by the slogans 'Winning is not everything, it is the only thing,' and 'It is only a game,' is a paradoxical middle way, pursuing sport *as if* it had some ultimate significance . . . and at the same time realizing that it does not *really* matter. It is to care, toil, and even suffer, while embracing a reflective detachment undermining the significance or justification of your activity. It is to recognize an apparent seriousness in action mediated by a reflective negation of that seriousness, both in the unity of a single attitude" (Randolph M. Feezell, "Of Mice and Men: Nagel on the Absurd," *Modern Schoolman* 61 [1984]: 264).

CHAPTER 3

THE SECOND DOCTRINE

As I mentioned in the last chapter, I think we can glean from "The Absurd" alternative interpretations of Nagel's doctrine. While these interpretations differ from the first one only in one respect, that respect is important: whereas under the first interpretation the external perspective is skeptical about mattering, under these alternative interpretations the external perspective is nonskeptical about mattering. According to one alternative interpretation, *we have reason to believe that nothing matters*, and according to the other, *we know that nothing matters*. These two interpretations are attractive (at least as far as the plausibility Nagel's doctrine is concerned) because they get around my main objection to the first interpretation. That objection exploited the skepticism of the external perspective regarding mattering and maintained the skepticism precluded the discrepancy between the two perspectives from being conspicuous. However, with no such skepticism to exploit, the objection loses its teeth. If in fact we know that nothing matters, or at least have good reason to believe that nothing matters, but nevertheless go on believing and acting as if things do matter, then the discrepancy may indeed be a conspicuous one, and our lives absurd. Thus before I can make a final judgment about Nagel's doctrine of absurdity in "The Absurd," I need to address these two questions: (1) does the text support either of the alternative interpretations? and if so (2) is Nagel's doctrine under either of them plausible? I shall take the questions in order.

Textual Evidence for Alternative Interpretations

Making a case for either of the alternative interpretations is no easy task. It first of all requires discounting many statements in which Nagel characterizes the external perspective as one that only generates "doubts" about mattering. Nagel remarks that the external perspective makes the seriousness of everything we regard as serious "open to doubt." Our lives are absurd, he states, "because we ignore the doubts that we know cannot be settled." Early on he writes that he must defend his view of the "inescapability of doubt." He says that what the external perspective produces is "universal doubt." Moreover, he speaks of the "starting points of our skepticism." In his discussion of why our lives would be absurd in any other world, he tells us that a "larger purpose can be put in doubt in the same way that the aims of an individual life can be." He adds that "if we can step back from the purposes of individual life and doubt their point, we can step back also from the . . . kingdom, power, and glory of God, and put all these things into question in the same way." And he sums up this discussion with the general claim: "Once the fundamental doubt has begun, it cannot be laid to rest." All of these statements seem irreconcilable with the position that we have reason to believe nothing matters, and even more in conflict with the other alternative view that we know nothing matters.[1]

Adding to the woes of the alternative interpretations is the analogy Nagel painstakingly develops between his view on mattering and skepticism about the external world. Such skepticism does not contrast appearances (what we take to be reality) with a reality, nor does it inform us that there simply is no reality. Rather, it only maintains that *we have no reason to believe* the external world exists. Likewise, Nagel states that "philosophical perception of the absurd" does not contrast what we take to be serious and important with what really is so, nor does it tell us that nothing really is serious and important:

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[1]Nagel, "The Absurd," 13–17.

> In this respect, as in others, philosophical perception of the absurd resembles epistemological skepticism. In both cases the final, philosophical doubt is not contrasted with any unchallenged certainties, though it is arrived at by extrapolation from examples of doubt within the system of evidence or justification, where a contrast with other certainties *is* implied. In both cases our limitedness joins with a capacity to transcend those limitations in thought (thus seeing them as limitations, and as inescapable).[2]

Given this great mass of textual evidence against the alternative interpretations, why would I even suggest that Nagel may have one of them in mind? The answer is that notwithstanding all the counter-evidence, several other statements he makes in the essay do seem to support these interpretations. In the last sentence of the essay, for example, Nagel argues: "If *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that does not matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair."[3] In standard form, the argument is:

1. If *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that [namely, *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters] does not matter either.
2. If that [*sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters] does not matter either, then we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism and despair.
3. *Sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters.
4. Therefore, we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair.

To begin, it is noteworthy that the antecedent of the first premiss is none other than the proposition signifying value skepticism: there is no reason to believe that anything matters. More evidence for the first interpretation perhaps. However, it is also important to note

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[2]Ibid., 18.

[3]The paragraph in which the sentence is located reads: "If a sense of the absurd is a way of perceiving our true situation (even though the situation is not absurd until the perception arises), then what reason can we have to resent or escape it? Like the capacity for epistemological skepticism, it results from the ability to understand our human limitations. It need not be a matter for agony unless we make it so. Nor need it evoke a defiant contempt of fate that allows us to feel brave or proud. Such dramatics, even if carried on in private, betray a failure to appreciate the cosmic unimportance of the situation. If *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that does not matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair" (Ibid., 23).

that something is terribly wrong with the implication in the first premiss: the antecedent (*sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters) does not imply the consequent ('*sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters' does not matter either). What the antecedent *does* imply is this much more modest consequent: *there is no reason to believe* the fact that '*sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters' itself matters. In standard form, the argument reflecting this change would be:

1. If *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then there is no reason to believe the fact that '*sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters' itself matters.
2. If there is no reason to believe the fact that '*sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters' itself matters, then we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair.
3. *Sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters.
4. Therefore, we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair.[4]

Now we might say simply that Nagel was careless when he attached the consequent to his previously established antecedent—and leave the matter at that. However, we ourselves may be careless to quickly judge the matter in this manner. There is another way to revise the first premiss of the original argument, and that is to leave the consequent of the conditional alone and instead change the antecedent. If we were to

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[4]It is conceivable Nagel has given an abbreviated version of the following argument. However, if that were so, I think he would not have left as much implicit, especially when '(b)' below is in need of support.

1. If *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then either nothing matters or something matters.
2. If either nothing matters or something matters, then the fact that '*sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters' does not matter. (For (a) if nothing matters, then obviously the fact that '*sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters' does not matter either; and (b) if something matters, it is not important that '*sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters.')
3. If the fact that '*sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters' does not matter, then we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair.
4. *Sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters.
5. Therefore, we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair.

change the antecedent, it would become '*sub specie aeternitatis* nothing matters.' In standard form, the argument reflecting this change would be:

1. If *sub specie aeternitatis* nothing matters, then that [namely, *sub specie aeternitatis* nothing matters] does not matter either.
2. If that [*sub specie aeternitatis* nothing matters] does not matter either, then we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair.
3. *Sub specie aeternitatis* nothing matters.
4. Therefore, we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair.

Of course the big price of changing the antecedent to make the implication a good one is abandoning the first interpretation of Nagel's doctrine, for the revised antecedent ('*sub specie aeternitatis* nothing matters') reflects the stronger of the two alternative interpretations, and in so doing reflects value *non*skepticism. Given the cost of this alternative change, are there any reasons to support it? I think there are.

To start, it is at least curious that three of Nagel's critics in referring to the argument simply revise its first premiss's antecedent without comment. I.J.H. Williams states that "we are to regard *the fact that nothing really matters* with irony and carry on as before."[5] And Jonathan Westphal and Christopher Cherry write:

> "If *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that does not matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair." But this recursive intuition (that if *nothing matters* [my emphasis] then that does not matter either) is not really solidly convincing. Perhaps nothing matters *except* that nothing matters. Why not?[6]

Second, the phrase 'there is no reason to believe that . . .' does have a connotation that is not epistemically neutral; we sometimes use it euphemistically to suggest there is good reason to believe the opposite of what we are saying there is no reason to believe. "Mary, you have no reason to believe that your good friend Patrick swiped your copy of *Crime and Punishment*!" Here, I may well not be declaring that it is fifty-fifty whether Patrick

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[5]Williams, 311. Emphasis mine.

[6]Westphal and Cherry, 102.

stole the book, but instead that it is unlikely he took the book or even that he did not take it. Thus when Nagel states that there is no reason to believe that anything matters, he might really mean the proposition that there is good reason to believe that nothing does. Incidentally, we sometimes use the term 'doubt' to express this same inclination to disbelieve something, instead of to express neutral uncertainty. The verb form can mean "feel distrust of . . . inclined to disbelieve . . . suspicious of."[7] So it is at least possible Nagel is using 'doubt' in this sense in those passages I cited above or that he unwittingly switched connotations at some point in his own mind.

While I do not think this problematic last sentence itself (that is, isolated from the rest of the essay), along with my commentary on it, is strong evidence that Nagel is, or is at some point, really nonskeptical about mattering, it becomes stronger in view of other remarks he makes which seem explicitly to affirm that the external perspective reveals we at least have good reason to believe nothing about our lives matters. For example, he refers to "the cosmic unimportance" of our lives in the penultimate sentence of the essay, the sentence preceding the problematic one just discussed.[8] If indeed Nagel believes our lives may or may not matter—if he thinks there is no reason to believe that anything matters but no reason to believe nothing does—then certainly he would not purposefully call our lives cosmically unimportant. In addition, when he argues earlier that we cannot abandon the internal perspective and live solely by the dictates of the external standpoint, he writes that "it is useless to mutter: 'Life is meaningless; life is meaningless . . .' as an accompaniment to everything we do. In continuing to live and work and strive, we take ourselves seriously in action no matter what we say."[9] And shortly thereafter he states

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[7]*Webster's New World Dictionary.*

[8]Please see note 3 for the paragraph in which this quotation is located.

[9]Nagel, "The Absurd," 20.

that from the external perspective our lives seem "trivial."[10] If from the external perspective we are skeptical about mattering, why on earth would Nagel imply that its mantra is life is meaningless, or why would he claim that our lives seem trivial to it?

Yet another place in the essay strongly suggesting Nagel is nonskeptical about mattering is in his discussion of why a mouse's life is not absurd. He states that the only condition saving a mouse from absurdity is that a mouse cannot take up an external perspective. If a mouse could, then his life, like ours, would become absurd; for he would see that he is "only a mouse" but would nevertheless "have to return to his meager yet frantic life."[11] The implication here is that we do see we are *only human* and nevertheless return to our *meager yet frantic lives*, and hence we, unlike a mouse, lead absurd lives. However, these descriptions suggest we know or at least have good reason to believe that our lives are unimportant; for if the external perspective were genuinely skeptical about mattering, we would not conclude from this perspective that we are *only* human or that our lives are meager. (And, for that matter, neither would a mouse see himself as "only a mouse" and his life as "meager yet frantic" if he could assume an external perspective and that perspective produced skepticism about mattering.)

I think this textual evidence warrants our going back to Nagel's central claim of his doctrine and seeing if it in any way lends itself to the alternative interpretations. Once again that claim is: "If there is a philosophical sense of absurdity . . . it must arise from the perception of something universal—some respect in which pretension and reality inevitably clash for us all. This condition is supplied . . . by 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." As I indicated in chapter 2, the one possible opening to the second interpretation lies in the term

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[10]Ibid., 21.

[11]Ibid.

"arbitrary." What does Nagel mean by 'the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as *arbitrary*'? Does this mean the same thing as 'the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as *open to doubt*'? Maybe not. Let us consider other passages in the essay wherein Nagel refers to our arbitrariness, as well as passages not containing this term but which may countenance nonskepticism:

> Without developing the illusion that they [humans] are able to escape from their highly specific and idiosyncratic position, they can view it *sub specie aeternitatis*—and the view is at once sobering and comical. . . .
>
> The things we do or want without reasons, and without requiring reasons—the things that define what is a reason for us and what is not—are the starting points of our skepticism. We see ourselves from outside, and all the contingency and specificity of our aims and pursuits become clear. Yet when we take this view and recognize what we do as *arbitrary*, it does not disengage us from life, and there lies our absurdity: not in the fact that such an external view can be taken of us, but in the fact that we ourselves can take it, without ceasing to be the persons whose ultimate concerns are so coolly regarded. . . .
>
> It is as legitimate to find ultimate justification there [in a larger purpose] as to find it earlier, among the details of individual life. But this does not alter the fact that justifications come to an end when we are content to have them end—when we do not find it necessary to look any further. . . .
>
> We adhere to them [the ordinary standards that guide our lives] because of the way we are put together; what seems to us important or serious or valuable would not seem so if we were differently constituted. . . .
>
> By feigning a nebula's-eye view, we illustrate the capacity to see ourselves without presuppositions, as *arbitrary*, idiosyncratic, highly specific occupants of the world, one of countless possible forms of life.[12]

Nagel in these passages expresses several related points, or premisses, that appear to lead him to the conclusion that our lives do not really matter: (1) we feel and think certain things are important rather than others, or rather than little else or nothing at all, simply because of the way we have been constructed; (2) had we been put together differently, other things would have seemed important to us, or maybe nothing at all; and (3) there are both existing and countless possible other forms of life, and hence both existing and countless possible value systems that differ from our own, which means our

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[12]Ibid., 15–18, 21. Emphasis mine.

own value system is "peculiar" (or "idiosyncratic" or "highly specific") and "contingent." From these premisses we can conclude that what from our idiosyncratic internal perspective we think is significant is only so from that perspective, and is not "really, objectively significant."[13]

The first and second premisses suggest that what in fact we value depends on how we happen to be organized. (And what other existing creatures value depends on how they happen to be organized, or what any possible creature would value would depend on how it was put together.) They suggest that Nagel believes such subjectivity in valuing encompasses not only all our emotional responses to states of affairs, but also our reasoning. We have reasons for believing certain things matter, but these reasons themselves are shaped by, and hence are only as deep as, our particular mental and physical properties—had we a different structure, we would have counted other considerations as reasons, or perhaps we would not have counted anything as a reason. This consideration seems to lead Nagel to conclude that the view that values are "out there in the world" for any creature with the sufficient sophistication to discover is naive and mistaken; values are irreducibly subjective. The third premiss states that there are both existing and countless possible organizational configurations, and hence value systems, that differ from our own. And this fact—combined with the fact about the subjective nature of values—would seem to prevent us from calling what we happen to value universally valuable, or cosmically important.

Now if we could respond rationally to this understanding the external perspective affords us, we would "disengage" ourselves from our "comical" lives we falsely believe are objectively important from the internal perspective. (We might again think of Nagel's hypothetical super-mouse, aware it is "only a mouse.") But we cannot disengage ourselves. We cannot help but "drag the superior awareness through a strenuous

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[13]Ibid., 19.

mundane life," force the "engagement of a transcendent awareness in the assiduous pursuit of mundane goals," and hence our lives are absurd.[14]

Moreover, our lives in any other world would be absurd too. For our concerns and goals in another world would be just as irreducibly subjective and idiosyncratic as our earthly ones are now. Whatever those concerns and goals would be, their validity would extend only so far as our idiosyncratic organization, and we would not have had them if we had been put together differently. As Gordon puts the matter: "If God exists . . . and this is occasion for our joy, so much for our peculiar needs and the peculiar source of their gratification. Under that cold and withering gaze, this fact about our needs and the source of their fulfillment becomes another arbitrary idiosyncrasy of the human drama."[15] In a word, values are only skin deep. There are a variety of skins we know to exist and an infinite number of forms skins could take. And that is all. There is nothing underneath them that makes one the one true skin.[16]

I think it is worth noting at this point a striking similarity between Nagel's language in the passages above and his language in certain passages in his most recent book, *The Last Word*, wherein he describes what he explicitly tells us is the basic dialectic of ethical subjectivism. If it is ethical subjectivism that Nagel describes in the book—and we know it is—then it seems hard to deny that it is the view he describes in the essay.

> Since all justifications come to an end with what the people who accept them find acceptable and not in need of further justification, no conclusion, it is thought, can claim validity beyond the community whose acceptance validates it. . . .

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[14]Ibid., 22.

[15]Gordon, 18–19.

[16]This explanation of why our lives would be absurd in *any* world is substantially different from the explanation under the first interpretation of the doctrine characterized by value skepticism. There the explanation involved unsettlable doubt about mattering in any world; here, in contrast, such doubt is replaced with knowledge that value in any given world would go no deeper than the peculiar, contingent way we were constructed.

> The subjectivist's all-purpose comment, applicable to anything we say or do, including any procedure of justification and criticism, is that it is ultimately the manifestation of contingent dispositions for which there is no further justification. Justification proceeds only within the practices which those dispositions support—practices that reflect the common forms of life of our culture or our species, but nothing more universal than that. . . . It is always possible to say, after the final justification has been given, "But that is only something that *satisfies* you, something you say with the conviction that it requires no further justification: and all that you say is merely a manifestation of the contingencies of your personal, social, and biological makeup. The end of the line is not the content of your reasoning but rather the fact that for you, justifications come to an end here; and that is a natural fact."[17]

Notwithstanding, one might object that my reading of the term 'arbitrary' in Nagel's central claim and elsewhere—and hence the interpretation of Nagel as nonskeptical about values—is off the mark. Regarding the question of whether Nagel means the same thing by 'arbitrary' and 'open to doubt' in the central claim, one might point out that his grammar suggests he means the same.[18] The comma after 'arbitrary' indicates that 'or open to doubt' is an appositive, a word group that simply identifies, defines, or renames 'arbitrary.' Also, he neither states anywhere that the two terms express different ideas nor explicitly gives them separate treatment. 'Arbitrary' can mean "not fixed by rules but left to one's judgment or choice," or "based on one's preference, notion, whim; capricious."[19] All Nagel means by the term, then, is that given our epistemic predicament, we cannot justify making the particular value choices we do make over those we do not, which makes our choices in the end a matter of the way we are put together—that is, a matter of whimsy, caprice. Arbitrariness in this sense is just another way to express value skepticism. That our lives are arbitrary in the deeper sense of our value system being on a par with other actual and possible ones is not part of Nagel's

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[17]Nagel, *The Last Word*, 4–5, 26–27.

[18]"This condition [of philosophical absurdity] is supplied, I shall argue, by 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."

[19]*Webster's New World Dictionary*.

doctrine. As Feezell writes: "We pursue justifications to a point at which our beliefs can no longer be justified and we understand that our life can never be supported wholly by reason. There must be [a] kind of arbitrariness about our life. . . . Thus, our life is absurd 'because we ignore the doubts that we know cannot be settled, continuing to live with nearly undiminished seriousness in spite of them.'"[20]

I think such a reading of 'arbitrary' in the essay is, on its face, plausible. Its beauty lies in making Nagel's essay consistent. Still, at the end of the day, I do not see the way to reconcile it with many of the passages cited above. At the very least, I think those passages preclude us from dismissing the possibility that Nagel is nonskeptical about mattering and instead call for our going ahead and evaluating the alternative interpretations. Moreover, even if neither reflects Nagel's true view, they seem to me worthy of critical examination in their own right. I shall have a word or two more to say about the issue of interpretation at the end of the chapter.

Evaluation of Alternative Interpretations

The main problem with the doctrine under the first interpretation, we might remember, is that the discrepancy between pretension (believing that, and acting as if, things matter) and reality (not in fact having any reason to believe that anything matters) is not *conspicuous*: even though we do not have any reason to believe that anything matters, it is not *ridiculous* to go on believing and acting as if we do. The alternative interpretations avoid this problem by changing the reality from 'our not having any reason to believe that anything matters' to either 'our knowing that nothing matters' or 'our having good reason to believe that nothing matters,' and in so doing perhaps making the discrepancy conspicuous. However, the high cost of making the discrepancy conspicuous

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[20]Feezell, 262.

and avoiding the main objection to the first interpretation is the difficult task of establishing the new, bolder nonskeptical claims.

Gordon, for one, argues that it is impossible for us to be convinced that nothing matters.[21] To support this claim, he offers a thought experiment:

> Imagine that we are beings in every respect like ourselves except in respect to values. Now there are mutants among us who believe it is of great importance that human beings be treated justly. But we, in our greater wisdom, know justice to be of no importance, a foolish and sentimental ideal. Can this fiction reveal to us the arbitrariness of our concerns. Surely not. . . .
>
> [1] It is not enough that we be able to imagine a being differently constituted from ourselves in order to call our own moral constitution into question; [2] it is necessary that we be convinced that the alteration would leave us *no worse off*. [3] But it is impossible for us to believe this about a consciousness that would systematically reject all our ultimate concerns, and so [4] this . . . [thought experiment] must . . . fail to establish the arbitrariness of those concerns.[22]

What I have labeled as Gordon's first premiss is important, and I think it is true. The fact that we can imagine countless possible creatures who do not share some or all of our core values because they are put together differently does not relativize values any more than the fact that we inhabit the world with creatures who do not share some of our core values. The hypothetical beings and existing nonhuman beings may be incorrect in their estimation of what is important and what is not, what is right and wrong—and we may be correct. Indeed, those who think the first premiss in the passage above is false (and unfortunately Nagel might be one of them) commit the same mistake as those who argue from the apparent fact that different human cultures have different moral codes to the conclusion that there is no objective truth in ethics. That mistake involves inferring *what is actually the case* from facts about *what is believed*. Scientists disagree about the

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[21]While Gordon does not recognize two main readings of Nagel's essay as I do (he believes Nagel's view is the bold nonskeptical one that nothing matters), he does as far as I can tell offer objections to both of them. In this way, Gordon's essay reflects Nagel's.

[22]Gordon, 23.

origin of our universe, but surely we would be wrong to infer from such disagreement that there is no truth in the matter. The view that there is no universal truth in ethics *might* be true, but it cannot be inferred solely from the fact that different creatures could, and do, have different values.

If "[1] it is not enough that we be able to imagine a being differently constituted from ourselves in order to call our own moral constitution into question," then what more is needed? Gordon's second premiss answers this question. We would need to be persuaded that if our values were changed in the manner suggested by the thought experiment, the change would not really matter. However, according to Gordon (as reflected in the third premiss), we would never concede that such a change would not really matter. We would not because we value justice and friendship and courage and generosity and the like ever so strongly—these values are "unassailably valid" to us. Therefore, Gordon concludes, we could never seriously question that what is important to us is important, period—that is, is *not* arbitrary.

Gordon's reasoning here closely resembles that involved in his objection to the first interpretation of Nagel's doctrine, and once again I think it can be criticized from a Nagelian standpoint. The third premiss amounts to the claim that we could never be convinced that there is no absolute value. Now perhaps *from the internal perspective* it is practically impossible for us to believe the value alteration would not ultimately matter. But it is not obvious that *from the detached, disinterested external perspective* we could never be persuaded the change would not really matter. I do not think ethical subjectivism would be beyond the reach of our acceptance if the arguments were there to back it up any more than, say, atheism is beyond our reach, which many people do seem genuinely to accept.

Therefore, I believe that Gordon's argument, as it stands, fails. Again, it does so because its third premiss seems to be false and Gordon does not give us any reason to believe it is true. However, I also believe the argument can be amended and made much

more plausible. If the problematic third premiss is replaced with the more modest one that ethical subjectivism is controversial and that Nagel has not made a persuasive case for it, then Gordon's conclusion follows and Nagel's doctrine of absurdity, interpreted as nonskeptical about mattering, will have been shown to be inadequate. This alternative objection to Nagel's doctrine is in fact Quentin Smith's main objection. Smith argues that Nagel's doctrine begs the question against mattering, that Nagel *assumes* our ultimate moral reasons are contingent and arbitrary. Smith asks:

> Why should we accept this assumption? I do not see that Nagel has given us any reason to think the end-points of ethical justification are arbitrary and contingent, or even has attempted to offer any argument for this claim. Why cannot we adopt the objectivist and absolutist view that some end-points of justification are *necessary and self-evident moral truths*, such as *that wisdom, friendship and aesthetic appreciation are intrinsically good*? . . . Perhaps this viewpoint on moral issues is mistaken, but if so, it must be shown to be such and cannot simply be dismissed without argument or ignored.[23]

Smith, unlike Gordon, stops short of claiming that any argument in support of ethical subjectivism cannot succeed. However, Smith correctly points out that nowhere in "The Absurd" does Nagel *argue* for ethical subjectivism, or against ethical objectivity, and such a criticism, to my mind, suffices to put a heavy burden of proof on Nagel's shoulders. My objection to Nagel's doctrine, then, is essentially the same as Smith's. Nagel neither establishes that we know nothing matters nor even that we have reason to believe nothing matters. It is true that we are only one among countless possible forms of life and that countless possible forms of life would not find important what we do; and in view of these facts Nagel may be justified in calling our form of life or position highly specific and idiosyncratic. Further, if by calling our lives contingent, Nagel means simply we are beings who might not have existed or existed as we do now, then again he is probably correct. Still we are not justified to infer from these facts that our lives do not matter, or even that we have reason to believe that they do not matter. Perhaps our peculiar form of

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[23]Smith, 121.

life is special in the sense that what we judge significant is "really, objectively significant." What has Nagel stated, let alone established, that supports the claim that our peculiar form of life is *not* special? Smith correctly answers that Nagel has stated nothing.

Which Doctrine?

In the final analysis, which of the two doctrines, if either, most likely represents Nagel's view in "The Absurd"? For their part, Nagel's critics are far from unanimous in their reading of the essay. Feezell, Gordon, Westphal and Cherry, and Williams all to one extent or another blur the two interpretations as Nagel himself does, and they seem as unaware as Nagel that the doctrine so interpreted is incoherent.

Feezell in several places describes the external perspective as producing only doubt about values, and he even makes the same comparison with skepticism about the existence of the external world that Nagel makes. However, within this analysis Feezell appears to slip into the nonskeptical stance. Offering a way to avoid the Nagelian conspicuous discrepancy between pretension and reality, and hence a way to avoid absurdity, he writes:

> How can one *act* as if one is serious, that is live *as if* things have some transparent significance and justification, all the while denying it? A good example of this arises in sports. Between the extreme attitudes described by the slogans "Winning is not everything, it is the only thing," and "It is only a game," is a paradoxical middle way, pursuing sport *as if* it had some ultimate significance . . . and at the same time realizing that it does not *really* matter. It is to care, toil, and even suffer, while embracing a reflective detachment undermining the significance or justification of your activity. It is to recognize an apparent seriousness in action mediated by a reflective negation of that seriousness, both in the unity of a single attitude.[24]

Interestingly, Gordon moves in the opposite direction. He begins with a discussion of Nagel as nonskeptical about mattering, and in particular of Nagelian arbitrariness. At one point he states: "Each of these activities [an ant's trying to lift an insect's carcass, a man or a woman trying to create a piece of art, a man who devotes his life to the glory of

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[24]Feezell, 261–65.

God] has its importance only within the narrow, idiosyncratic compass of the creature in question. Take the backward step and any human enterprise—however vital, however lofty from our ordinary perspective—becomes a curiosity, slightly comical, slightly mad."[25] However, as the discussion proceeds, he seems to see Nagel as a value skeptic. Now the arbitrariness that the external perspective reveals is alleged only to have "the force of calling into question the legitimacy of my concerns as a man," or "to call our own moral constitution into question." He states that "it is easy to exaggerate the ease with which we may call all moral values into question, and it is this fact . . . that gives Nagel's analysis its initial plausibility."[26] Here, then, Gordon appears to think the external perspective produces only skepticism about values.

Early in their critical essay on "The Absurd," Westphal and Cherry describe the Nagelian external perspective as "the expression of a certain sort of skepticism characteristic of conscious beings who can take the backward step of self-reflection." Shortly thereafter, however, they state that "a man of integrity or humanity" lives a life that "outshines the obscure arguments to the effect that everything must ultimately be destroyed, or that nothing, in itself, matters, or the reflective consciousness which, according to Nagel, stands behind them." Then the two critics go back to calling the external perspective "the skeptical view," only later to suggest again a Nagelian nonskeptical external perspective by using the term "ultimate disvalue" to describe what it reveals.[27]

Finally, Williams seems to flip-flop too. He begins by viewing Nagel as a value skeptic: "As reflective beings we will inevitably be afflicted by the form of doubt responsible for the philosophical sense of absurdity Nagel is expounding." Then he

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[25]Gordon, 18.

[26]Ibid., 22–23.

[27]Westphal and Cherry, 99–102.

presents the nonskeptical view by stating that Nagel argues that "we are to regard the fact that nothing really matters with irony and carry on as before." However, one paragraph later he appears to be back to the skeptical view when he describes the analogy between epistemological skepticism and "doubt concerning the coherence of life." And yet shortly thereafter he writes: "A person may conclude that nothing matters, but he will draw this conclusion from within the context of his own life, and from within the form of life to which it belongs, not by philosophical reflection on the nature of reasons and justification."[28]

For their part, Luper-Foy and Smith do not blur the interpretations, but each opts for a different one: Luper-Foy consistently interprets Nagel as being skeptical about mattering, while Smith views Nagel a nonskeptic. Luper-Foy writes that in "The Absurd" "the problem is a kind of skepticism. . . . We are not to understand that in reality nothing is significant; instead, the idea appears to be that our encounter with the view *sub specie aeternitatis* enables us to see that we lack any reason to think that anything matters. . . . The skeptical doubts that so exercised Nagel when he wrote his essay leave open the possibility that life really is worthwhile."[29] Smith, on the other hand, states that Nagel "assumes without argument an ethical subjectivism and relativism . . ."[30]

In the final analysis, I am more persuaded that Nagel had both interpretations in mind when writing the essay than I am that he consistently had only one. Among the considerations that have led me to this position are two main ones. First, while the two interpretations are different, indeed incompatible, they can easily be confused, as five of Nagel's critics bear out. Believing there is no reason to think something obtains may subtly tempt us to think the thing does not obtain. Adding to this psychological

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[28]Williams, 309–312.

[29]Luper-Foy, 86–87.

[30]Smith, 121.

motivation for Nagel to blur the two positions is, I think, a polemic one. To establish absurdity Nagel needs a reality that is both *defensible* and, juxtaposed to a pretension of ours, *conspicuously* discrepant. With value skepticism, a thesis with formidable supporting arguments, Nagel gets a *defensible* reality; with the nonskeptical view that nothing matters, he gets a *conspicuously* discrepant reality. (Put negatively, he does not get a conspicuously discrepant reality with only value skepticism, and he does not get a persuasive reality with only the nonskeptical view that nothing matters .) This interpretation of the essay makes, to my mind, the most sense of Nagel's words in it. It makes the most sense out of Nagel putting our knowledge of values on a par with epistemological skepticism and then two sentences later asserting our lives are cosmically unimportant. Having said this, I would also say that, officially, Nagel is probably a value skeptic, and my discussion in the next, and final, section of this chapter should explain why I believe this is so. Of course the question that is most crucial to answer is whether either interpretation of the doctrine is plausible. I have argued that neither is. Either the discrepancy Nagel explains to us is not conspicuous or it is conspicuous but not established, and hence he has failed to make a good case in "The Absurd" that our lives are absurd.

Conclusion

I would like to end this chapter, and my discussion of Nagel's doctrine of absurdity in "The Absurd," by discussing two further issues of interpretation that may seem to make the essay even more puzzling than the discussion has made it out to be thus far. The first, which I mentioned in chapters 1 and 2, concerns the apparent inconsistency between either of Nagel's doctrines of absurdity and his earlier criticism of the Death Argument. The second issue has to do with the apparent inconsistency between either of the doctrines and Nagel's views on the objectivity of values both before and immediately after he wrote "The Absurd." If these inconsistencies are not merely apparent but real, then a handful of

possible conclusions present themselves, ranging from Nagel contradicting himself in the essay to my not having understood it. I shall take the two issues in order.

We may remember that the Death Argument concludes our lives are absurd on the ground that none of our actions are justified or worth doing because they will come to nothing when we die, to which Nagel responds:

> Life does not consist of a sequence of activities each of which has as its purpose some later member of the sequence. Chains of justification come repeatedly to an end within life, and whether the process as a whole can be justified has no bearing on the finality of these end-points. No further justification is needed to make it reasonable to take aspirin for a headache, attend an exhibition of the work of a painter one admires, or stop a child from putting his hand on a hot stove. No larger context or further purpose is needed to prevent these acts from being pointless.[31]

Later in the essay, Nagel, attempting to clarify the external perspective, writes: "The crucial backward step is not taken by asking for still another justification in the chain, and failing to get it. The objections to that line of attack have already been stated; justifications come to an end."[32] Here Nagel is expressing his approval of his objections to the Death Argument, including the one contained in the passage above. So far so good. However, immediately after writing this, he seems to suggest that individual end-links in chains and the chains themselves are ultimately in need of justification:

> But this [that justifications come to an end] is precisely what provides universal doubt with its object. We step back to find that the whole system of justification and criticism, which controls our choices and supports our claims to rationality, rests on responses and habits that we never question, that we should not know how to defend without circularity, and to which we shall continue to adhere even after they are called into question.
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> The things we do or want without reasons, and without requiring reasons—the things that define what is a reason for us and what is not—are the starting points of our skepticism.[33]

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[31]Nagel, "The Absurd," 12.

[32]Ibid., 15.

[33]Ibid.

And shortly after this passage, Nagel once again first expresses his approval of his objections to the Death Argument and then goes on and makes claims that appear to undermine them:

> It is as legitimate to find ultimate justification there [in a larger enterprise, such as service to society, science, or religion] as to find it earlier, among the details of individual life. But this does not alter the fact that justifications come to an end when we are content to have them end—when we do not find it necessary to look any further. . . .
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> . . . We notice that certain types of evidence convince us, that we are content to allow justifications of belief to come to an end at certain points, that we feel we know many things even without knowing or having grounds for believing the denial of others which, if true, would make what we claim to know false. . . .
>
> . . . We can ask not only why we should take aspirin, but why we should take trouble over our own comfort at all. The fact that we shall take the aspirin without waiting for an answer to this last question does not show that it is an unreal question.[34]

First, we should note that these latter passages clearly reveal that (1) Nagel believes he earlier gave more than one objection to the Death Argument, (2) he is aware of these objections, and (3) he thinks they are perfectly consistent with his own argument for absurdity. Now is it possible to provide an interpretation that shows all of the claims in all of these passages are indeed consistent? Specifically, can we reconcile the following numbered propositions with the lettered ones?

1. No further justification is needed to make it reasonable to take aspirin for a headache. . . . No larger context or further purpose is needed to prevent [this act] . . . from being pointless.

A. We can ask not only why we should take aspirin, but why we should take trouble over our own comfort at all. The fact that we shall take the aspirin without waiting for an answer to this last question does not show that it is an unreal question.

2. It is as legitimate to find ultimate justification there [in a larger enterprise] as to find it earlier, among the details of individual life.

B. But this [the legitimacy of finding ultimate justification in a larger enterprise and among the details of individual life] does not alter the fact that

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[34]Ibid., 16, 18, 19.

justifications come to an end when we are content to have them end—when we do not find it necessary to look any further.

C. The things we do or want without reasons, and without requiring reasons—the things that define what is a reason for us and what is not—are the starting points of our skepticism.

Perhaps the way to reconcile the numbered propositions with the lettered ones is to focus on what Nagel thinks the defender of the Death Argument contends. Perhaps Nagel thinks this person contends that *from the internal perspective* (*within the "system of justification and criticism, which controls our choices and supports our claims to rationality"*), there are no end-links in chains of justification since we must die. And Nagel's response is that *from this perspective*, there certainly are such end-links; *within this system of justification and criticism*, it is reasonable, not pointless, to take aspirin; *here* it is legitimate to find ultimate justification in certain acts and enterprises. Hence death does not cut off chains that might otherwise have end-links, and therefore death cannot be what makes our lives absurd.

Now I suppose one might question this interpretation of Nagel's objection to the Death Argument. Why, one might ask, would Nagel conceive the argument's defender as offering the argument entirely within the internal perspective? Why would not Nagel give the Death Argument defender the benefit of the external perspective, interpret the argument as a transcendental one, not unlike his own?[35] (Of course if Nagel had—making the argument's defender's main claim the transcendental one that there *really* are no end-links in chains of justification, or at least that we have no reason to believe there *really* are such end-links—then in refuting the Death Argument Nagel would at the same time be refuting his own doctrine of absurdity.) The correct answer to these questions, I think, is that Nagel claims only to be evaluating a "standard argument" for absurdity, one which

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[35]By the term 'transcendental' here and below, I only mean the following: of or relating to something (e.g., an argument or a claim or a question) that in some way, and to some extent, lies outside the internal perspective, or that does not presuppose the "system of justification and criticism, which controls our choices and supports our claims to rationality." Thus the question "But should we take *anything* seriously?" is, in this sense, a transcendental question

many persons on the street give, and persons on the street make arguments from within the "system of justification and criticism, which controls our choices and supports our claims to rationality." This consideration, along with the one that the alternative interpretation of Nagel's objection would indeed land him in a terrible contradiction, gives us good reason to believe that the interpretation of the objection I have offered is correct.

Incidentally, the Death Argument does not seem to fare any better with the benefit of the external perspective and Nagel's above lettered claims it allegedly generates. For suppose the defender of the Death Argument were given the external perspective and, on Nagelian grounds, concluded that there really are no end-links in chains of justification, or at least that we have no reason to believe there really are such end-links. Certainly immortality would not change anything. It would not give us end-links. So death, under this supposition, would not have anything to do with what makes our lives absurd. In view of this, Nagel might have stated that if the defender of the Death Argument wishes to question the end-links of justification by assuming an external perspective and arguing as Nagel himself does, he or she may do so, but that will make death irrelevant; and if, on the other hand, the argument's defender wishes to question the end-links from the internal perspective, he or she is simply misguided—justifications come to an end within life—and hence once again the absurdity of our lives will not have anything to do with death.

However, Nagel is not in the clear yet. We might remember from chapter 1 that after criticizing the Death Argument by contending that, from within, justifications come to an end, Nagel offers another objection. This objection itself is a transcendental argument (in the Nagelian sense) insofar as it purports to be an (external) defense of our (internal) system of beliefs about values. Nagel writes:

> Even if someone wished to supply a further justification for pursuing all the things in life that are commonly regarded as self-justifying, that justification would have to end somewhere too. If *nothing* can justify unless it is justified in terms of something outside itself, which is also justified, then an infinite regress results, and no chain of justification can be complete. Moreover, if a finite chain of reasons

> cannot justify anything, what could be accomplished by an infinite chain, each link of which must be justified by something outside itself?
>
> Since justifications must come to an end somewhere, nothing is gained by denying that they end where they appear to, within life. . . .[36]

The objection condensed and in standard form seems to be this:

1. Justifications must end somewhere. (For if *nothing* can justify unless it is justified in terms of something outside itself, which is also justified, then an infinite regress results.)
2. Nothing is gained by denying that justifications end where they appear to, within life.
3. Therefore, justifications probably do end within life—certain actions of ours probably are ultimately justified.

Here, I am afraid, no charitable interpretation is available that would make this objection consistent with Nagel's own doctrine of absurdity, and in particular those lettered propositions above. Here it seems Nagel really is inconsistent. When he states—transcendentally this time—that "justifications must come to an end somewhere" (the conclusion of the infinite regress argument), and further states, transcendentally, that "nothing is gained by denying that they end where they appear to, within life" (that is, from the internal perspective, from within the "system of justification and criticism, which controls our choices and supports our claims to rationality"), he gives us a reason to believe that things matter and hence contradicts the main claim of his doctrine of absurdity: that we have no reason to believe anything matters, or even that nothing does matter.

This contradiction might motivate us to question both of my interpretations of Nagel's argument for absurdity—especially if we combine the contradiction with what seems to be Nagel engaging in normative ethics in his book that precedes "The Absurd" and in an essay that succeeds it. To be sure, if "The Absurd" is sandwiched between two works in which Nagel defends the claim that things matter and should be taken seriously, then perhaps I have got the essay, and his argument for absurdity within it, all wrong.

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[36]Ibid., 12.

Let us first consider the essay that was written shortly after "The Absurd." The essay I have in mind is "War and Massacre," which, Nagel tells us in a footnote, was completed in 1971, the same year "The Absurd" was published.[37] In the opening paragraph of "War and Massacre," Nagel plainly states his thesis, and it appears to contradict the moral skepticism or nihilism I have alleged he defends in "The Absurd." He writes: "I wish to argue that certain [moral] restrictions [on the conduct of war] are neither arbitrary nor merely conventional, and that their validity does not depend simply on their usefulness. There is, in other words, a moral basis for the rules of war, even though the conventions now officially in force are far from giving it perfect expression." We need not concern ourselves with the details of this thesis, but basically Nagel defends a deontological view, which he calls "absolutism," against utilitarianism regarding the treatment of combatants and noncombatants in time of war. He states that he thinks absolutism "underlies a valid and fundamental type of moral judgment—which cannot be reduced to or overridden by other principles. And while there may be other principles just as fundamental, it is particularly important not to lose confidence in our absolutist intuitions, for they are often the only barrier before the abyss of utilitarian apologetics for large-scale murder."[38]

For its part, Nagel's first published book, *The Possibility of Altruism*, whose publication antedates "The Absurd" one year, yields normative conclusions as well, and hence similarly appears to contradict my interpretation of his doctrine of absurdity in the

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[37]I suppose it is possible Nagel wrote "War and Massacre" before "The Absurd," but since "The Absurd" was published in 1971 and "War and Massacre" was only completed that year and published late 1972, I think it is reasonable to conclude that he wrote "The Absurd" first. In either case, the proximity, not the order, is what is significant. Thomas Nagel, "War and Massacre," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972); reprinted in Nagel, *Mortal Questions*. All page references refer to *Mortal Questions*.

[38]Ibid., 53, 56. I perhaps should note that Nagel argues that in rare circumstances neither the absolutist principle nor the utilitarian principle is superior, resulting in an unresolvable moral dilemma.

essay.[39] In short, Nagel tries to establish that in two important respects ethics is not founded on sentiment, but something deeper, thus giving ethics a more objective foundation. First, the motivation for acting on moral propositions is contained in the cognitive content of those propositions themselves (strong internalism or prescriptivism), rather than being dependent on something outside them, such as desire (externalism or descriptivism). Thus once we accept the truth of a moral claim, we thereby have a reason to act on it; we do not need, in addition, a certain desire to have a reason for acting. Reasons create desires for acting, not the other way around. Second, altruism does not depend on feelings of sympathy or benevolence but rather on the realization that each of us is only a person among many who are as real as we (universalizability). This realization alone gives us reason to take the interests of others into consideration. Nagel believes that this universal prescriptivism, then, provides the basis for constructing a normative ethical theory; and while he stops well short of constructing such a theory in the book, he does indicate that a plausible one will probably be moderately deontological. Thus it appears that not only immediately after "The Absurd" but also before it, and for quite some time, Nagel is committed to the existence of objective values, which makes the essay under my interpretations seem very odd.

However, I think a close reading of *The Possibility of Altruism* reveals that it is consistent with value skepticism, and hence with at least my first interpretation of Nagel's doctrine of absurdity in "The Absurd." In fact, the book outwardly supports value skepticism. Late in the book, Nagel writes:

> Moreover it must be repeated that an interpretation of the kind I have offered is neither a justification of the conduct which it explains, nor a demonstration that such conduct is necessary. It is not a justification, because a justification must operate within the framework of an assumed system of reasons for action, and this

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[39]Nagel tells us in the preface that the first draft of the book was written in 1966–67 and that the book grew out of his thesis for the B.Phil. at Oxford in 1960 and his doctoral dissertation at Harvard in 1963. Thus the major ideas of the book probably express his views for the entire decade preceding "The Absurd."

> interpretation offers to explain the most fundamental structure of just such a system. It is not a demonstration of necessity, because it is possible to imagine an individual fully capable of occupying the impersonal standpoint and possessing a conception of himself as just another of the world's inhabitants, who nevertheless remained from this standpoint split off, detached from his practical concerns and his rationally motivated actions.[40]

What is of importance here are Nagel's remarks about justification, but I first want to say a word or two in passing about his remarks about necessity. The individual Nagel believes is possible to imagine is someone who does not at all live from the internal perspective and hence does not take things seriously. In "The Absurd," Nagel, we know, comes close to denying the physical possibility of such an individual; and the plausibility of his doctrine of absurdity, we also know, depends on there not being one, or at least not many of them. Also, we shall see in the next chapter that after "The Absurd" the conspicuous discrepancy making our lives absurd involves, neither value skepticism nor value nihilism, but the existential inescapability of the kind of "split-offness" or "detachment" to which Nagel refers here.

But first things first. Regarding the issue of justification, Nagel in the above passage tells us in effect that he only purports to be speaking within the "system of justification and criticism, which controls our choices and supports our claims to rationality." He does not claim to be giving a justification of the system itself, which is to say that there is always the possibility of calling the system into doubt, and in particular of questioning whether anyone's interests really matter. In other words, Nagel's view in *The Possibility of Altruism* is that *given* one's own interests matter, one has an objective reason to concern oneself with the interests of others. Though this conditional is rather deep, it is a conditional nonetheless, and Nagel never suggests that it can be discharged. In view of this position in the book, we have every reason to believe that Nagel thinks his claims on behalf of absolutism in "War and Massacre" rest on this deep presupposition as well. Therefore, while *The Possibility of Altruism* and "War and Massacre" may give us

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[40]Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, 123.

reason to doubt that Nagel is a thoroughgoing value nihilist in "The Absurd," they do not give us any reason to doubt he is a value skeptic.

CHAPTER 4

THE THIRD DOCTRINE

Nagel's first discussion of absurdity after "The Absurd" lies in "Subjective and Objective," which is the concluding chapter of *Mortal Questions*, the same book in which he includes "The Absurd." While Nagel does not say the order of the two essays in the book reflects the order in which he wrote them, clearly it does for the following reason. "Subjective and Objective," first published as the concluding chapter of *Mortal Questions*, binds together "The Absurd," which had been published eight years before the book, and several other previously published chapters around a single problem. This fact strongly suggests he wrote the concluding chapter specifically for the book and hence after "The Absurd." That "Subjective and Objective" binds together several chapters in the book also indicates he wrote the chapter shortly before the book was published, and hence that a significant time elapsed between the time he wrote it and "The Absurd."[1]

Now Nagel's opening remarks on absurdity in "Subjective and Objective" concern the issue of whether the external perspective is skeptical or nonskeptical about our lives mattering. These remarks reveal that it is nonskeptical and nihilist. Nagel states that "from a point of view outside my life, my life does not matter," that from such a point of view "people, and oneself in particular, are perceived as having no significance, and absurd because they seem to accord their lives great importance in action, even though they can

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[1]Nagel writes in the preface: "These essays have both internal and external sources. Disparate as they are, they are held together by an interest in the point of view of individual human life and the problem of its relation to more impersonal conceptions of reality. This problem, which receives a general discussion in chapter 14 ['Subjective and Objective'], arises across the board in philosophy, from ethics to metaphysics" (Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, xii).

also appreciate a broader point of view from which they have no importance."[2] Thus it seems Nagel's position in "Subjective and Objective" is the same as the second doctrine of absurdity in "The Absurd" (and at the same time corroborates the view that he does in fact present that doctrine in that essay). Perhaps, then, we are justified in calling the second doctrine Nagel's prominent doctrine of absurdity. However, I am afraid this judgment is premature; for as we read through "Subjective and Objective" and come to understand its main thesis, it becomes clear that by no means is there a perfect match between Nagel's doctrine of absurdity here and his second doctrine in "The Absurd."

The Main Thesis

Nagel's main thesis in "Subjective and Objective" is that a general metaphysical problem which has divided and plagued philosophers for centuries can be resolved. That age-old problem is, as the title of the chapter suggests, the conflict between two points of view, the subjective and objective, and the two realities or worlds that correspond to these points of view. Later I shall describe in some detail what Nagel takes objective reality to be, but it will suffice now to be brief and say that generally objective reality is impersonal reality, reality *from no particular point of view*, or what is sometimes called a third-person point of view. It is the reality of things in themselves: properties of things and relations between things which obtain absent a viewer and which sufficiently intelligent beings with different means of perception would agree do obtain. Subjective reality, on the other hand, is reality *from a particular point of view*, or from what is sometimes referred to as a first-person point of view. It is the world as a subject experiences it, and as such it is the world within which properties unique to an experiencing subject, or to a particular point of view, exist. As Nagel writes: "The properties that make them [experiences] experiences exist only from the point of view of the types of beings who have them."[3]

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[2]Nagel, "Subjective and Objective," in *Mortal Questions*, 197.

[3]Ibid., 213.

Now Nagel tells us that we have had in the past, and still do today, a propensity to accept only a single conception of reality corresponding to one or the other perspective: either a wholly subjective reality (as the idealist tradition has advanced) or, more popularly, a wholly objective one (as, say, the physicalist tradition has advanced). The propensity stems from recognizing that to deny a single conception of reality "is in a sense to deny that there is a single world," and to deny a single world "is harder to accept than it may seem, for it implies that there is no single way things are in themselves."[4] Yet when we try to commit ourselves to a single conception of reality and way things are in themselves, whichever it may be, the other conception keeps popping up and nags us and makes us dissatisfied with our single conception. Hence we find ourselves in a terrible dilemma: we are dissatisfied with any single conception of reality and we are dissatisfied with anything other than such a conception.

Nagel points out that this general problem is really at the heart of more specific age-old philosophical problems, such as the problem of clashing perspectives regarding the importance of our lives, which amounts to the problem of absurdity.[5] Just as we are, generally, dissatisfied with any single conception of reality, we are, specifically, dissatisfied with a single view regarding whether our lives matter. Now if Nagel's doctrine of absurdity in "Subjective and Objective" does in fact mirror his second doctrine in "The Absurd," wherein the nihilist objective perspective has the final say about the importance of our lives, we expect Nagel would propose solving the problem of absurdity (and

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[4]Ibid., 212.

[5]To be exact, I should mention that while Nagel *describes* the problem in terms of absurdity, he actually *calls* the problem "the problem of the meaning of life." The discrepancy is understandable. Nagel, I think, takes mattering (not mattering) to be basically synonymous with meaningful (meaningless) with regard to our lives. If so, the problem of clashing perspectives regarding whether our lives *matter* can naturally be thought of as the problem of the *meaning* of life. Now what interests Nagel most about the mattering/not mattering (or meaningful/meaningless) clash is the clash itself, which, he believes, amounts to the absurdity of our lives. So for all intents and purposes, the problem of the meaning (or mattering) of life is the problem of absurdity.

perhaps the general problem and its other instances as well) by judging supposed subjective reality illusory and eliminating it in favor of objective reality. However, such a solution is exactly what he criticizes in "Subjective and Objective." He believes that the move to eliminate the subjective or to reduce it to the objective (which he notes "has dominated recent analytic philosophy in spite of Wittgenstein") is just as implausible as denying the reality of the objective.[6] Against both kinds of reduction, Nagel insists that the correct solution to the general problem and its instances is to accept the fact of two irreducible realities, two irreducible worlds.[7] Therefore, it should be clear that Nagel's doctrine of absurdity in "Subjective and Objective" is not only not identical with the second doctrine in "The Absurd," but incompatible with it.

The Objective Perspective and Importance

If, then, Nagel's doctrine of absurdity in "Subjective and Objective" is not the second doctrine, what exactly is it? To begin, as we know, Nagel in "The Absurd" thinks the operative belief generated by the external perspective (nothing, including our lives, matters) *epistemically trumps* that produced by the internal perspective (our lives matter). There the belief that nothing matters is true; therefore, the belief that our lives matter is mistaken. In contrast, Nagel's solution to the general problem of subjectivity and objectivity in "Subjective and Objective" suggests he thinks that the belief of the external view does *not* epistemically trump that of the internal view. It suggests that the two beliefs are *epistemic equals*, not in the sense that we do not know which one is true (which would amount to the value skepticism of the first doctrine in "The Absurd") but in

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[6]Nagel also argues in the essay that attempts to *annex* the subjective to the objective fail as well (Ibid., 210–211).

[7]Against the reductionist objective conception, he writes: "Reality is not just objective reality, and the pursuit of objectivity is not an equally effective method of reaching the truth about everything." And against the reductionist subjective conception, he states: "Objective reality cannot be analyzed or shut out of existence anymore than subjective reality can" (Ibid., 212–213).

the sense that, with a qualification, *both are true*. The qualification is that each belief is true only from the perspective that generates it. Thus insofar as the external view "claims a position of dominance, as the only complete conception of how things really are," and declares that "people, and oneself in particular . . . have no importance," it is mistaken. For its part, the internal perspective is incorrect for the same reason when it claims that "issues of significance are significant only if they can be raised from inside," that it "does not matter that from a point of view outside my life, my life does not matter."[8] We might call this new Nagelian view *value perspectivism*. It is not to be confused with value subjectivism or relativism, which do not recognize and accept such dual perspectives on value, not at least in their traditional forms.

I am not altogether confident this interpretation of the text is right on the mark. One reason I am not is that Nagel states the specific problem of absurdity before he solves the general problem of subjectivity and objectivity—and never readdresses the specific problem in view of the general solution. Further, he leaves open the possibility that in *certain instances* there may be no subjective reality or no objective reality; in certain instances what the subjective perspective reveals may be illusory, and the same goes for the objective perspective. Nagel suggests as much when in focusing on the objective perspective he states that we should "stop assuming that understanding of the world and our position in it can always be advanced by detaching from that position and subsuming whatever appears from there under a single more comprehensive conception. Perhaps the best or truest view is not obtained by transcending oneself as far as possible"[9] If in a particular instance an objective view is not the "best or truest" one, that would seem to imply that what it reveals, or at least part of what it reveals, is unreal. In fact, it would appear to be the case that in many instances a perspective reveals something illusory, since

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[8]Ibid., 197.

[9]Ibid., 211.

on Nagel's view, as I shall explain in some detail shortly, there is really no *one* subjective perspective and no *one* objective perspective but rather a "polarity," degrees of subjectivity and objectivity, and hence different subjective realities and objective realities competing against one another in one instance. Maybe, then, it is the case that the most distant objective perspective from which we supposedly conclude that our lives are unimportant is not the best or truest objective perspective. Maybe one closer in is, and this one is the one that is epistemically equal to the subjective view from which we conclude that our lives are very important. Such an interpretation actually receives support in both "Subjective and Objective" and Nagel's next book, *The View from Nowhere*. Let me take a moment to explain.

Regarding the support from the book, Nagel there argues that the view that nothing matters, including our lives, is not credible. At the same time, he argues that another objective—but not *so* objective—view *is* credible: that our lives matter, but not very much, a view he may think stems from consequentialist ethics. Now interestingly, one of the instances of the general problem Nagel critically examines in "Subjective and Objective" is the conflict between consequentialist and agent-centered ethical views, the former being an objective view and the latter a subjective one. In short, Nagel states that consequentialist views forbid us to pursue our personal aims and ambitions when doing so conflicts with what is in the interest of the general good, whereas agent-centered ethical views permit us, and sometimes require us, to pursue them in such circumstances.[10] Now if we take 'our lives' to mean our personal aims and ambitions, we can see how Nagel might think that the consequentialist view is one that maintains our lives do not matter much and the agent-centered view is one that purports our lives do matter much. Thus when all is said and done in "Subjective and Objective," Nagel may think the view that

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[10]Ibid., 202–206.

'our lives do not matter' is false and the views that 'our lives matter little' and 'they matter a lot' are true within their perspectives.

In the previous two paragraphs, I have actually considered two alternative interpretations of Nagel's view regarding the importance of our lives in "Subjective and Objective." One is that there are *no* epistemic equals in the case of mattering; that is, there is no *value* perspectivism. With regard to values, there is only one reality. The other interpretation is that there are epistemic equals, but they are the subjective view that our lives are very important and the objective view that our lives are important, although hardly so. In response to these alternative interpretations, I want to say, first, that the former can be safely discarded. Nagel as much as refutes it in the opening of the chapter: "There is a problem that emerges in several areas of philosophy whose connexion with one another is not obvious. I believe that it can be given a general form, and that some treatment of it is possible in abstraction from its particular instances—with results that can be applied to the instances eventually."[11] Here Nagel suggests that each of the specific problems, among them the problem of absurdity, has the same form as the general problem. The general problem involves the general statement that the subjective and objective perspectives are epistemic equals. Therefore, it stands to reason that Nagel thinks that each of the specific problems, too, involves a subjective perspective and an objective perspective being equal epistemically. So while Nagel thinks we may be able to resolve some individual clashes between subjectivity and objectivity by dismissing one of the perspectives as illusory, he does not believe this resolution is available to the individual clashes he discusses in the essay.

Now regarding the other alternative interpretation (that there are epistemic equals but that they are the subjective view that our lives matter much and the objective view that our lives matter little), I do not think it can be dismissed as easily. However, for two

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[11]Ibid., 196.

reasons I believe that it may not be as plausible as the original one I offered (that the objective epistemic equal is the view from which we judge that our lives do not matter). The first reason draws from the same passage I used to criticize the first alternative interpretation. In this passage Nagel states that we can apply the solution of the general problem of subjectivity and objectivity to the individual cases he discusses. This solution does not involve replacing an objective perspective with another; it simply demands that we accept each of the conflicting perspectives, which suggests that the clashing perspectives in the individual cases he presents are indeed the ones that enjoy equal epistemic status. On the objective side, the perspective in the problem of absurdity is the nihilist one from which we judge that our lives do not matter, not the consequentialist one from which we judge that our lives do matter, albeit just a little. We may recall Nagel's statement of the clash cited earlier: "People, and oneself in particular, are . . . absurd because they seem to accord their lives great importance in action, even though they can also appreciate a broader point of view from which they have no importance." Unless he is being sloppy here, Nagel clearly thinks the clash, which he recommends should be tolerated, involves an objective perspective that is nihilist.

The second reason I opt for the original interpretation is that there is a passage in *The View from Nowhere* where Nagel seems to be referring to the problem of absurdity and his value perspectivism in "Subjective and Objective"; and in this passage the objective perspective is the nihilist one, not the one that accords our lives a little importance:

> Even if the problem [of absurdity] can't be dismissed as unreal, it may have a simple solution. Is it so certain that the [subjective and objective] attitudes really conflict as they appear to? Since the two judgments arise from different perspectives, why isn't their content appropriately relativized to those perspectives, rendering the conflict illusory? If that were true, it would be no more problematic that the course of my life should matter from inside *but not from outside* than that a large mouse should be a small animal, or that something should look round from one direction and oval from another.[12]

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[12]Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 216. Emphasis mine.

Despite these two reasons, one might object that accepting the original interpretation commits us to the view that Nagel believes there are not only two, but at least three, perspectives with equal epistemic status regarding whether or how much our lives matter. We are committed to this view because the objective consequentialist perspective is one of the clashing perspectives in the problem of ethics he discusses in the essay. Further, Nagel tells us in "Subjective and Objective" that he defends a version of consequentialism in his first book *The Possibility of Altruism*.[13] I am not sure how to gauge the force of this objection, but one question I have is this: is a triple value perspectivism any less plausible than a dualist one? In any case, let me end this discussion on a positive note. We shall see that the original interpretation (that Nagel takes the epistemic equal on the objective side to be the nihilist view that our lives do not matter) and the second alternative interpretation (that he takes the epistemic equal on the objective side to be the consequentialist view that our lives matter, but hardly so) will serve Nagel's doctrine of absurdity in "Subjective and Objective" pretty much equally well.[14]

The Third Doctrine

In view of Nagel's value perspectivism, whether triple or dual, it may very well seem to us that he *no longer has* a doctrine of absurdity. In one fell swoop he has legitimized the internal perspective—we can have our external perspective, and internal perspective too—and hence seemingly dissolved the conspicuous discrepancy necessary for absurdity. In other words, insofar as Nagel purports to have solved the general problem of subjectivity and objectivity, does he not also purport to have solved the specific problem of absurdity?

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[13]Nagel, "Subjective and Objective," 205.

[14]For the sake of simplicity, I shall from hereon assume the original interpretation is the correct one.

It may seem so, but really Nagel does not purport to have solved the problem of absurdity. He does not think he has dissolved the conspicuous discrepancy. For he believes that while ultimately no *epistemic* tension exists between the two perspectives, a great and inescapable *psychological* tension does—and herein lies the fundamental absurdity of our lives. We all naturally come to believe the two diametrically opposed views concerning the importance of our lives, and they both are so alluring that we persist in believing them throughout our lives. We take our own lives and the lives of others very seriously from day to day, while at the same time feeling from a certain standpoint that all our lives are utterly insignificant. We concern ourselves with issues and take strong stands on them, and in a moment of reflection we judge, in viewing the world a particular way, that those issues and our involvement are kind of silly. We fret and complain about personal and world events, and then are secretly embarrassed for getting all worked up over them when upon looking at them from a certain point of view we recognize they do not matter. This never-ceasing psychological tension regarding the importance of our lives, Nagel believes, amounts to a basic conspicuous discrepancy in our lives, and hence a fundamentally absurd way of being.

Since our psychological commitment to this nihilist objective perspective is a central component of Nagel's new doctrine of absurdity, it may be worth examining in more detail what Nagel has to say about both the perspective and our alleged commitment to it before turning our attention to the plausibility of the doctrine.

In "The Absurd" Nagel only briefly describes the objective perspective, leaving us somewhat in the dark as to what he really means by it. However, in "Subjective and Objective" he devotes more time to this perspective. We learn, first, that it is really not a distinct viewpoint, but only one side of a "polarity," the subjective viewpoint making up

the polarity's other side.[15] As for the nihilist objective perspective, it is the most extreme objective perspective we take up, and as such it most closely approaches a pure objective perspective, which is but an ideal. Actual "objective" viewpoints, then, are relative: at $time_2$ a person's perspective may have been more objective than his or her perspective at $time_1$, but less objective than now at $time_3$. Regarding this point, Nagel states that "a general human point of view is more objective than the view from where you happen to be, but less objective than the viewpoint of physical science."[16] He also states that the perspective of consequentialism in ethics is more objective than the agent-centered ethical viewpoint, but less objective than the standpoint from which we judge that human concerns are ultimately unimportant.

According to Nagel, the one defining mark of the objective viewpoint is "detachment." He writes:

> The attempt is made to view the world not from a place within it, or from the vantage point of a special type of life and awareness, but from nowhere in particular and no form of life in particular at all. The object is to discount for the features of our pre-reflective outlook that make things appear to us as they do, and thereby to reach an understanding of things as they really are. We flee the subjective under the pressure of an assumption that everything must be something not to any point of view, but in itself. To grasp this by detaching more and more from our own point of view is the unreachable ideal at which the pursuit of objectivity aims.[17]

The passage suggests that in assuming an objective point of view, we detach ourselves from the peculiar contingencies of our particular selves, or, to be more objective, we detach from the contingencies of a human perspective—or to be more objective yet, from the mammalian point of view. Thus one paradigm of objectivity and its pursuit would seem to be the traditional physical scientist who is a scientific realist, who

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[15]Nagel tells us that he writes as if he believes a pure objective perspective exists only because it is simpler: "Although I shall speak of the subjective viewpoint and the objective viewpoint, this is just shorthand, for there are not two such viewpoints . . ." (Ibid., 206).

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid., 208.

believes the objects of scientific research and theory exist independently of our knowledge of them and whose aim is to discover and describe these real objects underlying their appearances to us.

The passage also suggests that the pursuit of objectivity is motivated by a particular dialectic ("We flee the subjective under the pressure of an assumption . . ."). Shortly after the above passage, we learn that this dialectic's point of departure is the observation that a given object appears very differently to "differently constituted and situated observers." The best explanation of this observation is that there is in fact a way the object is in itself and that the contingencies of observers' unique constitutions and situations cause the object's diverse appearances. It seems to follow that "the respects in which the results of various viewpoints are incompatible with each other represent distortions of the way matters really are." Conversely, the greater the number of viewpoints that arrive at the same appearance, the closer the appearance probably is to reality—and "the less an appearance depends on contingencies of . . . [a] particular self, the more it is capable of being arrived at from a variety of points of view." We can conclude from all of these considerations that the more we each discount elements in our own individual viewpoint that are idiosyncratic, the closer each of us will be to seeing things the way they really are. Again, we shall be closer yet by discounting elements that are peculiarly human, and even nearer to reality by discarding mammalian elements. In sum: "The pursuit of objectivity . . . involves a transcendence of the self, in two ways: a transcendence of particularity and a transcendence of one's type. . . . [It] aims at a representation of what is external to each specific point of view: what is there or what is of value in itself, rather than *for* anyone."[18]

While Nagel, as we now know, does not think the external perspective armed with its dialectic renders null and void the internal perspective and subjective reality, he also

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[18]Ibid., 208–209.

does not believe we can resist in practice thinking it does. We cannot help thinking, for example, that our lives do not matter, period. As the following passages illustrate, Nagel reminds us throughout the essay that the external perspective persistently allures us, and he may be well aware that his doctrine of absurdity rides on this alleged fact:

> [The individual] develops this kind of detachment *naturally*, to counter the egocentric distortion of a purely internal view, and to correct the parochialism engendered by the contingencies of his overspecific nature and circumstances. But it is not merely corrective. It claims a position of dominance, as the only complete conception of how things really are. This dominance is not imposed from outside, but derives from the *intrinsic appeal* of impersonality to individual reflection. Life seems absurd because it seems absurd to *oneself*, taking up a point of view that is both *natural and appealing*. . . .
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> Objectivity is *naturally* linked with reality; it is *easy to feel* that anything has to be located in the objective world in order to qualify as real, and that it must have as its real nature some character which, whether physical or not, can be regarded impersonally and externally. . . .
>
> We flee the subjective under the *pressure* of an assumption that everything must be something not to any point of view, but in itself. . . .
>
> We *cannot help wanting* to extend it [objective transcendence] farther and farther, and to bring more and more of life and the world within its range. But the *consistent pursuit* of greater objectivity runs into trouble. . . . Two *natural and necessary* ways of thinking [from a subjective perspective and from an objective one] lead to a collision and cannot . . . be accommodated in a single view of how things are.[19]

In these passages, Nagel suggests that the pursuit of objectivity is psychologically hard-wired in us. It is at least as "natural," "intrinsically appealing," "easy to feel," and "consistent" as, say, our sex drive is throughout much of our lives. While of course the objective perspective will ebb periodically, as does our libido, and give way to the subjective perspective, it inevitably flows again and again throughout our lives, its expression immune to any intellectual counterforce. One manifestation of the objective perspective is nihilism with regard to values, the viewpoint from which we judge that our lives do not matter. In life we continually go back and forth—from believing and acting as

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[19]Ibid., 197, 202, 208, 210. Except for 'oneself,' emphasis mine.

if our lives matter, to believing and acting as if they do not, back again to believing and acting as if they do, and on and on. The dance is an absurd one.

Evaluation of the Doctrine

Does this third doctrine of absurdity stand up to critical scrutiny any better than the first two? To start, one might want to attack Nagel's general metaphysical position of perspectivism within which the doctrine of absurdity is situated. The fact is, Nagel does little more than *assert* perspectivism. However, such an objection would miss its mark. Nagel's general perspectivism really is not crucial to his third doctrine of absurdity; rather, all that is crucial is that we are *existentially* committed to two views about the importance of our lives each of which denies the truth of the other. If we are in fact so committed, then whether Nagel's perspectivism is true or not is superfluous. This consideration leads us, I think, to what a good objection *would* be. It would be one that plausibly denies that we are existentially committed to at least one of the two opposing views. In the remainder of this chapter, I shall try to establish that we are not so committed to the reductionist objective perspective from which we judge that our lives do not matter.

To begin, a tension runs throughout Nagel's thinking in "Subjective and Objective." In the effort to sustain his decade-old claim that our lives are absurd, he sets out to establish that we are constitutionally incapable of escaping a reductionist viewpoint. Then toward the end of the essay, he comes very close to saying we can, and should, resist the very same viewpoint: "The only alternative to these unsatisfactory moves [to bring everything under an objective description] is to resist the voracity of the objective appetite, and stop assuming that understanding of the world and our position in it can always be advanced by detaching from that position and subsuming whatever appears from there under a single more comprehensive conception." Similarly, he states in the penultimate sentence of the essay: "The task of accepting the [subjective-objective] polarity without allowing either of its terms to swallow the other should be a creative

one."[20] At the very least, Nagel here seems to be holding out some hope that in the future we may learn to be living nonreductionists. But of course in doing so he is suggesting that it is possible our lives need not be absurd. Thus by the end of the essay, he seems to tear down the very doctrine he took pains to build up.

Now I realize that this objection may look like an *ad hominem*, that all it does is point out Nagel is inconsistent, which does not effect the conclusion of his doctrine of absurdity. However, I wrote, "*at the very least*, Nagel here seems to be holding out some hope that in the future we may learn to be living nonreductionists." I believe the two passages cited above, as well and others, suggest that Nagel thinks he is well on his way to incorporating the perspectivist viewpoint into his life. If so, and if he is not in bad faith, he is not only inconsistent; he is a counter-example to his doctrine of absurdity.

Still, I can anticipate how Nagel might respond to this objection. He might say I am forgetting an important distinction he makes: that between an *epistemic* discrepancy between the subjective and objective perspectives and an *existential* one. Thus when he encourages us to "resist the voracity of the objective appetite" and tells us that "the task of accepting the polarity . . . should be a creative one," he only means we can, and should, do so *intellectually*, seated at our desks, not out in the street which, he would argue, is impossible.

I am not confident that this is all Nagel means, but it does save him from a terrible inconsistency, and, more importantly, from perhaps being a counter-example to his own doctrine. The principle of charitable interpretation, I think, demands that I so favorably interpret the passages, and so I shall.

Now the first interesting thing to note about the doctrine under this interpretation is that Nagel's view of exactly how the human condition signifies an absurd one has flip-flopped between the time he finished "The Absurd" and the time he wrote "Subjective and

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[20]Ibid., 211, 213.

Objective" in an even more curious way than has already been indicated. According to the second doctrine in "The Absurd," we know the operative belief of the *subjective perspective* is false, but we cannot help acting on it in our day to day living. However, according the doctrine in "Subjective and Objective," we know the *reductionism of the objective perspective* is false, but we cannot help acting on *it* in everyday life. What a drastic change of view regarding the human condition! Of course pointing out such a change of view, while perhaps shocking, is not in itself an argument against Nagel's doctrine of absurdity in "Subjective and Objective" (or for that matter against the second one in "The Absurd"). Therefore, given Nagel's claim is that we all cannot *at least in ordinary life* escape a reductionist objective perspective, is such a claim true?

I indicated above that a paradigm of this perspective, as Nagel understands it, is the perspective of the physical scientist who is a realist. If that is true, and if it is true that we are all committed to reductionism, then our ordinary viewpoints must be similar to this scientist's. But are they? Do we continually "flee the subjective under the pressure of an assumption that everything must be something not to any point of view, but in itself"? I would gauge that many people have not once carried out the reductionist dialectic of the objective perspective that Nagel has in mind, let alone "consistently pursued" it. Moreover, I do not see that Nagel has given us any reason to think that those intellectuals who *have* carried out the dialectic, and who do *not* find it plausible, are only part-time perspectivists or pragmatists or value realists, and are in bad faith if they believe otherwise. In my view, Nagel has over-intellectualized the human condition. We are not walking reductionists.

One might object on Nagel's behalf that I have unfairly presented the reductionist attitude which Nagel claims comes natural to us all. I have exploited the most abstract terms Nagel uses to describe it so as to make silly the suggestion that ordinary people assume it. The suggestion that in day to day living we all "flee the subjective under the assumption that everything must be something not to any point of view, but in itself" may

indeed sound funny. However, if we cash such abstract language in for the ordinary terms of the particular problem at issue, then the apparent silliness wears off. Ordinary people probably do not carry out the reductionist dialectic at the same level of sophistication and same degree of consciousness as Nagel and other philosophers. But in some manner they do, and they persistently find themselves concluding words to the effect that from a nebula's-eye view their lives do not matter.

I think there is something to this criticism of my objection. To be fair, I should represent the reductionist attitude in the most concrete terms possible, that is, as an ordinary person might manifest it. Still, I think my objection stands. I do not think "we all persistently find ourselves concluding words to the effect that from a nebula's-eye view our lives do not matter." Nagel never shows that we do, and the burden is on him to do so. Moreover, even if I were wrong about ordinary people, Nagel still must show that the many philosophers and scientists who do not countenance the reductionist dialectic, in general, or value nihilism, in particular, cannot help appealing to it in everyday life. Philosophers and scientists, not to mention everyone else, may not be able to stop themselves from thinking that the sun is actually setting when they peer out at the western sky in the evening. They may not be able to quell their libido for any substantial amount of time. But I cannot see why they would be haunted, and persistently, by the viewpoint they emphatically deny, such as "that everything must be something from no point of view and that nothing is really something from a particular point of view." Nagel must show us that they are.

CHAPTER 5

THE FOURTH DOCTRINE

I argued in chapter 2 and chapter 3 that "The Absurd" presents us with two very different doctrines of absurdity. Central to one is the skeptical claim that we have no reason to believe our lives matter; central to the other is the nonskeptical claim that we know they do not. In chapter 4, I noted that no such discrepancy appears several years later in "Subjective and Objective" but also that the doctrine in this later work differs substantially from the first two, leaving us with three doctrines. According to the third (or an interpretation of it I took to be the most plausible, all things considered), our lives are unimportant from an objective standpoint but important from a subjective standpoint—and neither standpoint epistemically has the final say, resulting in what we might call value perspectivism.

In light of these changes of view, it may not be surprising to learn that Nagel's doctrine of absurdity changes once more in *The View from Nowhere*. In this work, published fifteen years after "The Absurd" and at least seven years after "Subjective and Objective," a view emerges that can only be described as a fourth doctrine of absurdity. Against the value perspectivism of the third doctrine, we learn that our lives either do or do not matter, period, and the objective perspective has the final say. And against the first and second doctrines, we are told that while from an external standpoint we are tempted to conclude nothing matters, the correct verdict from this perspective is that we have reason to believe things do matter, including our lives to some degree. Now while news that Nagel changes his doctrine of absurdity yet again may not be alarming, that the doctrine allegedly involves the external perspective countenancing objective value

probably is. For such a view seems to negate, once and for all, the conspicuous discrepancy needed for absurdity. Much, then, needs to be explained about this puzzling new doctrine in *The View from Nowhere*, and that is what I intend to do in this chapter. First I shall slowly explicate what I am calling the fourth doctrine, and in the process try to establish that it is indeed an accurate interpretation of the text. Then I shall evaluate the doctrine.

Traces of the Old Doctrines

I want to begin by acknowledging that passages in *The View from Nowhere* might lead a reader to conclude that Nagel advances not a fourth doctrine of absurdity at all, but one of the first three, for these passages appear to support one or another of these doctrines. For example, the following passage, which I cited in chapter 4, seems to support the third doctrine:

> Is it so certain that the attitudes [of the subjective and objective perspectives regarding whether my life matters] really conflict as they appear to? Since the two judgments arise from different perspectives, why isn't their content appropriately relativized to those perspectives, rendering the conflict illusory? If that were true, it would be no more problematic that the course of my life should matter from inside but not from outside than that a large mouse should be a small animal, or that something should look round from one direction and oval from another.

The passage is reminiscent of the value perspectivism advanced in "Subjective and Objective," and the passage immediately after it completes the argument of the third doctrine. Nagel suggests that while seemingly "logical," relativizing the verdicts of the perspectives will not eliminate absurdity, for "the trouble is that the two attitudes have to coexist in a single person who is actually leading the life toward which he is simultaneously engaged and detached."[1] In other words, although we may be able to escape the conflict *intellectually*, we cannot escape it *existentially*. The human condition

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[1]Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 216.

essentially involves occupying these conflicting attitudes, and being committed to the clash existentially is sufficient to make human existence absurd.

While this text appears to reflect the argument of the third doctrine, we must reject the claim that Nagel presents this doctrine of absurdity in *The View from Nowhere*. To begin, Nagel in the second passage only indicates that relativizing the contents of the perspectives *seems* logical; he does not offer any defense or discussion of the view, here or anywhere else in the book. But much more importantly, Nagel throughout the book flatly contradicts value perspectivism. As I proceed to explain below Nagel's view on value, a view he develops and supports in several chapters, it should become quite clear that he is not a value perspectivist, but rather a thoroughgoing value realist.

If in *The View from Nowhere* Nagel does not advance the third doctrine of absurdity, then maybe he goes all the way back to the first doctrine, the one in "The Absurd" in which the objective perspective is skeptical about objective values. Here is a passage from the book that supports this suggestion:

> The problem of the meaning of life [and so also the problem of absurdity] is in fact a form of skepticism at the level of motivation. We can no more abandon our unqualified commitments at will than we can abandon our beliefs about the world in response to skeptical arguments, however persuasive we may find them, as Hume famously observed. Nor, I believe, can we avoid either problem by refusing to take that step outside ourselves which calls the ordinary view *into question*.[2]

As though he had the essay in front of him in writing this passage, Nagel here makes the same analogy he made fifteen years earlier in "The Absurd."[3] The analogy is between the epistemological status of our beliefs about facts and our beliefs about values:

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[2]Ibid., 218. Emphasis mine.

[3]Compare the passage with, for example, this one from "The Absurd": "Philosophical skepticism does not cause us to abandon our ordinary beliefs, but it lends them a peculiar flavor. After acknowledging that their truth is incompatible with possibilities that we have no grounds for believing do not obtain—apart from grounds in those very beliefs which we have called into question—we return to our familiar convictions with a certain irony and resignation. . . . The same situation obtains after we have put in question the seriousness with which we take our lives and human life in general and have looked at ourselves without presuppositions" (Nagel, "The Absurd," 19–20).

just as the external perspective is skeptical about facts, so does it call "into question" values. Now it would be difficult to resist the claim that the view Nagel expresses here is none other than the first doctrine of absurdity, the one which states that despite being aware we do not have any reason to believe our lives matter, we go ahead and believe and act as if they do. And the first doctrine receives additional support in the introduction of *The View from Nowhere* where Nagel plainly admits to being an all around skeptic: "Skepticism is radical doubt about the possibility of reaching any kind of knowledge, freedom, or ethical truth, given our containment in the world and the impossibility of creating ourselves from scratch. . . . I believe that skepticism is revealing and not refutable. . . ."[4]

Despite this impressive textual evidence, we must also reject the first doctrine as being the doctrine of absurdity Nagel presents in *The View from Nowhere*. It is true that in this text Nagel remains a skeptic, and in particular a value skeptic, and this fact would seem to point to the first doctrine. However, a careful reading of the introduction where Nagel proclaims his skepticism, as well as the rest of the text, reveals that he only remains a skeptic "of sorts," as Steven Luper-Foy puts it.[5] Later I shall explain more fully how and why Nagel is only sort of a skeptic, but a few remarks now should convey the general idea.

According to Nagel in *The View from Nowhere*, although it is possible that nothing in fact matters, we nevertheless have reason to believe things do. Such a view is never even hinted at in "The Absurd."[6] What we learn in that essay is that, at best, we have no reason to believe things matter and no reason to believe things do not—the core statement

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[4]Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 7.

[5]Luper-Foy, 87.

[6]There is, however, an interesting semblance between the *modest* version of the *second* doctrine of absurdity and Nagel's view in *The View from Nowhere*. The modest version of the second doctrine states that we have some reason to believe nothing matters, and the view in *The View from Nowhere* is that we have some reason to believe things do matter.

of the first doctrine. Now we may reasonably ask whether this difference makes a difference. That is to say, if Nagel exploits the skepticism that remains in his new view to get the conspicuous discrepancy needed for absurdity—and the passage above strongly suggests he does—then it would seem that despite his now thinking we have some reason to believe things matter, his doctrine basically mirrors the first doctrine in "The Absurd." As it turns out, however, he does not use this remaining skepticism in his new argument. Notwithstanding the above passage, what in *The View from Nowhere* creates the conspicuous discrepancy between pretension and reality that makes our lives absurd does not have to do with *what we do not know*, but, as we shall see, with *what we do know*. And that, in short, is why Nagel's doctrine of absurdity in *The View from Nowhere* is not the first doctrine of absurdity we encounter in "The Absurd." As for why Nagel would write the above passage in the book, I believe the most plausible view is that he is not conscious of the fact that his view has evolved; he thinks his argument in *The View from Nowhere* is basically the same as the one he gives in "The Absurd."

Finally, one may point to a passage in *The View from Nowhere* that appears to reflect Nagel's second doctrine of absurdity, the one that involves the nonskeptical claim that nothing matters:

> Finding my life objectively insignificant, I am nevertheless unable to extricate myself from an unqualified commitment to it—to my aspirations and ambitions, my wishes for fulfillment, recognition, understanding, and so forth. The sense of the absurd is the result of this juxtaposition.[7]

Interestingly, this passage immediately precedes the passage I cited above (the one that appears to support the first doctrine and value skepticism), indicating that Nagel fifteen years after "The Absurd" still does not recognize the fundamentally distinct views they express. (The two passages lumped together also corroborate the view that, probably unbeknownst to him, he does present two doctrines of absurdity in "The Absurd"). At any

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[7]Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 218.

rate, explaining why this passage does not make trouble for the view that Nagel offers a distinct fourth doctrine in *The View from Nowhere* is not difficult. It is not difficult because after stating the argument expressed in the passage, Nagel explicitly rejects it. He points out that one solution to the problem of clashing standpoints expressed in the above passage is "a denial of the objective unimportance of our lives, which will justify full engagement from the objective standpoint." He goes on to say that "while this response to detachment has some merit, the truth in it is not enough to resolve the conflict."[8] We shall see below just why denying the objective unimportance of our lives "is not enough to resolve the conflict" between the standpoints. What, however, is most significant about this statement is that the "merit" and "truth" of the response to which Nagel is referring is none other than the claim that our lives do objectively matter—a clear renunciation of the second doctrine of absurdity. The appearance of the second doctrine, then, is merely a dialectical stepping stone to Nagel's true doctrine of absurdity in *The View from Nowhere*, one importantly different from the second and, as I hope I have begun to make clear as well, the first and third.

Values

To this point I have done little more than allude to what Nagel's new view on values is. Before setting out his main argument for absurdity in *The View from Nowhere*, of which his new view on values is an integral part, I would like briefly to rehearse his argument for his new view on values, citing key text in the process. In addition to helping the reader understand his general argument for absurdity, rehearsing his argument for his new view on values will, I hope, leave no doubt in the reader's mind that Nagel does in fact advance a fourth doctrine of absurdity.

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[8]Ibid., 219.

As I have already indicated, Nagel in *The View from Nowhere* remains a value skeptic, of sorts. He believes that we cannot know for sure whether anything is objectively important, or in particular whether our lives objectively matter. Reality might be radically different from what it appears to be, and we have no way of finding out. At the same time, he also believes that "it is worth trying to bring one's beliefs, one's actions, and one's values more under the influence of an impersonal standpoint even without the assurance that this could not be revealed from a still more external standpoint as an illusion."[9] Bringing our values under the influence of an impersonal standpoint is worthwhile, despite the possibility that everything this standpoint yields is false, not simply for practical reasons, as we might suspect, but for theoretic reasons as well. Despite value skepticism, we have more reason to hold certain claims about value than suspend belief or hold rival claims. Generally, we have more reason to believe some values are objective, and hence to be value realists, than to think all values are merely subjective, and hence to be value antirealists. This new view of Nagel's is reflected in the announcement at the end of chapter 8, entitled "Value": "I have argued against skepticism, and in favor of realism and the pursuit of objectivity in the domain of practical reason."[10] Now, then, how does he so argue?

According to Nagel, value realists need to give us reason to believe that objective values are at least *possible*; if these realists can do that, they can then argue that value realism is more plausible than value antirealism because realism best explains the appearances. While Nagel concedes that value realists do not possess a *proof* for the possibility of value realism, he contends they can refute all the extant arguments that purport to show objective values are impossible. Together these refutations make the possibility of value realism stronger than its impossibility, which he believes is enough for

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[9]Ibid., 7.

[10]Ibid., 162.

value realists to take the next polemic step and argue that value realism far better explains the appearances than antirealism.

Nagel takes the time to explain and refute three antirealist arguments that he says have had the "capacity to convince." The second argument is noteworthy insofar as it seems to reflect one of his own in "The Absurd" on which the second doctrine of absurdity hinges:

> Nothing has any objective value, because objectively nothing matters at all. If we push the claims of objective detachment to their logical conclusion, and survey the world from a standpoint completely detached from all interests, we discover that there is *nothing*—no values left of any kind: things can be said to matter at all only to individuals within the world. The result is objective nihilism.[11]

Nagel now argues that as tempting as this argument is from the external perspective, it is nevertheless unsound, and can be shown to be so from this same perspective. It is unsound, not because value antirealism must be false; antirealism might be true. Rather, the argument is unsound insofar as it is a nonskeptical view about values, one which makes the knowledge claim that there are no objective values. Nagel argues that if from an external perspective we had nothing more to go on than data from this perspective, then the conclusion we would reach would indeed be that there are no values, for values are as absent and unintelligible from a purely perspectiveless viewpoint—a viewpoint from no one and nowhere in particular—as the value of music is to a person who has been deaf since birth and who has not communicated with anyone. From a purely objective perspective, we cannot produce any normative reasons for action, make any normative judgments whatsoever. Indeed, we cannot make any sense of them. From a completely detached point of view, the world is devoid of value.

However, this verdict from the external perspective is mistaken, for from an external viewpoint we have data from the internal viewpoint to consider. And such data include appearances of value, everywhere. Just as accounts of what the factual world is

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[11]Ibid., 146.

really like use data from the internal perspective (that is, use the appearances from particular perspectives to infer what the world is objectively like), an objective account of value appropriately involves using appearances of value from particular perspectives. This explanation of what an objective account of values properly involves no more implies that values are objective than the explanation of what an objective account of the factual world involves implies the existence of a material world. All Nagel is suggesting at this point is that objective accounts of the world, whether the world of fact or value, legitimately use subjective appearances as data. If this is the case, then the above argument which purported to establish that values are unintelligible from an objective point of view is unsound.[12] As Nagel puts the matter:

> The fact that the point of something can't be understood from the objective standpoint alone doesn't mean it must be regarded objectively as pointless, any more than the fact that the value of music is not directly comprehensible to someone deaf from birth means he has to judge it worthless. His knowledge of its value must depend on others. And the objective standpoint can recognize the authority of particular points of view with regard to worth as it can with regard to essentially perspectival facts.[13]

Nagel concludes by claiming that since this antirealist argument and the others fail, it is reasonable to assume that objective values are at least possible; and once we grant the possibility of objective values, then by far the best explanation of the appearances is that there are objective values. In several places we read why Nagel thinks the appearances support value realism.[14] In one such place he argues for the objective badness of pain, something he believes is objectively bad if anything is objectively bad. (The passage also nicely illustrates Nagel's general method of arguing for value realism, which I have tried to outline):

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[12]Ibid., 146–47, 219—20.

[13]Ibid., 219.

[14]Ibid., 145–46, 148, 154–55.

> We can begin by asking why there is no plausibility in the zero position, that pleasure and pain have no value of any kind that can be objectively recognized. That would mean that I have no reason to take aspirin for a severe headache, however I may in fact be motivated; and that looking at it from outside, you couldn't even say that someone had a reason not to put his hand on a hot stove, just because of the pain. Try looking at it from the outside and see whether you can manage to withhold that judgment. If the idea of objective practical reason makes any sense at all, so that there is some judgment to withhold, it does not seem possible. If the general arguments against the reality of objective reasons are no good, then it is at least possible that I have a reason, and not just an inclination, to refrain from putting my hand on a hot stove. But given the possibility, it seems meaningless to deny that this is so. . . .
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> There is nothing self-contradictory in this proposal [that I have no objective reason to refrain from putting my hand on a hot stove], but it seems nevertheless insane.[15]

Nagel's case for value realism is more substantial than what this passage and my remarks leading up to it convey. If I were to evaluate his case, I would feel compelled to do more justice to it. However, my interest, at least at this point, lies not in critically examining his position on values but in explaining it and establishing that he indeed defends a position on values which is fundamentally different from his earlier ones, and hence that the doctrine of absurdity he presents in *The View from Nowhere* is fundamentally different as well.

Thus, to sum up the evolution of his views on values: Nagel in parts of "The Absurd" seems to be a thoroughgoing value skeptic, and he presents a doctrine of absurdity reflecting this view; in other parts of the same work, though, he appears to be a value nonskeptic and antirealist, and another doctrine of absurdity emerges that reflects this view. In "Subjective and Objective," he presents the objective perspective as nonskeptical and antirealist with regard to values; however, its final word is not *the* final word. The subjective perspective's final word on values is as good as that of the objective perspective, and from the subjective perspective values are real and our lives really do matter. Thus value realism and antirealism are relative to perspective. Finally, in *The View from Nowhere* one clash over values takes place wholly within the external

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[15]Ibid., 157.

perspective, and Nagel shows that the value nihilism of the external perspective is mistaken; while it is still possible that values are merely subjective and that our lives do not really matter, we have reason to believe there are objective values and that our lives do matter. So Nagel goes from being a value antirealist and/or unmitigated value skeptic, in "The Absurd," to a mitigated skeptic who thinks we have reason to be realists about values, in *The View from Nowhere*.

The New Discrepancy

When in the last chapter I announced that in "Subjective and Objective" Nagel maintains that our judgment of value from the internal standpoint is epistemically immune to the reductionist judgment of value we naturally make from the external standpoint, I pointed out that it appears Nagel thereby kills his basic doctrine of absurdity, for he can no longer refer to a discrepancy between pretension and reality. I then tried to show the doctrine still has life, since Nagel argues that although an *intellectual* discrepancy does not exist, a *practical* one does. Well, here again, in view of his new position on values in *The View from Nowhere*, we cannot help but think Nagel undermines his basic doctrine of absurdity. Not only does the subjective perspective countenance objective values, the objective perspective does too. The objective perspective gives us reason to believe our lives are important—that they matter, period—and hence apparently gives us a green light to take ourselves seriously. So it seems we are not ridiculous in spending time in front of the mirror after all.

Once more, however, Nagel without blinking claims that our lives are absurd because of a fundamental discrepancy between pretension and reality. The *new* discrepancy he has in mind (although he does not refer to it as such) has to do with the amount of importance we naturally attribute to our lives, as well as to humanity in general, from the internal perspective versus the amount of importance they may really have as determined by the external perspective:

> My life is one of countlessly many, in a civilization that is also not unique, and my natural devotion to it is quite out of proportion to the importance I can reasonably accord it from outside. . . .
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> We can try to avoid assigning ourselves a personal importance grotesquely out of line with our objective value, but we can't realistically hope to close the gap completely. So while the acknowledgment of objective worth inside human life may make the conflict of standpoints less extreme, it doesn't eliminate it. . . .
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> Our constitutional self-absorption together with our capacity to recognize its excessiveness make us irreducibly absurd even if we achieve a measure of subjective-objective integration by bringing the two standpoints closer together. The gap is too wide to be closed entirely, for anyone who is fully human.[16]

The basic idea of the doctrine ought to be clear from my discussions of the other doctrines of absurdity. However, I should clarify two things about the general doctrine before moving on to Nagel's explanation and defense of its specific claims. The first concerns the distinction between objective values, on the one hand, and the objective value or importance of an individual life, on the other. I made a big deal above about Nagel's new view of value realism, indicating that it has a great bearing on his doctrine of absurdity. But as we can see from the two passages I have just cited, the supposed conspicuous discrepancy that makes our lives absurd does not have to do with objective values *per se*, but rather with the objective value or importance of each of our lives. On this distinction, Luper-Foy notes, "If it is not nihilism that threatens us with absurdity, what does? Well, perhaps his real concern is that *individuals* might not have objective importance, which is a matter that Nagel does not clearly distinguish from the thought that objective values might not exist at all."[17] What, then, is the relation between objective values and the objective value of our individual lives, or in Luper-Foy's negative terms, between values not being objective and our lives not being objectively important?

Value realism is the view that certain acts, dispositions, and policies are good or right and are so independently of the contingent, arbitrary, varying, and sometimes fleeting

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[16]Ibid., 220, 223.

[17]Luper-Foy, 88.

attitudes or feelings we, or any other creatures, may have of them. The best reasons support good or right acts, dispositions, and policies, and that is why they are good or right; and furthermore these reasons, unlike attitudes, are not contingent, arbitrary, varying, or fleeting. Now I think the first, and somewhat obvious, point to make about the relation between value realism and the objective value of each of our lives is that if value realism is false, if values are merely subjective, then it would be impossible for our lives to have any objective importance. To say of all my acts, for example, that they are neither objectively good nor bad (or neither right nor wrong) is at the same time to say they do not objectively matter. Thus the existence of objective values is a *necessary condition* of our lives having some objective importance.

Now is the existence of objective values also a *sufficient condition* of our lives objectively mattering? To answer this question we perhaps first need to make sure we know what Nagel means by 'our lives,' which to this point I have not said much about. Nagel in fact, to the best of my knowledge, never explicitly tells us what he means, but it is pretty clear he has in mind something like 'the totality of our intentional acts.' Our lives, he might say, are essentially defined by what we do on purpose, so that the two questions "Is my life important?" and "Are my acts important?" are basically synonymous.[18] If this is correct, then the answer to the question above would, strictly speaking, appear to be "no." It is conceivable that whereas certain things are objectively either good or bad, a human being's acts are not among them; that is, all our actions are objectively neither good nor bad. But let us not give this picture any more credibility than it deserves: it is only barely conceivable. We might recall what Nagel considers to be the best reasons and evidence in support of the view that what best explains the appearance of objective values is that objective values do exist. All of those reasons and evidence

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[18]This explanation is brief and rough, and maybe even somewhat misleading. Nevertheless, it will do for now. The issue of what constitutes 'our lives' will come up again within my evaluation the fourth doctrine, and there I shall say more about what Nagel's view may be, as well as say what mine is.

involve human beings and human affairs. Whatever we may think of Nagel's defense of value realism, I believe we would have to agree that any considerations (appearances) that motivate us to be value realists also motivate us to believe that among the things objectively good or bad, right or wrong, are a human being's actions, the totality of which we might call a human being's life.

In sum, while Nagel perhaps should have made explicit the distinction between the existence of objective values and the objective value of our individual lives, we can now see that his not doing so was both natural and harmless. The existence of objective values and the objective value of our own lives are closely related. Before we can assert the latter, we need to establish the former; and once we do establish the former we can feel pretty confident in asserting the latter. Nagel, therefore, rightly defends value realism before stating his doctrine of absurdity, and in stating it he is justified in attributing to each of our lives objective value. Of course *the degree to which* our lives are objectively important is altogether another matter. The claim that we have reason to be realists about values does not tell us anything about how important our lives are. Nagel will have to go beyond his discussion of value realism to gain support for his view, central to his fourth doctrine of absurdity, that our lives do not objectively matter much. He does. And shortly we shall see what he says.

The second clarification about the fourth doctrine involves another distinction: that between the objective importance of an individual life and the objective importance of a life form. It is one thing to claim that, distributively, human life does not objectively matter much at all, and another thing to claim that, collectively, it does not. When I claim the first, I assert that my life, or any other given individual's life, does not matter much; when I claim the second, I assert that the existence of humanity itself matters little. Nagel claims both, and he does appear to keep them separate, not committing the fallacy of

composition.[19] He argues that from the inner perspective we give both our own selves and humanity far too much importance. However, in view of the disproportionate space he devotes to the claims, it is clear he is much more interested in arguing that we give our individual lives too much importance than he is that we give human existence itself too much. The reason his main interest lies with the former is probably this. First, he realizes the plausibility of the claim that humanity matters little depends on the implausibility of the claim that each of our lives matter much more than a little, and so he recognizes he must establish that the latter claim is implausible before he entertains the former.[20] However, after he establishes the implausibility of the claim that each of our lives matter much more than a little, he recognizes that having done so sufficiently shows our lives are absurd, and so proceeding on to establish that humanity matters little is superfluous. Whether or not this was in fact his reason, I think it is a good one and hence shall focus most of my attention on Nagel's claim that each of our lives matter little.

Nagel's Defense of the Discrepancy

With these two clarifications made, I turn now to Nagel's defense of the fourth doctrine. Three key claims, it seems, need to be plausible for the doctrine itself to be plausible: (1) that we can reasonably afford our lives and humanity only a little objective

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[19]I do not mention the fallacy of division, for I believe that it would be appropriate to infer that, distributively, human life matters little from the premiss that, collectively, human life matters little. It may also be worth noting that I think it is appropriate to infer that human existence is absurd on the ground that each human being's life is absurd. The fallacy of division is at issue here, and it is not committed.

[20]This bit of reasoning seems to be expressed in the hypothetical statement in the following passage, a passage in which Nagel seems to be suggesting that human existence as such cannot be much important (and hence must be absurd) if its defining mark is the alleviation of suffering: "But how could the main point of human life be the elimination of evil? Misery, deprivation, and injustice prevent people from pursuing the positive goods which life is assumed to make possible. *If all such goods were pointless* [emphasis mine] and the only thing that really mattered was the elimination of misery, that really *would* be absurd" (Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 217). Nagel recognizes it must be established that "pursuing positive goods," by which I think he means each of us pursuing our personal aims and ambitions (or our individual lives), is pointless, or of little importance, before it can be shown that "the main point of human life," is pointless, or of little importance.

importance; (2) that we each as a matter of fact afford our lives and humanity much objective importance; and (3) that the discrepancy between the objective importance we are justified in attributing to our lives and humanity and the importance we do attribute to them is conspicuous enough to make our lives absurd. Whether the third key claim is plausible of course depends on the plausibility of the first two, as well as their details. We can, then, put aside the third key claim until we have critically examined the first two.

The second key claim, especially as it concerns the value we place on our own lives, is one with which we are already familiar, for it is a central part of the first doctrine. In fact, it is a major component of all four doctrines of absurdity. The first passage that follows comes from "The Absurd" and the second from *The View from Nowhere*:

> [Human beings] spend enormous quantities of energy, risk, and calculation on the details. 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 a full-time occupation, to which everyone devotes decades of intense concern.
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> We worry about a bad haircut or a bad review, we try to improve our income, our character, and our sensitivity to other people's feelings, we raise children, watch Johnny Carson, argue about Alfred Hitchcock or Chairman Mao, worry about getting promoted, getting pregnant, or becoming impotent—in short we lead highly specific lives within the parameters of our place, time, species, and culture. What could be more natural?[21]

As I mentioned above, Nagel seems less interested in showing our overvaluation of humanity than he does our individual selves. All he states about the former is that our admiration of the "achievements of humanity as a species" is excessive, that "the human race has a strong disposition to adore itself, in spite of its record."[22] Part of what Nagel probably has in mind here is our propensity to place much more value on our species than

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[21]Nagel, "The Absurd," 15; idem, *The View from Nowhere*, 215.

[22]Here, he also mentions our excessive "pride in our culture, in our nation." I suppose a culture and a nation are, broadly speaking, life forms too. Ibid., 222.

on other ones—indeed, other ones combined. When, for example, the life of a human being and that of another kind of mammal are at stake, and we have the means to save only one of them, the choice is crystal clear. Few of us would hesitate a moment, nor would we feel the least bit of compunction with our decision, or at having decided instantaneously. Moreover, if we ever encountered a race of beings who were sentient, benevolent, and very intelligent (say, similar to the fictional cinematic alien ET), we would no doubt value our kind much more than theirs, just as any particular human culture cannot help thinking it is above the rest.[23]

Now as for our overvaluation of our own selves, to which the two passages really refer, Nagel insists that while some of us take ourselves less seriously than others take themselves, even the least self-absorbed among us show a great deal of concern about their own lives from day to day. Who among us, Nagel would ask rhetorically, do not do the kinds of things suggested above, all of which express such concern? In response, many of us self-proclaimed enlightened beings who believe we harbor no illusions about our self-importance, might simply declare that we do not do these kinds of things or, perhaps more plausibly, that we do them, but with little passion. I, for one, responded in like fashion when I first read the above passages. I reasoned that Nagel is probably one of those people who take themselves much more seriously than I and others take ourselves and that he therefore has made a hasty generalization from his own case; or perhaps he is not one of these people himself but has focused all his attention on them. However, after reflecting on the matter—including the psychological discomfort I experienced, seemingly embarrassment, in entertaining the thought that I might take myself seriously[24]—I had to

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[23]Nagel might also think that in addition to feeling humanity is *relatively* important, we feel that somehow our kind is important *absolutely*. We cannot help thinking the universe is *for* humanity, that we are truly the center of it all, Copernicus notwithstanding. I hesitate, though, to assert that he goes this far.

[24]Does Nagel's doctrine explain this psychological discomfort? Is my embarrassment an expression of my objective side reluctantly owning up to the objectively unwarranted egocentric acts of my subjective side, owning up to them, that is, insofar as the objective side is a side of *me*? Another question: might it be that doubts as to the veracity of Nagel's claim that we each take ourselves very seriously are

admit Nagel's first key claim is plausible. Here is some anecdotal evidence in support of it, drawn (with some reluctance) from my own experience.

(1) I think the whole phenomenon of fashion is pretty silly. I dress very casually most of the time and rarely buy clothes; my hair is long and unstyled, and I do not worry about a "bad hair day." It would seem, then, that I am a good counter-example to Nagel's claim that we all sweat over our appearance. Yet, truth be told, I suppose I am concerned about how I appear in the eyes of others—not just to prospective employers and mates, but to people in general. For example, I do not want my students to think that my clothes look ugly or that I look ridiculous in them. I do not want them to think I am physically unattractive. If a stranger stopped me on the street and told me I had a great look about me, I probably would feel good all day and recall the compliment for a few days, warming myself with the recollection. Upon returning home, I might even look in the mirror and wonder if there was something particularly appealing about my appearance that day.

(2) I recall occasions when I have felt compelled to dress up. Since I own few clothes and have little insight into fashion, I worry at these times about looking at least presentable. I can remember on two occasions before weddings feeling the need to purchase attire. In both cases, I made a trip to a large department store. Although I felt some discomfort, I tried on several sport coats and pants and looked at myself in the mirror after putting each selection on. I turned this way and that and wondered how I looked. When I persuaded myself that certain combinations would pass muster, I then tried to decide which one looked the best. After deciding, I moved to the shirt and tie area and ruminated over these components. Again, I narrowed the field down to those I judged to be at least satisfactory and then tried to choose the most attractive ones. While I did not buy any shoes (I thought I could get away with the old pair of dress shoes I owned, reasoning that shoes are hardly noticeable), I remember looking down at my shoes

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really manifestations of the clash of perspectives and so not evidence against, but evidence for, Nagel's doctrine of absurdity?

when I dressed for the weddings and wondering whether they would really be as inconspicuous as I originally thought. I looked at them in the mirror, turned to the right and then to the left, and assured myself they did not look bad. As far as I could tell, my attire and I blended in at the weddings, although I may have been a bit disappointed at the extent to which I did blend in. Perhaps I hoped someone would have said I looked nice. So do I *sweat* over my appearance? No. But my behavior does suggest I take it at least somewhat seriously some of the time.

(3) My behavior also suggests I take myself seriously in other ways, and probably more seriously than my physical appearance. For example, I act as though succeeding in philosophy (in school, scholarship, and teaching) matters. Failing a comprehensive exam humiliated me; and then passing it made me euphoric. A poor performance in presenting a paper awhile back left me feeling miserable for quite some time; recalling that disaster still hurts. Earlier, a good performance made me feel great. A publication of an essay thrilled me—my words and name in print. Another piece having been rejected for publication depressed me. A flat teaching performance upsets me, and causes me to work arduously to turn things around the next class session. A good class always has a positive effect on me, and a great class makes my day. I am anxious whenever I am handed my course evaluations and relieved when the marks are good, although bothered by any negative comments. If ever my overall marks revealed mediocrity or below, I know I would be very upset. If the marks did not improve, I would quit, and would probably be devastated in the short term and bothered in the long term at having failed in this profession.

(4) My actions suggest I am much concerned about my personality as well. The other day, for instance, I argued with two older men in a cocktail lounge. Sitting at the bar to my right, they were enjoying attacking public policies I strongly support when I butted in and questioned some of their assumptions. We spent the next half hour engaged in a loud, heated debate. In the thick of it, I was so appalled at their ideas that I spoke faster than I could form coherent thoughts, which resulted in moments of near babble.

When they had had enough they retreated to the door shaking their heads, served some last minute *ad hominems* my way, and walked out. Immediately I regretted the confrontation. I was upset at myself. I recall scolding myself for butting into their conversation and for having been so damned inarticulate. I remember being embarrassed, even ashamed, at causing everyone in the lounge, including the owner, to stop talking and turn their attention to me and my two opponents. I felt I had shocked and disappointed these people around me. Until then I had been a friendly, quiet patron; the owner, staff, and regulars over time had grown fond of me, as I did them, and we were now on a first name basis. But I felt that with this outburst their image of me was degraded. They now knew I could be loud and hateful and inarticulate. For several days afterward, I was upset at myself, and though certainly not as much, I remain so to this day.

(5) A few months ago I watched a film with two good friends, a married couple, with whom I have engaged in several friendly debates. As usual, we critiqued the film after watching it. I offered a criticism, and one of them objected to it in defense of the film. I reconsidered and said I thought my criticism was off the mark, to which they responded in playful amazement: "Can you believe it, he's admitted he's wrong!" Just as playfully I responded, "I'm very willing to admit I'm wrong when I am, but it is just the case that I rarely am." They booed this comment, and we continued to critique the film. In truth, their comment stung me. Am I perceived by others as being someone who will never admit to being wrong? I hope not. I do not want to be that sort of person.

(6) My mother died of cancer in 1992, and I still remember visiting her at her house on one particular occasion when the cancer was at an early stage. As I walked into her living room she was sitting on the couch switching TV channels with her remote control. A certain sitcom turned up on the screen; she paused; and before she could say anything I made a negative offhand remark about the program to the effect that it was corny. She either mentioned that she found the program entertaining and then turned the channel or simply turned the channel (I cannot recall exactly), but I later learned she

watched the program regularly; in fact, it was a favorite of hers. To this day, I think about the event, and it grieves me. I had insulted her, and the part of the event that pains me the most is that she did not turn to me and defend her favorite program but kept her eyes on the TV and tried her best to find a program that she thought would meet my approval. Seeing her in my mind's eye clicking that remote, arm extended toward the TV, trying to please me after I had derided her, hurts. Occasionally I come across reruns of the sitcom, and I always watch them.

Now I do not think these last three examples should be interpreted as indicating that I am *preoccupied* with my personality. I do not believe I am. Anyway, it is only occasionally that I actually think about my personality. That said, I believe the sitcom, film critique, and cocktail lounge examples do indicate that I take my personality seriously. I want to be an intelligent, interesting, and, above all, pleasant and caring person. I want people to like me and to enjoy being around me. I do not want to be pretentious, arrogant, pompous, combative, or self-righteous. Whenever I think I have displayed one or more of these bad qualities, I get upset at myself. Whenever I believe someone finds me boring or uninteresting, I feel bad.

Reflecting on my behavior (as well as the behavior of others, which I think in form resembles mine) has, then, led me to accept Nagel's second key claim. Nagel is probably correct that we all take ourselves seriously, that we all act as if our lives are important. My only problem with the claim concerns *the extent to which* we all take ourselves seriously, we all act as if our lives are important. Nagel's view is that we all take our lives *very* seriously, that we act as if our lives are *very* important. Indeed, at one place in *The View from Nowhere* he writes that our lives from the internal perspective seem to us "monstrously important."[25] I, however, am at this time reluctant to go that far. At any rate, if I thought that the plausibility of the fourth doctrine of absurdity hinged on the

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[25]Ibid., 209.

second key claim, I would need to examine this issue. But I do not think it does. I think that another major component of the fourth doctrine is implausible and that consequently the doctrine itself, at least as it stands, is untenable. The implausible component of the doctrine is the first key claim that our lives objectively matter very little, and to Nagel's defense of it I now turn.

It seems the conjunction of two considerations lead Nagel to posit the first key claim. One consideration is that each of our lives "is one of countlessly many, in a civilization that is also not unique." The other consideration is that each of us "is no more important than anyone else and that the human form of life is not the embodiment of all value."[26] The first consideration simply points to the fact that there are innumerable fellow valuers in the world: millions and millions of other human beings with their own concerns, as well as a great number of nonhuman creatures with interests of their own. In addition, humanity is just one of many life forms in the world. As for the second consideration, it seems to be none other than the principle that many moral philosophers take to be the cornerstone of morality: the principle of impartiality. This principle states that from the moral point of view no one's concerns are inherently more important than anyone else's, or, in Nagel's parlance, that from the objective perspective, the value of every human being's life is the same, as is perhaps the value of every life form.

Now it is these two considerations, in tandem, that seem to lead Nagel to conclude that each of our lives has little objective value or importance, as does each life form including humanity. However, at this point we may question whether we really can infer this conclusion from the considerations. We might ask, as Luper-Foy does, why it is not the case that "everyone is extremely important even if none is more important than others"? Luper-Foy speculates as to what Nagel's answer may be:

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[26]Ibid., 220–21.

> Nagel reaches his conclusion [that each person's life is objectively trivial] because he assumes that the objective value of people's ends is roughly equal to (certainly no greater than) how strongly we (anyone) would be motivated by those ends once we assign equal importance to everyone's ends and construct a collective project accordingly. Given this tie between motivation and value, no individual's concerns are more important than they 'feel' to anyone who takes up the collective project. We can care less and less about each individual involved in a collective project as more and more individuals are involved, so that when we have to consider all human beings . . . as involved in a collective project, no individual's aims or life can be taken very seriously.[27]

The basic idea seems to be that we can determine the objective importance of an individual's personal aims by asking ourselves to what degree we would feel concerned that they in particular be attained when, in embodying the impartiality principle, we feel equally concerned about the personal aims of countless other individuals. The obvious answer is that an equal concern for everyone's aims would leave us feeling negligible concern for any one individual's aims. One way for us to appreciate this answer is to imagine ourselves with the task one afternoon of caring for thirty toddlers, none of whom we know personally and care about more than the rest, and all of whom pretty constantly want this or that. It is clear that our attention to any particular toddler would be very limited. Now concerning ourselves equally with, not thirty toddlers, but all subjects of value, will clearly leave us feeling at best an iota of concern for any one.

We should understand that on this conception the degree of motivation is what determines objective value, and this "strong internalist view," as Luper-Foy calls it, gains support as being what Nagel has in mind in light of some of Nagel's remarks on death. He points out that when we step back and contemplate the hundreds of thousands of times a day death occurs, the felt awfulness of each death is slight. The reason is that "we cannot regard all those deaths with the interest with which their subjects regard them: sheer emotional overload prevents it, as anyone who has tried to summon a feeling adequate to an enormous massacre knows. The objective standpoint simply cannot accommodate at

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[27]Luper-Foy, 90.

its full subjective value the fact that everyone, oneself included, inevitably dies."[28] That is to say, the objective awfulness of an individual's death is determined by the extent to which we would regard it awful while at the same time equally concerning ourselves with the thousands and thousands of other individual deaths which occur daily (as the principle of impartiality, in particular, and the objective perspective, in general, demand). The degree of awfulness felt about each death would be very little indeed. Thus the death of a particular person is far less objectively awful (important) than the awfulness (importance) which that person him or herself regards it as having.

If, as these remarks on death suggest, Nagel's claim that our lives matter very little does rest on an essential link between motivation and value, the claim would appear to be implausible. Luper-Foy uses Nagel's remarks on the minimal objective importance of an individual's death as a *reductio ad absurdum* to Nagel's general claim that our lives matter little. Luper-Foy writes: "Suppose that the awfulness of five deaths is the maximum people can regard with the interest with which their subjects regard them. Does it follow that objectively speaking six deaths is no worse than five? Five *billion* no worse than five? Is there no reason objectively speaking to prefer saving billions of lives to saving few given how limited people are in their capacity to take on the interests of others?"[29] His point seems to be that since our emotional reaction to the accumulation of individual deaths will at some point level off, any additional deaths beyond that leveling off point are objectively superfluous on Nagel's view, which is obviously false. Hence Nagel's view on values in general is incorrect.

As I understand Nagel's remarks on death, they may imply something even stronger and stranger than what Luper-Foy states: each individual's death *loses* degrees of objective importance as a death count rises, given a constant felt awfulness. In keeping

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[28]Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 230.

[29]Luper-Foy, 91.

with Luper-Foy's simple example, five or six deaths elicit the same degree of awfulness from me, but since with six deaths this awfulness must be spread out over more individuals than with five deaths, each individual's death is less important when six deaths occur than when five do. Thus under this view of the objective importance of an individual's death, such importance not only depends on the number of deaths an individual's death occurs alongside, but actually declines as fellow casualties rise. In sum: the basic misconception lying behind this implausible conclusion regarding the objective importance of an individual death is that our human motivational capacity, which seems merely subjective and contingent, essentially determines an individual's objective importance.

However, I am not so sure the above argument is the one Nagel uses to arrive at the claim that our lives objectively matter very little, even in view of those remarks on death. Luper-Foy himself seems less than confident,[30] but he thinks that "if we dropped Nagel's strong internalist claim, there would no longer be any motivation for his view that our lives are objectively trivial."[31] I want now to suggest other ways in which Nagel might be so motivated.

First of all, if from the objective standpoint we acknowledge the objective value of subjective concerns, but also that the subjective concerns of individuals are equally important, then it might seem to follow, from this standpoint, that maximizing the satisfaction of subjective concerns is what is most important. Given the great number of individuals, this judgment entails that whether any particular individual's concerns are satisfied is of little importance, since the effect either way will be negligible on the scale measuring the sum satisfaction of concerns. In other words, Nagel may think, *a la*

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[30]"In spite of the fact that the connection between motivation and value explains his fear that individuals are objectively unimportant, I hesitate to say that Nagel makes the connection. For one thing, it is not clear *why* Nagel makes it. . . . It would be better for Nagel to say (in the spirit of his moral realism) that certain aspects of the truth about objective value are relatively inaccessible to people because of their limited emotional capacities. . . ." (Ibid., 90–91).

[31]Ibid., 91.

Richard Hare and other utilitarians, that (1) the satisfaction of interests is objectively very important; but (2) no one's interests are more objectively important than anybody else's; so (3) what is objectively most important is maximizing the satisfaction of interests. Now since (4) there are countless interests, (5) we can conclude that objectively the satisfaction of any particular individual's interests matters little. Here the importance of an individual's interests does not, or at least does not appear to, amount to how important "they 'feel' to anyone who takes up the collective project," the central (and problematic) claim in the account Luper-Foy attributes to Nagel. Rather, such importance is determined by only moral logic and the nonmoral facts, expressed in '(1)' through '(4)' above.

Turning now to these propositions, '(2)' and '(4)' are of course the tandem propositions I have already noted Nagel emphasizes in reaching his second key claim, which is basically '(5).' While I have not yet said anything about proposition '(1),' Nagel does write much that is relevant to it in chapters 8 and 9, which I shall discuss shortly. Suffice it to say now that critics of Nagel's first key claim would not contest '(1).' As for '(3),' specifically the inference to it from '(1)' and '(2),' it is also new, and it seems crucial. While there are only hints of textual evidence that Nagel makes the move, these hints are located at one of the very few places he tries to establish that our lives matter little. In the following passage Nagel states and responds to an objection to his view that a conspicuous discrepancy exists between the importance we attribute to our lives from the inside and the amount we are justified in attributing to it from the outside. Both the objection and response suggest Nagel makes such a utilitarian move. In particular, they suggest he is a utilitarian who rejects fellow utilitarian John Stuart Mill's claim that the principle of utility warrants considerable attention to one's own affairs:

> It is true that my life is the one among all these [possible forms of life] that I am in the best position to devote attention to, and it could be argued that the traditional principle of division of labor warrants my concentrating on it in the usual way *as the best method of contributing to the cosmic pool*. But while there is something in this, it should not be exaggerated. The argument would not really justify us in

> engaging fully with our personal aims from an objective standpoint, and such engagement as it warranted would be on sufferance from *an objective concern for the whole of which we were a part*. This is at best a method of partial reconciliation between inner and outer views. . . .[32]

Supposing this is Nagel's defense of the first key claim, what are we to make of it? To begin, it would appear Nagel's fourth doctrine of absurdity so understood is, at best, only as plausible as the controversial reasoning utilitarians employ. Does the objective recognition of the value of an individual's interests, '(1)' above, combined with the objective recognition that no one is more important than anyone else, '(2)' above, logically entail the principle of utility, '(3)' above? Many people argue they do not, and hence will not be persuaded by Nagel's fourth doctrine so interpreted, at least not until he can get them to change their minds about this utilitarian reasoning. I take this to be an unhappy situation for Nagel and the fourth doctrine. At any rate, I am not going to spend time on whether this utilitarian reasoning is sound, at least not at this point. One reason I am not is that I believe propositions '(1)' through '(5),' rather than supporting the thesis of absurdity, actually undermine it. And the second reason is that a more detailed account than has been given of Nagel's view on values and ethics (which he brings out in the three chapters immediately preceding the one in which he discusses absurdity) reveals that, despite the passage above, Nagel in the end does not use the utilitarian reasoning just sketched to derive his first key claim that our lives matter very little, and hence the fourth doctrine itself is not wedded to such controversial reasoning.

Let me begin with why I think the so-called utilitarian conception of value is no good for Nagel's doctrine of absurdity. Such a conception implies that the relative importance of the satisfaction of an individual's concerns will vary as the total number of individuals vary. This implication (aside from being a part of what makes utilitarianism implausible to many nonutilitarians) in turn seems to imply that if, say, nuclear bombs went off tomorrow and the earth's population of living things dramatically dropped, the

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[32]Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 220. Emphasis mine.

objective value of the satisfaction of the concerns of the individuals still alive would dramatically rise. So before the bombs went off, that my concerns are satisfied objectively matters little. But after the bombs explode and I am one of the few survivors, that my concerns are satisfied is—presto!—objectively very important, or at least more so than they were. What this implication suggests is that our lives may be absurd now (because multitudes of us and other living things exist), but they may not be absurd tomorrow or sometime in the future (because a much smaller number of us and other living things may exist), which amounts to a repudiation of Nagel's fourth doctrine of absurdity. In other words, because it is possible that the lives of individual human beings will be considerably more important in the future, it is possible that the discrepancy between pretension and reality will vanish or at least will not be conspicuous. However, since the latter is possible, human existence *as such* is not absurd. And it seems we can make the argument even stronger if to the future possibility we add a fact about the past: that at one time the human population was much smaller.

There does seem to be a way for Nagel to head off this objection, and interestingly two statements he makes suggest it. They indicate that he regards as proper subjects of value not only the countless *actual* individual valuers (and the many other *actual* kinds of valuers) but also the infinite number of *possible* individual valuers (and *possible* kinds of valuers): "To the external view, many different actual and *possible* subjective values must be acknowledged. . . . From there [the objective perspective] I can accord it [my life] no more importance than it merits in a global view which includes all *possible* forms of life and their value on an equal footing."[33] Now if all actual *and possible* individuals have equal value, then no fluctuation of the value of an individual can occur. The number of actual beings would be irrelevant regarding each's value; it neither would increase with

[33]Ibid., 220. Emphasis mine.

fewer actual valuers nor decrease with more actual valuers. Consequently, the objection centering on fluctuation vanishes.

Unfortunately, the move to throw all possible valuers, and all possible kinds of valuers, into the cosmic pool with actual valuers, and actual kinds of valuers, appears to be an *ad hoc* one. What metaphysics and ethics would afford all *possible* beings value and, if that were not enough, the same value as any actual being? Luper-Foy seems to be on the mark when he writes:

> Here Nagel's argument teeters on the threshold of incomprehensibility. Having said that the objective standpoint acknowledges that my life is of value, does he really mean to add that objectively speaking my life is of damn little importance since it has the same significance as that of any living thing and the same, moreover, as any possibilia, so that it is no better than the life of the possible angry man standing in the doorway? . . . [I]t is patently absurd to say that the concerns of individual people are no more important than those of individual possible people, individual plants and animals, and individual possible plants and animals.[34]

If this metaphysics and ethics is not "patently absurd," then Nagel needs to show why, which he does not. I myself cannot conceive of how the story would go.

Another, and more plausible, way Nagel may respond to the fluctuation objection is, first, to agree that human existence *as such* is not absurd but, then, to insist that all along he has really been defending the more modest claim that human existence *as we know it* is absurd—and human existence as we know it is a world in which plenty of human beings exist. This response of course comes at the cost of making the fourth doctrine of absurdity a more modest one. But the doctrine so interpreted is still pretty bold, and so I think this response may be available to Nagel.[35]

However, at this point I want to call into question the view that Nagel uses some kind of utilitarian reasoning to arrive at the claim that our lives objectively matter very

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[34]Luper-Foy, 89.

[35]Shortly, I shall revisit the plausibility of the second view, or something very similar to this view, and argue that, appearances to the contrary, utilitarian reasoning does not in fact lead to the conclusion that our lives are of little importance.

little. I believe he in fact employs another kind of reasoning, and although we have to hunt for it in places where he does not explicitly discuss absurdity, it receives significantly more textual support than the two previously discussed views, so much more that I think it warrants being called Nagel's official account.[36] To understand it, we need to understand Nagel's normative realism in more detail, especially the distinction he makes in *The View from Nowhere* between moral reasons that are "agent-neutral" and those that are "agent-relative."

Nagel believes we have "objective reasons" to want or do certain things. For him, to say that reasons are *objective* is to say that they can be "understood and affirmed from outside the viewpoint of the individual who has them."[37] And to say that reasons can be *affirmed* from outside is to go beyond the nonnormative, causal, merely explanatory—that is, antirealist—sense of reason, in whose context we would simply say that that woman's "reason" for acting was that she had this desire or motive. In affirming that there are objective reasons, Nagel affirms value realism.

However, according to Nagel's own conception of value realism, there are "two levels of objectification" with regard to reasons. On one level are what he, following Derek Parfit, calls "agent-relative reasons"; on the other are "agent-neutral reasons."[38] The important difference between the two for the issue at hand is that having an agent-relative reason to want or do something depends on being a particular person with a particular perspective in a particular circumstance, whereas having an agent-neutral reason

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[36]One may wonder why I even bothered with the first two views given this strong endorsement of the third. I bothered with the first because Luper-Foy, a competent critic, attributes it to Nagel and provides text, albeit a limited amount, that seems to support it. As for the second view, I think that, first, it is suggested by the passage I cited, which is centrally located within Nagel's argument for absurdity; second, it is a more credible account of objective value than the first view; third, it receives some support in "Subjectivity and Objectivity" as the view Nagel espouses; and fourth, it, as I shall discuss shortly, may be compatible with the third view and, in Nagel's mind, work with it.

[37]Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 153.

[38]In *The Possibility of Altruism*, he calls the two kinds of reasons "subjective reasons" and "objective reasons."

to want or do something does not depend on these things. So, to take an example Nagel is fond of, if I have an agent-relative reason to take aspirin to relieve a bad headache, that is just because anyone from the objective view can understand and affirm that my presently occupying a specific perspective—one with particular conscious experiences, along with a particular system of beliefs and values—makes reasonable my wanting the headache to go away and to take aspirin for this purpose. The objective justification here stems from an objective recognition that the pain is bad *from my particular perspective*.[39] At the same time—and this is the feature of agent-relative reasons that will turn out to be most crucial—if the reason to relieve my bad headache is only agent-relative, then since people do not occupy my perspective they do not have a reason to do anything to relieve my pain, nor even a reason to want it to go away. (Of course they do have a reason to want to relieve and to relieve their own pain.) This feature follows by definition alone.[40] As Nagel explains:

> As objective spectator, I acknowledge that TN [Thomas Nagel] has a reason to want it [TN's suffering] to stop, but I see no reason why it should stop. My evaluation of it is entirely confined within the framework of a judgment about what it is rational *for this person* to want. . . .
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> From within I am directly subject to certain agent-relative reasons. From without all I can do is to acknowledge the reasonableness for the person I am of being motivated by those reasons—without being motivated by them myself, qua objective self."[41]

Now if, in addition to this agent-relative reason, I have an agent-neutral reason to take aspirin for the purpose of relieving my bad headache, that is just because anyone from the objective perspective can recognize that the pain is not only bad from my perspective,

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[39]It should be added that anybody from the objective perspective understands and affirms, as well, that *anyone occupying the same kind of specific perspective* has reason to want his or her own headache to cease and to take aspirin for this purpose. While an agent-relative reason is relative to a perspective, it is not relative to an *instance* of this perspective. Objectivity always requires generalization, and, as Nagel emphasizes, such a generalization in part explains why agent-relative reasons are objective.

[40]Ibid., 159.

[41]Ibid., 160, 170.

but also bad from no perspective in particular, that is, bad from the objective perspective itself. "The pain," states Nagel, "though it comes attached to a person and his individual perspective, is just as clearly hateful to the objective self as to the subjective individual. . . . The pain can be detached in thought from the fact that it is mine without losing any of its dreadfulness. It has, so to speak, a life of its own."[42] What this feature of agent-neutral reasons implies most importantly, in stark contrast to that important feature of agent-relative reasons, is that *everyone* has a reason to want to relieve my headache and to relieve it. Any rational agent has a reason to want to eliminate and a reason to eliminate what is objectively bad.[43]

Now how, according to Nagel, do these reasons and their features relate to value, and in particular to the claim that our lives objectively matter very little? Let me start with agent-relative reasons and their relation to value, and let me first make one last remark about agent-relative reasons and then one introductory remark about value. The last remark about agent-relative reasons is that on Nagel's view a person's interests, together with their strength relative to one another, will in general determine what he or she has agent-relative reason to want or do. The introductory remark about value is that on Nagel's view we can speak of two kinds: subjective value, what is of value to a particular perspective, and objective value, what is of value to no perspective in particular, or from the objective perspective.

Now regarding agent-relative reasons and their relation to *subjective* value: just as the strength of an interest will in general determine what a person has agent-relative reason to do, the strength of an interest will determine its subjective value. In other words, the subjective importance of the interest is generally equivalent to what the person

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[42]Ibid., 160. Nagel is actually referring to a severe burn in this passage, but the source of the pain is irrelevant.

[43]Ibid., 159.

whose interest it is says it is.[44] So if my strongest interest at this time is to finish my doctoral dissertation (and if this interest is not irrational in view of other particular facts about me), I have a very strong agent-relative reason to want to finish it and to finish it; and the subjective value of wanting to finish it and finishing it is likewise great.

However, as for the *objective* value of something that a person has only an agent-relative reason to want or do (no matter how strong), it is at best minuscule. The reason it is minuscule is that something a person has only an agent-relative reason to want or do does not engage the objective will. It does not engage the objective will because for something to engage it, the objective will must have a reason to want or do that something, which in the case of things that a person has only a relative reason to want or do, it does not. This much is clear about Nagel's view of the objective value of something that a person has only an agent-relative reason to do. Now whether Nagel believes such value is absolutely zero or whether he thinks it is just very little is not clear. He hedges. For example, about a personal ambition that one has only an agent-relative reason to want or do, he writes: "[It] has no value except from the perspective of its subject—at least none in any way comparable to the value reasonably placed on it by the person whose ambition it is."[45] The sliver of objective value such a thing *might* have consists in the sympathy the objective will may have for the agent. In a few places, Nagel mentions such sympathy:

> When you look at your struggles as if from a great height, in abstraction from the engagement you have with this life because it is yours—perhaps even in abstraction from your identification with the human race—you may feel a certain sympathy for the poor beggar, a pale pleasure in his triumphs and a mild concern for his disappointments. . . .
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> Those [subjective values] arising within my life may evoke sympathy, but that is not the same as true objective engagement.[46]

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[44]The exceptions are cases when one is wrong about one's own feelings, beliefs, values, etc.

[45]Ibid., 169.

[46]Ibid., 216, 220.

I shall not pause any more than I have to examine this issue. The reason is that the more modest view, the one which assigns an iota of objective value to things a person has only relative reasons to want or do, should serve Nagel as well as the bolder view in his attempt to establish the claim that objectively our lives matter very little.

Let me turn now to the relation between agent-neutral reasons and value. The *subjective* value of something that a person has an agent-neutral reason to want or do roughly amounts to the importance he or she assigns it from within his or her particular perspective. Thus the same thing that determines the subjective value of something that a person has a *relative* reason to want or do also determines the subjective value of something that a person has a *neutral* reason to want or do.

As for the *objective* value of something a person has an agent-neutral reason to want or do, it would appear to be substantial. In fact, Nagel in several places suggests that it is comparable to the subjective value of something that a person has a weighty agent-relative reason to want or do. Let me try to make this point clear by giving an example of something Nagel actually thinks a person has both a relative and neutral reason to want and pursue: relief from physical pain. Nagel indicates that in any given case the objective value of this state is comparable to its subjective value. To quote a part of a passage I cited earlier: "The pain [from a severe burn] . . . is just as clearly hateful to the objective self as to the subjective individual. . . . The pain can be detached in thought from the fact that it is mine without losing any of its dreadfulness."[47] And a little later Nagel suggests the same thing in the process of asking why the objective value of something that a person has only an agent-relative reason to want or do is not the same as its subjective value: "Why shouldn't the satisfaction of my desire to climb the mountain [which I have only a relative reason to do] have impersonal value [objective value] comparable to the

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[47]Ibid., 160.

value it has for me [subjective value]—just like the elimination of my headache?"[48] The passage seems to imply that the objective value of something that a person has a neutral reason to want or do, in this case relief from a headache, is comparable to its subjective value.

Now, all we need to do is fill in what in general Nagel thinks we have agent-relative reasons to want or do and what we have agent-neutral reasons to want or do, and we should be able to understand why he believes our lives matter little.

To begin, we have an agent-neutral reason to promote sensory pleasures (those of "food, drink, sleep, sex, warmth, and ease") and to relieve sensory pains (those of "injury, sickness, hunger, thirst, cold, and exhaustion").[49] We have, in addition, an agent-neutral reason to promote individual "freedom" and "self-respect" along with individual access to "general opportunities" and "the basic resources of life."[50] In contrast to these goods (which for the time being I shall call interpersonal goods) are other ones (which I shall call personal goods), and we have only agent-relative reasons to promote them. These personal goods include the remainder of our concerns, which, according to Nagel, account for "most of the things we pursue."[51] Some examples Nagel uses are stamp collecting, learning to play the piano or all of Beethoven's piano sonatas, climbing to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro, spending time at the race track, building a monument to a god, and securing posthumous fame. While generally each person has a (relative) reason to pursue his or her personal goods, everyone else does not have a (neutral) reason to promote them. In other words, the objective will could not care much less about them.

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[48]Ibid., 167.

[49]Ibid., 156.

[50]Ibid., 171.

[51]Ibid., 168.

And that, at last, is exactly why Nagel thinks our lives objectively matter very little. We now understand that what he really means by 'our lives' when he states that our lives objectively matter little is our *personal* lives, which he defines in terms of our *personal* aims and ambitions. That a particular person is free of pain is objectively important. That others respect her is objectively important. That she has access to opportunities and resources that will allow her to lead a fulfilling life is objectively important. That she learns the nine Beethoven piano sonatas, however, is not objectively important. That she fills up her stamp collecting books or climbs Mount Kilimanjaro are not. That she succeeds at, or even *has*, any of her other idiosyncratic ambitions or projects is not either. But, as Nagel points out, she herself takes these things very seriously. She acts as if they do objectively matter very much—and that precisely is why her life is ridiculous, absurd. And because we all devote ourselves to our own "optional ends," as he sometimes calls our personal aims and ambitions, our lives are absurd too. Nagel uses a wonderful analogy to drive home his case:

> From outside we do indeed tend to see most of our pursuits as important only relatively. Watching the human drama is a bit like watching a Little League baseball game: the excitement of the participants is perfectly understandable but one can't really enter into it. At the same time, since one *is* one of the participants, one is caught up in the game directly, in a way that cannot include an admission of relativity. When you are considering a career, marriage, children, or even whether to go on a diet, review a book, or buy a car, the external standpoint is excluded and you face the matter directly, from the internal standpoint of ordinary life. The detached external view just has to come along, and accommodate itself to the unqualified concerns that it can't internalize.[52]

We can now see why Nagel may not be inconsistent, contrary to what Luper-Foy thinks, when, perplexingly, Nagel writes: "From the objective standpoint, the fundamental thing leading to the recognition of agent-neutral reasons is a sense that no one is more important than anyone else. The question then is whether we are all equally unimportant

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[52]Ibid., 217–218.

or all equally important, and the answer, I think, is somewhere in between."[53] Luper-Foy responds: "But clearly Nagel must think that objectively we are more nearly unimportant than important, or else he would not have said that 'human life even at its subjective best' is threatened with 'objective meaninglessness' . . ., nor that we find our lives 'objectively insignificant' . . ."[54] The apparent inconsistency between the passage and the two statements vanishes if we interpret Nagel in the way I have been suggesting and if we charitably interpret the passage and two statements. The charitable interpretation of the passage is that insofar as our basic, interpersonal interests (pleasure, pain, freedom, etc.) are concerned, we are all equally very important, but with regard to our personal interests, we are all equally unimportant. The charitable interpretation of the two statements is that Nagel has in mind our personal interests alone when he refers to 'human existence' and our 'lives.' (That he does have this alone in mind makes sense in light of his view that our personal interests comprise "most of the things we pursue.") Thus, on Nagel's view, our lives are somewhat important if by 'our lives' we mean both our (nearly unimportant) personal interests and our (important) interpersonal interests, and our lives are nearly unimportant if by 'our lives' we mean only our (nearly unimportant) personal interests.

But then again one might argue, in defense of Luper-Foy's position, that Nagel's true position is that each of our lives is nearly unimportant *even when our interpersonal interests are included.* The reason is that our interpersonal interests are important—but only in the abstract, only before they are *practically* considered, that is, in the context of what actual people ought objectively to strive for in the world. What it seems they ought to strive for is maximizing utility, utility being the interpersonal goods. This principle of utility is objectively warranted because we all need to be impartial in promoting such goods, for "no one is more important than anyone else." However, the principle leaves

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[53]Ibid., 171.

[54]Luper-Foy, 90.

any *particular* person's pleasure, freedom, and so on minimally important in view of the countless number of people in the world.

This distinction between something's objective value "in the abstract" and its objective value "in the concrete" can be made more intelligible by considering the following. There are no doubt many instances in which a person has competing agent-neutral reasons to want or do different things, and in such instances it seems that certain things have significantly less objective value than they would if they did not have to compete against other things. That is to say, just as the market value of a home decreases when the fact that it sits in a crime-ridden neighborhood is taken into consideration, so too does a portion of something's objective value get canceled out whenever the neutral reason to which it is attached competes with a stronger neutral reason to want or do something else.

This view of objective value, and along with it the position that Nagel thinks that each of our lives is nearly unimportant even when our interpersonal interests are included, does seem to square nicely with the second interpretation of Nagel's defense of the first key claim, which I presented a short while ago and referred to as the second view. We might remember that this view generated the claim that our lives matter little by using utilitarian reasoning, and it was supported by the passage in which Nagel speaks of our "contributing to the cosmic pool" and our "objective concern for the whole of which we are a part." Moreover, if we deny that Nagel believes that each of our lives are practically unimportant even when our interpersonal interests are included, then it is hard to understand why he emphasizes the fact that each of us is "one of countlessly many, in a civilization that is also not unique." There appears to be no reason for Nagel to emphasize this fact if his argument supporting the claim that our lives matter little has solely to do with the value of our personal goods. On Nagel's view, our personal goods would be practically unimportant regardless of the number of subjects of value. In contrast, there does seem to be a point in emphasizing the countlessly many subjects of value if the

argument involves a utilitarian calculation in conjunction with the interpretation of objective values just presented.

I think in the final analysis that it is possible Nagel believes the objective value of an individual's interpersonal interests (pain, pleasure, freedom, etc.) must be brought down to earth, subjected to utilitarian reasoning, and adjusted in the way just suggested. However, if he does believe this, I think he is incorrect. Rather than speak of objective value somehow "in the abstract" and then "in the concrete," it makes much more sense to say that, from a utilitarian point of view, all interpersonal interests are very important, period, but that, depending on the circumstances, some interpersonal interests are more important than others (that is, with regard to whether they ought to be satisfied). In other words, from a utilitarian standpoint, all interpersonal interests are very important and should be addressed, which means they ought to be included in the utility calculation; but, because of the way the world is, some interpersonal interests, regretfully, ought to be left unsatisfied. Therefore, given the plausibility of the principle of utility, we may be *bad* in paying special or exclusive attention to our own interpersonal interests "on sufferance from an objective concern for the whole," but we are not *absurd* in doing so.

Nagel, then, might just as well say, if in fact he does not, that an individual's interpersonal interests are important but that his or her personal ones practically are not. That an individual's personal interests are practically unimportant might well enough justify the claim that each person's life matters little, or in any case might create enough of a discrepancy in our lives to warrant calling them absurd. The important question now is whether Nagel can make a case for the view that some individual interests are objectively important while others practically are not. By using the labels *personal interests* and *interpersonal interests* above, I have already hinted at why he thinks some interests engage the objective will while others do not. However, to be fair, I should take some time to explore these labels to try to get a better sense of Nagel's view before I evaluate it.

We might remember Nagel emphasizing that the evidence for any objective value begins with reports of value from subjective perspectives. However, he is quick to add that this does not necessarily mean that all appearances of objective value are veridical, just as not all appearances of empirical facts are veridical. (We have reason to believe, for instance, that colors are not attributes of external objects, even though they appear to be.) Now given the existence of objective value, the question is how to determine which appearances of objective value are veridical and which are not. Nagel's answer seems to be that the more something is not tied to a particular perspective the more likely it has objective value and, inversely, the more something is tied to a particular perspective the more likely its value is merely subjective. One of the things it means for something to be bound up with a particular perspective is that the appearance of this thing's value depends on the very personal likes and dislikes associated with that person. It is valued by the person *because* of his peculiar interests; without them it would have no value for him. If I were not a person with peculiar interests, I would not have this great desire to climb Mount Kilimanjaro, nor would I support anyone else doing it, unless that climber was a friend and I felt some special obligation to him or her. Now if the appearance of a thing's value is contingent on a person's idiosyncratic perspective, that would strongly suggest its value is merely subjective. For in order for something to have significant objective value it must be appreciated from an objective perspective; but if something is tied to a particular perspective, it will not be appreciated once one assumes an objective perspective and the particular perspective is left behind.

In contrast, one of the things it means for something not to be bound up with a particular perspective is that the appearance of the value of the thing does not depend on the very personal likes and dislikes of an individual. It, unlike the thing that has merely subjective value, is not valued by the individual *because* of his or her specific concerns; just the opposite—concerns are evoked *because* of its value. The value of a thing that is not tied to a particular perspective "simply come[s] at [a person] independently of his

choices." He need not have these individual aims and ambitions or those personal concerns and projects to value this thing; he would value it from any perspective. And to say that he would value it from any perspective is to say that while historically the value of such a thing, like the value of everything, arises as an appearance of a particular perspective, it "can just be taken over by the objective self." Its value is "transparently good or bad." The badness of the pain one experiences from a severe burn, for example, is evident to a person directly and immediately; it is not bound up with his or her particular dislikes. The person would judge the pain bad regardless of his or her personal dislikes that are among his or her distinguishing characteristics. These facts about physical pain strongly suggest that if anything has objective value, physical pain does. As a person leaves his or her personal perspective behind when assuming an objective one, the badness of the pain is still appreciated because it is not tied to the unique aspects of that subjective perspective.[55]

Such an analysis leads Nagel to make a claim he admits sounds paradoxical: "The more subjective the object of the desire, the more impersonal [or objective] the value of its satisfaction." What Nagel is essentially saying here is that the likeliest candidates of objective value are those that can be identified with a person's mental states, or with, as he puts it, "the quality of the subject's experience." Physical pain and pleasure are two prime examples. The unlikeliest candidates of objective value, on the other hand, are those that hardly involve, if at all, a person's mental states, which he tells us are "things happening in the world outside our minds." These turn out to be all those concerns, projects, and goals of ours that are personal and optional, such as climbing Mount Kilimanjaro and learning all of the Beethoven piano sonatas. About these objects, Nagel writes: "It seems too much to allow an individual's desires to confer impersonal [or objective] value on something outside himself, even if he is to some extent involved in it. The impersonal authority of

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[55]Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 166–68.

the individual's value diminishes with distance from his inner condition." Nagel thinks we can easily see the merely subjective value of these objects outside our minds if we consider those that can in no way impinge on one's mental states, such as securing posthumous fame. We strongly believe that we have no agent-neutral reason to secure anyone's posthumous fame. "If someone wants posthumous fame, he may have a reason to do what he thinks will achieve it but one cannot see it as anything but a good *for him*. There is no agent-neutral value whatever in the realization of his hope. . . ." But what exactly is behind this conviction? Nagel's answer is that the satisfaction of this desire will have absolutely no effect on the famous person's mental states. Because it will have no such effect, its value is merely subjective.[56]

Evaluation of the Distinction and Doctrine

Nagel is a moderate deontologist, not a consequentialist. However, he is a moderate deontologist who happens to think consequentialist considerations, along with the principle of impartiality, describe much of what is of objective value and what we are morally obligated to do.[57] At the same time, Nagel pits himself against those consequentialists who do not distinguish between preferences, such as Richard Hare. They believe that all preferences are objectively important, and so must be included in the utility calculation. Now the question before us is in effect how plausible Nagel's case is against these consequentialists. How plausible is his case for a distinction between interests that are objectively important and those that are hardly so? Once again I want to emphasize the distinction's importance with regard to Nagel's fourth doctrine of absurdity. If he can successfully make it (and if he is right that we regard as very important those

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[56]Ibid., 169–71.

[57]"I am not an ethical hedonist, but I think pleasure and pain are very important. . . ." (Ibid., 156). "There is one important component of ethics that is consequentialist and impersonal. . . . [S]ome kind of hedonistic, agent-neutral consequentialism describes a significant form of concern that we owe to others" (Ibid., 164). "Difficult as it may be to carry out, each of us has reason to give significant weight to the simple sensory pleasure or pain of others as well as to his own" (Ibid., 166).

interests of ours that objectively matter very little, and if these interests are not negligible but make up a good portion of our interests), then his doctrine of absurdity may very well be compelling. If, on the other hand, he cannot successfully make the distinction, then he fails to generate a conspicuous discrepancy and consequently is left with no plausible doctrine of absurdity. So is Nagel's case for the distinction persuasive? My view is that it is ingenious, but not persuasive.

The central problem of Nagel's argument for making a radical value distinction between preferences can best be described as a dilemma in which the argument, I believe, lands him. I shall first outline this dilemma by identifying its two horns and then defend it.

Under one of two possible interpretations of Nagel's argument for the distinction, which I take to be the first horn of the dilemma, Nagel gives personal preferences that objectively barely matter wide scope. By this I mean he includes as our personal preferences *all* of our personal goals, concerns, projects, and ambitions. However, the problem with this position is that it is false that the satisfaction of all these preferences is at best minimally associated with our pleasure and pain. I want to argue that the satisfaction of many of these preferences is inextricably bound to "the quality of the subject's experience."

If this is correct, then it seems Nagel must give personal preferences that objectively hardly matter narrow scope. Under this interpretation, which I take to be the second horn of the dilemma, while some of our personal preferences (namely, those that have a strong connection to our mental states) are objectively important, the rest are practically unimportant. However, the trouble with this position, as I shall argue, is that not enough objectively practically unimportant personal preferences are left to warrant calling our lives, or human existence, absurd. We might be ridiculously attached to certain goals and projects, but our attachment to many others is not ridiculous. So while we may be justified in saying that some of our concerns and pursuits are absurd ones, we would not be justified in saying our lives are absurd.

In standard form, the dilemma, then, is this:

1. Either Nagel gives personal preferences that objectively barely matter wide scope or he gives them narrow scope.
2. If he gives personal preferences that barely matter wide scope, then he commits himself to the untenable position that none of our personal preferences are strongly tied to the quality of our subjective states, and hence has not shown that our lives are absurd.
3. If he gives personal preferences that objectively barely matter narrow scope, then a significant number of our personal preferences will be important, and consequently our lives will not be absurd.
4. Therefore, either Nagel commits himself to the untenable position that none of our personal preferences are strongly tied to the quality of our subjective states, and hence has not shown that our lives are absurd; or a significant number of our personal preferences are important and consequently our lives are not absurd.

Now let me discuss and defend this dilemma, beginning with the first horn (premiss '2'). Its two major claims are (1) that many of our personal preferences are tied up with our pleasure and pain and (2) that if so, they, on Nagel's view, must be objectively important since the quality of our mental states is objectively important. Now what exactly do I mean by the first major claim? I simply mean that the satisfaction of many of our personal preferences will make us happy and give us pleasure and that their not being satisfied will make us sad and give us pain. Nagel is certainly right that we do take these preferences very seriously—after all, they are our personal projects and ambitions! Indeed it is in large part for their sake that we continue to do all the unpleasant things that take up so much of our time. It is largely for their sake that we go to work and put in our forty, fifty, sixty hours each week, that we put up with all the daily drudgery: the dish washing, laundry, housecleaning, and yard work. Nagel is certainly correct that we take our personal interests very seriously. But ironically that is where his problem lies. Satisfying a preference that we cherish is apt to bring us great pleasure; not satisfying it is likely to

bring us great pain, in many cases enduring misery. I take this point to be pretty obvious. But let me support it with some anecdotal evidence that quickly comes to mind.[58]

(1) As I have already indicated, one of my personal aims is to earn a Ph.D. degree in philosophy. It is a personal aim insofar as it is, as Nagel says, "optional," idiosyncratic and one I most likely could do without. But that I have not yet earned the degree really bothers me. I usually feel anxious and uneasy whenever I do something unrelated to this aim—and even when I am working on it. Moreover, one of the requirements of getting the degree is taking and passing comprehensive examinations. When I failed one, I was positively miserable.

(2) A woman in her early forties is childless and trying to become pregnant. This is one of her (optional) personal preferences, and a very important one. She desperately wants to be a mother. She has been trying to get pregnant for over a year and knows her maternal clock has little, if any, time remaining. With every period she grows sadder and sadder. She knows adoption is a possibility, but she very much wants to give birth. She is distraught.

(3) A young man got a full-time job with a large horticulture business a few years back. One of his goals last year was to be "employee of the year." He worked very, very hard to get this award. It was quite important to him. He felt a strong desire to make his wife, father, and older siblings proud of him. He won the award, and was euphoric.

Now it is certainly true that the extent to which the satisfaction or frustration of our personal preferences effects the quality of our experience varies. For example, had the young man not won employee of the year, his pain probably would have been significantly less than what the woman's pain and my pain would be if we fail in our aims.[59] And

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[58]Again, I would prefer to use nonpersonal examples, but I am most confident about the personal ones. Please indulge me.

[59]What I have in mind here by "significantly less" is a rough measure of pain arrived at by considering different respects in which pain is bad, *a la* Jeremy Bentham.

certainly I have personal preferences whose frustration would be less, and many far less, than what the young man's would have been. Recall that example I used in chapter 2. The fact that my coming up troutless after a day of fishing when my buddies have managed to land some fish often upsets me. Chances are the displeasure I feel in a given instance is significantly less than what the young man would have experienced had his employer not given him the award. Notwithstanding, we can all, I believe, readily identify personal concerns and projects of ours intimately bound up with the quality of our subjective experience.

Moving over to the other horn of the dilemma (premiss '3'), it is possible that the personal preferences Nagel believes are barely important are only those that at best have a minimal effect on our mental states. We might remember the example he highlights, the personal preference of posthumous fame, whose satisfaction or frustration has *no* effect on the person's mental states. (The person will not be around to experience his or her having succeeded or failed.) To this example we might add the many cases of winning or losing in friendly competitions, such as a set of tennis or a game of bridge or chess. Often the outcomes of these events hardly effect the quality of our subjective experience, one way or the other. No doubt still other kinds of cases could be added, in general any cases involving mild concerns of ours and goals and projects we pursue but with little enthusiasm.

I am quite willing to grant Nagel all of these cases, but I hasten to add that these preferences are just not the ones that define our lives. If individual human existence were accurately characterized as the pursuit of posthumous fame, then Nagel would be in business. But it is not. And our lives cannot accurately be characterized in terms of our mild concerns either.[60] If any characterization of our lives in terms of our personal

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[60]If they were so characterized, Nagel's doctrine of absurdity would be none the better, for it would lack the conspicuous discrepancy on which it hinges. The only discrepancy obtaining would be one involving our taking certain personal preferences that were objectively unimportant as being minimally important—hardly a *conspicuous* discrepancy.

preferences is accurate, it is one involving our lifelong aims and ambitions whose satisfaction we enjoy immensely and from whose frustration we suffer much pain and sorrow. Therefore, the move to limit personal preferences that are barely important to those at best minimally connected to the quality of our experience seems just as problematic as claiming that all of our personal preferences are minimally so connected and hence are practically unimportant.

While Nagel does not directly address either horn of the dilemma, he does make some statements about the connection between personal preferences and pleasure and pain that I think indicate what his response to the dilemma would be. These statements occur in the following passage:

> There is nothing incoherent in wanting to be able to climb Kilimanjaro or play all the Beethoven piano sonatas, while thinking that impersonally it doesn't matter whether one can do this. In fact one would have to be dotty to think it did matter impersonally. It doesn't even matter much impersonally that *if* someone wants to play all the Beethoven sonatas by heart, he should be able to. It matters a little, so that if he is incapable of achieving it, it might be better if he didn't want to—leaving aside whatever value there may be in the ambition itself. The neutral value of pleasure and pain come into effect here. But even that is a rather weak neutral value, since it is not the neutral correlate of the agent-relative reasons deriving directly from the ambition, whose object is not pleasure. If an interest is developed by the agent himself through his own choices and actions, then the objective reasons it promotes are primarily relative.[61]

First, I need to draw attention to a distinction Nagel makes in the first and third sentences of the passage. The distinction is between (1) whether it matters that one can play the Beethoven piano sonatas, *without considering if he or she wants to*, and (2) whether it matters that one can play them, *considering that he or she wants to*. The first question is more abstract than the second insofar as the first does not refer to someone actually wanting something; it just asks about the value of the thing (all by) itself. Now without considering if anyone wants to play the sonatas (that is, thinking about them in the abstract), it does seem "dotty to think," as Nagel claims, that it objectively matters

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[61]Ibid., 170.

"whether one can do this." Interestingly, it may *not* seem foolish to think that it matters objectively that one is in severe pain. Is it, then, this contrast, along with others involving other personal preferences and pleasure or pain, that persuades Nagel that pain and pleasure are objectively important but personal preferences are not? Maybe. In any case, I want to suggest that the contrast is misleading. It is misleading because implicit in the claim that it objectively matters that one is in pain is another claim, namely, that one hates the experience of pain—and it is this claim (which, we may notice, does involve a consideration of what one wants) that wholly drives our value judgment. That is to say, I submit that if we were totally to disregard the implicit claim, we would judge one experiencing pain as being neither important nor unimportant. In disregarding the implicit claim, we would in effect be assuming that extreme objective perspective from which Nagel tells us value judgments make no sense and which he warns us not to assume if we are trying to find out what, if anything, objectively matters. Therefore, if Nagel thinks the claim about playing the Beethoven sonatas in the second clause of the first sentence advances his position that personal preferences do not objectively matter, he is mistaken.

The proper question for Nagel to address, then, is whether it objectively matters that one can play the sonatas, *considering that he or she wants to* (just as the proper question regarding one experiencing pain is whether it objectively matters, *considering that he or she hates it, or wants it relieved*). And it is this question that Nagel addresses after the first two sentences. His answer is that playing them matters, but only an iota. He suggests that the little importance stems from the pleasure in succeeding or the pain in failing ("the neutral values of pleasure and pain come into effect here"). So, to begin, Nagel does acknowledge a connection between personal preferences and pleasure or pain—enough of a connection so that he admits these preferences have objective importance, albeit just a little. But even so, if he can plausibly show that our personal preferences do not matter much, the discrepancy between this fact and the fact that we attribute to them a lot of importance may be conspicuous enough to make our lives

absurd. Thus the next question is why exactly, according to him, do they not matter much? Nagel's answer lies in his statement that the pleasure from succeeding in playing the sonatas "is a rather weak neutral value, since it is not the neutral correlate of the agent-relative reasons deriving directly from the ambition, whose object is not pleasure."[62] What he seems to be saying here is that the agent-relative reasons one has for wanting to learn the sonatas and for learning them do not have to do with any pleasure the person may experience from learning them, unlike the relative reason one has for, say, engaging in sex. Rather, the agent-relative reasons concern other things (perhaps, for example, an idiosyncratic need to pay homage to the great Beethoven). And if pleasure is not among the (relative) reasons the person has for wanting to learn and for learning the sonatas, but is merely an unintended by-product, it cannot have much objective value. The pleasure cannot, it seems, because it simply will be a weak sensation, *qua* unintended by-product.

Before I respond to this argument, I want to suggest the possibility that I may have partly misinterpreted it. It is possible Nagel is making a different, and perhaps more subtle, point than what my last sentence in the last paragraph conveys. Maybe his point is that, regardless of the strength or weakness of the sensation, unintended pleasures have much less objective value than intended ones. The pleasure, for example, one enjoys from sex *for pleasure*, has more objective value than the same amount of pleasure another person derives from learning all of the Beethoven sonatas *for the sake of Beethoven*. The fact that pleasure was the aim in the first case is just what gives this pleasure more objective value than the pleasure in the second case. It is as though the idiosyncratic intention of paying homage to Beethoven clouds over the pleasure the person derives from learning all of the sonatas and negates all but a peephole of the transparency needed for the pleasure to be "taken over by the objective self."

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[62]As far as I can tell the subject to which the clause in quotes refers (that is, to which the pronoun 'that' just preceding the clause refers) is the pleasure from succeeding in playing the sonatas.

Now if something like the above does accurately represent Nagel's argument, then he needs to tell us exactly why the objective value of pleasure depends on whether it is intended or not—why pleasure is not simply pleasure. To the best of my knowledge he does not, and I myself cannot think of any plausible explanation within the parameters of his theory of value. In fact, on this interpretation of the argument, sex for pleasure would have more objective value than sex for procreation, all else remaining the same. I find plausible the view that our very personal aims and ambitions by themselves, that is, divorced from the pleasure they may produce, have little or no objective value. But that is quite different from the view that these aims and ambitions *qua* producers of pleasure have little objective importance if and only if pleasure was not the reason, or primary reason, the subjects pursued the aims and ambitions.

So let us return to the original interpretation of the argument Nagel makes in the passage above: since pleasure is not one of the primary reasons the person wants to learn all of the Beethoven sonatas, the pleasure she derives from succeeding in her endeavor will be little, and so, then, will be its objective value. My criticism of this interpretation of Nagel's argument is that he drastically underestimates the amount of pleasure or pain the satisfaction or frustration of many of our personal projects produce—regardless of the agent's own reasons for pursuing these projects. I submit the following generalization about human psychology, which I alluded to above and which I take to be fairly obvious: the more seriously a person takes his or her personal interests, the more pleasure will come from their being satisfied and the more pain will come from their going unsatisfied. I would add that the satisfaction or frustration of the personal interests a person takes most seriously produces much pleasure or pain, relative to his or her other pleasures and pains. If I succeed in getting my Ph.D. degree, I am confident that I shall experience much pleasure (so much that the term 'joy' would probably better describe my mental state). If, on the other hand, I fail I shall be grief-stricken. I am confident as well about the extent to which the childless woman in her early forties becoming pregnant or failing to do so will

effect her mental states. What about that piano player? That depends on how badly she wants to learn the sonatas. If other aims and projects are much more important to her, chances are success or failure will not effect her much. But in this case the success or failure of those aims and projects that are much more important to her will bring her much pleasure or pain.

Once more, no matter how idiosyncratic are our strong personal interests, no matter how idiosyncratic is our perspective that developed these strong interests, their satisfaction or frustration will greatly effect our mental states, will produce much pleasure or pain. This claim is an empirical generalization. As an *empirical* generalization, its truth or falsity depends on the way the world is, specifically on the facts about human psychology. I have arrived at it as the result of observations of myself, friends, acquaintances, and strangers. While it is of course possible these observations are off the mark, I feel confident in them and in the end can only ask others to check their observations to see if they match mine. Also, as an empirical *generalization*, the claim admits exceptions. But a warranted generalization is more than enough to undermine Nagel's response to my original objection.

In conclusion, I believe I have cast serious doubt on the distinction Nagel makes regarding the objective importance of preferences. He has not given us any good reason to think either that all personal preferences do not yield much pleasure or pain, or that if some do they, unlike other pleasures or pains, can hardly be objectively appreciated. He has failed, then, to meet his main condition of absurdity: a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension and reality. Consequently, the fourth doctrine of absurdity as it stands is not plausible.

CHAPTER 6

THE VIEW FROM EREWHON

My critical examination of Nagel's views on human absurdity has come to an end. In the preceding five chapters I have tried to establish three major claims. The first is that all of Nagel's objections to the four so-called standard arguments for absurdity fail to undermine them and that these arguments therefore warrant further investigation. The second is that, appearances to the contrary, Nagel offers, not one, but four distinct doctrines of absurdity in three works he wrote over a fifteen-year period. And the third claim is that none of the four doctrines succeeds in showing that human existence is absurd. Now in looking at these claims all at once, one may get the impression that this dissertation has amounted to a wholesale dismissal of what one philosopher has had to say about absurdity; and with this impression, one may question the value of such a negative project. I think both of these reactions are understandable, and I want to address them.

First of all, I should admit that insofar as my primary purpose in the preceding chapters has been to criticize Nagel's arguments, it can fairly be characterized as negative. I believe, however, that in philosophy there is generally value in this sort of purpose. It seems to me the value of the philosopher whose (negative) aim is to refute an argument is not unlike that of a prosecuting attorney whose (negative) aim is to disprove the presumed innocence of a defendant. Given our ultimate goal in law is getting at the truth of the matter when an allegation of wrongdoing is made, we value the crucial role the prosecuting attorney plays in this effort. Without this official's work, our efforts to

discover the truth would be severely thwarted. Likewise, to the extent that our ultimate goal in philosophy is getting at the truth (however we may wish to conceive 'the truth'), the role of the "prosecuting philosopher" has value. Without the work of this "official," our efforts to get at the truth would be hindered. I believe that when we are apt to question the value of the prosecuting attorney and prosecuting philosopher, we forget the ultimate goal the work of each of these officials serves.[1]

Regarding the impression that this dissertation has amounted to a blanket dismissal of what Nagel has had to say about absurdity, I want first to repeat that I understand the impression. It certainly may seem that I think there is little, if anything, to be learned from Nagel's works on absurdity, that is, other than that they fail to establish what they set out to. However, in spite of its seeming so, this impression does not actually reflect my view. In truth, I believe there is much to be learned from Nagel's works on absurdity, and I want to spend the rest of this chapter (acting now as Nagel's "defense lawyer") trying to show this. Specifically, I would like to try to support the following two related claims: (1) Nagel's notion of *conspicuous discrepancy* helps us to understand the general concept of absurdity and so may provide us with a touchstone for determining whether something, anything, we are inclined to call absurd is so; and (2) Nagel's more specific notion of a *conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality* is useful in getting us to think of ways in which our lives might be absurd, ways which Nagel himself has not explicitly considered. I shall take the two claims in order.

Absurdity As Conspicuous Discrepancy

According to Nagel, a conspicuous discrepancy of a particular kind makes our lives absurd. I have argued that he has not established such a discrepancy and hence has

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[1]I might also mention that I do not think my project up to this point has been *thoroughly* negative. Both my attempt to defend the standard arguments for absurdity against Nagel and my effort to clarify Nagel's texts can, I think, be properly construed as positive.

not shown that our lives are absurd. This claim of mine suggests, however, that if I thought Nagel *had* established a conspicuous discrepancy in all our lives, then he would be correct to say they are absurd. I do believe that to be the case. In fact, I think Nagel captures the core of the concept of absurdity in associating it with the notion of conspicuous discrepancy. By this I mean two things: (1) that a conspicuous discrepancy of some kind is sufficient (and perhaps necessary too) for human absurdity; and (2) that a conspicuous discrepancy of some kind is sufficient (and perhaps necessary too) for all other kinds of absurdity as well. If these claims are true, then I think Nagel's analysis of absurdity helps us to understand the concept more clearly.

Let me start with the second claim. Not only might we say that our *lives* are absurd; we might say that certain *propositions* of ours are absurd. To see this, consider the argument form *reductio ad absurdum*. We use this argument form to show that some claim X is false, and we show that by using the claim as a premiss by itself, or along with premisses that are obviously true, and deducing either a self-contradictory proposition or a strikingly false proposition. If a self-contradictory proposition or a strikingly false proposition is deduced, then, in the case of just one premiss, that premiss (claim X) must be false (q.e.d) or, in the case of more than one premiss, at least one premiss must be false, and since all the premisses but claim X are obviously true, it must be the false premiss (q.e.d). Now the feature of a *reductio* of interest to us is the fact that we consider the deduced self-contradictory proposition or strikingly false proposition *absurd*, as the name of the argument form suggests. Granted we are correct in doing so, what exactly makes them so?[2]

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[2]Perhaps one would want to say that what is shown to be absurd in a *reductio* is not the conclusion of the argument but the opponent's major claim, or even the opponent's position that contains this major claim. That is to say, it is the opponent's major claim or position that gets *reduced* to absurdity, not the conclusion. However, while it is certainly true that the opponent's major claim (or position) gets reduced to absurdity, it gets so reduced as the result of logically entailing an absurd proposition, the conclusion of the *reductio*. Thus if sound, a *reductio* actually shows that all three elements are absurd: the opponent's position and major claim of that position and the conclusion of the *reductio*. To keep the analysis simple, I shall only discuss the last of these three elements.

Let us consider self-contradictions first. We know that a self-contradictory proposition is at the same time an affirmation and a denial that something is the case, as is illustrated by the following formal compound proposition: All S is P, and some S is not P. As such, a self-contradictory proposition expresses a kind of opposition, disharmony, disagreement, or incongruity—in other words, a kind of *discrepancy*. And the particular kind of discrepancy it expresses is a *logical* one. However, a self-contradictory proposition is not just any logical opposition, disharmony, disagreement, or incongruity; it is a radical, jarring, glaring one—that is, a *conspicuous* one. The formal compound proposition 'All S is P, and some S is P' is logically discrepant insofar as its second component (whose quantity is particular) can be true and its first component (whose quantity is universal) can be false. But it is not conspicuously discrepant. The reason this compound proposition is not conspicuously discrepant is that it can be true. Of course any self-contradictory proposition cannot be true—it is logically false—which explains just why it is *conspicuously* discrepant. Therefore, just as a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality makes our lives absurd, a conspicuous discrepancy between components of a proposition makes that proposition absurd. In this way, Nagel's analysis of the conditions of *existential* absurdity helps us to better understand the conditions of *logical* absurdity, in this case self-contradiction.

Let us now turn to absurd conclusions of *reductio ad absurdum* arguments that are not self-contradictory but rather only strikingly false. I believe we can also use Nagel's analysis of absurdity to help us understand why these propositions are absurd. It seems to me that being strikingly false, like being self-contradictory, is a way for a proposition to be conspicuously discrepant. Consider first the following argument, which is a version of the argument from potential, an anti-abortionist argument:

1. All potential persons are beings that have a right to life.
2. All human fetuses are potential persons.
3. Therefore, all human fetuses are beings that have a right to life.[3]

Now look at the argument below, which is a *reductio ad absurdum* argument against the argument from potential. Its first premiss is the major claim of the argument from potential. Its second premiss is a proposition the *reductio's* proponents believe is obviously true. Its intermediate conclusion, or subconclusion, is a proposition they consider strikingly false, and hence absurd. Lastly, the *reductio's* final, or main, conclusion is the assertion that the first premiss, assumed to be true for the sake of argument, must be false:

1. All potential persons are beings that have a right to life.
2. All human sperm and ova are potential persons.
3. Therefore, all human sperm and ova are beings that have a right to life. (But that is absurd!)
4. Therefore, it is false that all potential persons are beings that have a right to life.[4]

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[3]By 'person' most defenders of this argument mean a being that possesses most of these psychological characteristics: consciousness, self-awareness, self-motivated activity, reasoning, language.

[4]If the hundreds of medical ethics students I have taught are any indication, most people—including most defenders of the argument from potential themselves—do agree with the *reductio's* author that proposition three *is* absurd. In referring to the claim that contraception and abstinence are seriously morally wrong (which can be immediately inferred from my proposition three), Bonnie Steinbock writes: "Very few defenders of the potentiality principle are willing to accept this conclusion" (Bonnie Steinbock, "Abortion: A Pro-Choice Perspective," in *Ethical Issues in Modern Medicine*, ed. John D. Arras and Bonnie Steinbock, 4th ed. [Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1995], 334). And in a footnote Steinbock writes: "R.M. Hare may be the only potentiality theorist who does not hinge his argument on a morally significant difference between embryos and gametes" (Ibid., 342, note 18). Thus I am inclined to think most people will find this example of a *reductio* an apt one. Incidentally, most defenders of the argument from potential attack the *reductio* by attacking proposition two. For examples, see John T. Noonan Jr., "An Almost Absolute Value in History," in *Ethical Issues in Modern Medicine*, ed. John Arras and Nancy Rhoden, 3d ed. (Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1989), 261–65; Rosalind Hursthouse, *Beginning Lives* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell in association with the Open University, 1987), 80; Richard Warner, "Abortion: The Ontological and Moral Status of the Unborn" in *Today's Moral Problems*, ed. Richard A. Wasserstrom, 2d ed. (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1979), 57; Stephen Buckle, "Arguing from Potential," *Bioethics* 2 (July 1988), 230–41; and Joel Feinberg, "Abortion," *Matters of Life and Death: New Introductory Essays in Moral Philosophy*, ed. Tom Regan, 2d ed. (New York: Random House, 1986), 267.

The argument is sometimes expanded to include another intermediate conclusion, derived from the existing one, which its proponents take to be strikingly false, and consequently absurd, as well: contraception, abstinence, and male masturbation are morally horrendous. Now, to begin, given that the propositions 'all human sperm and ova are beings that have a right to life' and 'contraception, abstinence, and male masturbation are morally horrendous' are in fact false, how exactly is each one discrepant? What two things disagree with, or are opposed to, one another or are disharmonious or incongruous? It seems to me that the discrepancy characteristic of each proposition is, quite simply, between what these propositions *assert* to be the case and what *is* the case. What each asserts to be the case is not so, and therefore that proposition is discrepant with reality. We might think of this kind of discrepancy as a *factual* one, in contrast to the *logical* kind of discrepancy characteristic of self-contradictions. Whereas the content of a proposition, including how this content squares with reality, plays no role in a logical discrepancy—a logical discrepancy is purely formal—a proposition's content does play a role, and a central one, in a factual discrepancy.

The next question is what makes the two propositions that are factually discrepant conspicuously so? The answer, probably coming at no surprise, is the striking manner in which they are false. The mere suggestion, let alone the assertion, that sperm and ova have a right to life (meaning, it seems, that we have a moral duty not to kill them or otherwise deprive them of continued existence) is, most of us think, not simply false, but laughingly so. And the same goes for the proposition that contraception, abstinence, and male masturbation are morally horrendous. According to this second proposition, the celibate Catholic priest is a horrible person. Morality demands that he procreate so as to save at least a few beings that have as much a right to life as the priest himself. Similarly, Mother Teresa, while saving many lives, also deprived a great many others of theirs. Bad Mother Teresa! But of course most of us think these claims are just plain silly. Mother

Teresa was a saint, and many Catholic priests are morally outstanding people. Her chastity did not violate anyone's right to life, and neither do theirs.

Now just why one contingently false proposition is *strikingly* false (*conspicuously* discrepant) and another one is merely false (discrepant) is not altogether clear. I have already mentioned that the former are laughingly false. Okay, but why exactly are they? Gilbert Ryle's notion of a "category mistake" may shed some light on the matter. It is not simply the case that sperm and ova do not have a full-fledged right to life. They do not have *any* claim to life. In fact, they are not the sort of beings that have any moral status whatsoever. To place sperm and ova in the category of 'beings that have moral status' is to commit a category mistake, which is what makes the proposition appear preposterous to us. In contrast, we might consider the proposition 'late gestation human fetuses are beings that have a full-fledged right to life.' Many people believe this proposition is false. At the same time, many who hold this opinion probably would not call the proposition absurd. If this is correct, what is the explanation? Why, in other words, do not these people find the proposition *conspicuously* discrepant? I think the answer is that they do not believe a category mistake is committed in asserting that late gestation human fetuses are beings that have a full-fledged right to life, for these people think late gestation human fetuses may have *at least some* claim to life.

I do not believe, however, that the notion of a category mistake explains why we find strikingly false all the propositions that we do. Take for instance the proposition 'there are no human beings on earth.' We may well find it strikingly false and absurd, but it does not seem to involve a category mistake. If the proposition is strikingly false but involves no category mistake, then we need to search for another reason it is strikingly false. What might it be? It seems to me that this proposition, as well as a host of others, is strikingly false because it is contrary to what is plainly and commonly evident. It certainly does not take a rocket scientist to know that there are humans on earth. That there are humans on earth is evident to every small child who understands the terms

'human,' 'existence,' and 'earth.' In contrast, the proposition 'Mars is smaller than earth' is not plainly and commonly evident. That is why we judge the assertion that Mars is larger than earth as *just* false, not strikingly so, and hence not absurd.[5] If Dee Dee were to say candidly to Butch that Mars is larger than earth and Butch responded, "That's absurd!" both would be wrong. Dee Dee because Mars is smaller than earth; Butch because Dee Dee's false proposition is not absurd since it is not plainly and commonly evident that Mars is smaller than the earth. In fact, chances are Butch's pronouncement was not even sincere. He was probably just showing off his knowledge or trying to insult Dee Dee.

Now the question as to which propositions are plainly and commonly evident and which are not is a difficult one. We might wonder *how* plainly and commonly evident a proposition must be for us appropriately to classify it as plainly and commonly evident. And of course what is evident to one group of people may not be to another. As I suggested above, the proposition 'Mars is smaller than earth' is not evident to Dee Dee (and, I am sure, not to many other people as well). However, it is probably evident to any astronomer worthy of the title. If so, then even though Butch may not be justified in declaring "Absurd!" regarding the proposition 'Mars is larger than earth,' might an astronomer be justified if, say, in the context of a debate with another astronomer over some astronomical matter, this astronomer were able to show that her opponent's position entailed the proposition? If so, then, with regard to at least some propositions, we may be correct in relativizing those that are plainly and commonly evident to groups of people. And it would seem to follow that whether some propositions are strikingly false (hence conspicuously discrepant, hence absurd) depends in part on the context in which they are asserted.

So far I have suggested that Nagel's notion of conspicuous discrepancy serves to clarify and explain different ways in which *propositions* can be absurd. I now want to

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[5]The assertion does not commit a category mistake either. Nor does it seem to be strikingly false in any other way.

consider a possible way in which *sentences* can be absurd and to see if the notion of conspicuous discrepancy serves to clarify and explain it too. Given it is correct to make a distinction between sentences and propositions and to construe sentences as the means by which we assert propositions, it seems right to say that sentences can sometimes fail to do what they are commonly supposed to do.[6] Consider a standard example of such a failure: Colorless green ideas sleep furiously. First of all, this *is* a sentence. It is syntactically sound: it has a subject (in this case, a noun phrase) and a predicate (in this case, an adverbial predicate). Nevertheless we may judge this well-formed sentence absurd. If we would be correct in doing so, what exactly makes it absurd?

Once again, I think we may profit by turning to Nagel for the answer. We might say that the sentence 'Colorless green ideas sleep furiously' is conspicuously discrepant. The discrepancy (opposition, disharmony, disagreement, incongruity), this time, is between what sentences are commonly supposed to do and what this sentence does. Sentences are commonly supposed to state propositions, and this sentence states no proposition. In other, perhaps simpler, words: sentences are commonly supposed to mean something, and this sentence does not—it has no meaning, it is meaningless. Now as for the *conspicuousness* of the discrepancy, it seems to lie in the fact that the sentence as a sentence is *completely*—that is, *from beginning to end*—meaningless. Consider a second sentence: In green pajamas, I sleep furiously. This sentence is discrepant to the extent that its complete predicate ('sleep furiously') is senseless, which in turn precludes the sentence, taken as a whole, from stating a proposition. At the same time, it seems right to say that this sentence is *in part* meaningful, that in uttering it we are asserting a proposition, namely, that I sleep in green pajamas. But we assert no proposition whatsoever when we utter 'Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.' Despite the fact that each of its words is

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[6]In referring to the function of sentences here ("what they are commonly supposed to do") and in the following, I do not mean to suggest anything Aristotelian. All I mean by the function of sentences is what they, as a matter of fact, happen to be used for.

meaningful, the sentence, as such—that is, as a group of syntactically related words—is *wholly* meaningless; for each of its syntactic units is meaningless: the conjunction of the simple subject and simple predicate ('ideas sleep'), the conjunction of the simple predicate and its modifiers ('sleep furiously'), the conjunction of the simple subject and its modifiers ('Colorless green ideas'), even the conjunction of the simple subject modifiers ('Colorless green'). Since this first sentence, unlike the second, completely fails to do what a sentence is commonly supposed to do, it seems appropriate to refer to it as a *conspicuous* discrepancy, which explains why, I think, we call it absurd.

I can imagine, however, someone complaining that while 'Colorless green ideas sleep furiously' perhaps fails worse than 'In green pajamas, I sleep furiously,' the latter sentence is absurd too. I imagine this person saying, "'In green pajamas, I *sleep furiously*'—that's absurd! The sentence commits a category mistake, which makes the sentence absurd." On its face, this complaint is persuasive. In fact, my linguistic intuitions have pulled me both ways: a part of me has wanted to say the sentence is not absurd and another part has wanted to say it is, albeit not as absurd as the other sentence. For the sake of argument, let us concede that the sentence 'In green pajamas, I sleep furiously' is absurd, though perhaps not as much as the other one. Does this concession imply that, at least with regard to sentential absurdity, what is absurd need only be discrepant, not *conspicuously* discrepant?

I do not think so. Consider this third and last sentence: I, in my colorless green pajamas, slept soundly. Like 'In green pajamas, I sleep furiously,' one syntactic unit in this third sentence is meaningless ('colorless green'). Unlike the old sentence, however, the meaningless syntactic unit occurs, not in the main clause, but in a prepositional phrase that modifies the subject of the main clause. Moreover, the prepositional phrase itself is a nonrestrictive modifier (indicated by its being set off by commas) and hence provides nonessential information about the subject it modifies. Because the meaningless unit is not part of the main clause, and since the phrase in which it occurs is nonrestrictive and hence

nonessential, it seems wrong to judge the whole sentence absurd. In other words, the main assertion of the second sentence (In green pajamas, I sleep furiously) corresponding with the main clause, is that I sleep furiously—a senseless assertion. However, the main assertion in third sentence (I, in my colorless green pajamas, slept soundly) is that I slept soundly—which makes perfect sense. Given that the main assertion, corresponding with the main clause, makes perfect sense, the sentence, though discrepant, is not conspicuously discrepant, and hence not absurd.

Yet I can imagine someone complaining again: "'I, in my *colorless green* pajamas, slept soundly'—that's absurd! This sentence asserts a contradiction." Now what I think is going on here—and what, in the final analysis, I think is going on in the complaint about the second sentence—is that the objector is failing to note a legitimate distinction, one between (1) there being something absurd about, or in, a sentence and (2) a sentence itself being absurd. There is something absurd about, or in, the sentence 'I, in my colorless green pajamas, slept soundly.' It is that one of its syntactic units does not make any sense. But the *sentence* makes *some* sense—or, we might say, *basically* the *sentence* makes sense—and so while there is something absurd about, or in, it, the sentence itself is not absurd. In fact, what I suspect the person who declares ". . . —that's absurd!" is really referring to is the one meaningless syntactic unit, not all of the individual units, nor all of the units as a group. That this is so is indicated by the accent on the meaningless syntactic unit: "'I, in my *colorless green* pajamas, slept soundly'—that's absurd!" True, it was my decision to include the accent, but I did so only because in imagining one who would argue that the sentence is absurd, I hear the person doing so.

I have discussed two general ways in which propositions can be absurd and one general way in which sentences can be absurd. I certainly do not claim to have said all that can be said about these ways, nor do I claim to have exhausted the ways in which propositions and sentences can be absurd. And I do not think that, along with lives, propositions and sentences are the only things that can be absurd. However, I do hope I

have shown that we may profit from Nagel's notion of conspicuous discrepancy in thinking about the general concept of absurdity, that we might even be able use this notion as a touchstone for determining whether something is absurd. I would like to end this section by considering the conceptual connection between absurdity and conspicuous discrepancy one last time, this time in the context of *existential* absurdity. Specifically, I want to try to show that Nagel's notion of conspicuous discrepancy helps us to see just why a very popular conception of human absurdity is inadequate, as well as why the misconception is so popular.

Many people, including many philosophers, use the terms 'meaningless' and 'absurd' interchangeably in speaking about human life or *a* human life. That is, they think to say 'life is meaningless' is to say 'life is absurd' and to say 'life is absurd' is to say 'life is meaningless.' But I believe Nagel gives us a reason to think this is a mistake, even though occasionally he himself commits it.[7] The reason is that meaningless human existence, strictly speaking, signifies no conspicuous discrepancy. It does not, anyway, if by 'meaningless' we mean 'having no objective, overarching purpose or point.' Let us suppose that (1) human life is meaningless in this sense. Further, let us suppose that (2) Helen is someone who believes human life is meaningless, (3) she genuinely does not mind life being meaningless, and (4) the way she lives her life is consonant with both the fact that life is meaningless and her attitude toward this fact—in short, she does not act as though her life or human existence has some point to it. Do these things add up to an absurd existence? I do not think so. After all, there really is nothing silly or laughable about Helen. She is not playing the fool.

We might consider for a moment a human appendix. As far as we can tell, this growth, at least now, serves no purpose. If we are right, then there is a sense in which it is meaningless. But it seems incorrect to say the appendix is *absurd*. That would be going

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[7]Nagel, "The Absurd," 20; idem, *The View from Nowhere*, 214–215.

too far. Why, then, think Helen's life is absurd? True, there are many differences between, on the one hand, an appendix and its existence and, on the other, Helen and hers. But what difference makes a difference regarding absurdity? I myself cannot think of one. If there is no such difference, then it is one thing for an appendix and our lives to be meaningless and quite another thing for them to be absurd.

I believe the temptation to say Helen's life is absurd arises only when we place ourselves in her shoes and unwittingly consider the question of absurdity from *our* perspective, not hers, and the corresponding way in which *we live our* lives, not the way she lives hers. Of course when we do this, we violate conditions '(3)' and '(4)' above, and so distort the thought experiment. Interestingly, what we in effect do when we unwittingly make the shift is create a discrepancy, and one which may be conspicuous. And that, I want to say, is precisely what accounts for our judgment of absurdity. This discrepancy (and possible conspicuous discrepancy) is between (a) the fact that life is meaningless and (b) our perspective and corresponding way of living that in one way or another clash with the fact about life. We think of ourselves—and our goal-oriented, nose to the grindstone ways—in Helen's meaningless world, and the incongruity we apprehend between us and it may tempt us to throw up our arms and declare, "Absurd!"

If my explanation of our temptation to call Helen's existence absurd is correct, then we can understand that meaningless existence and absurd existence are indeed conceptually distinct and that Nagel's notion of conspicuous discrepancy helps to explain why. At the same time, my explanation of our temptation to call Helen's existence absurd might suggest that while meaningless existence and absurd existence are *conceptually* distinct, they are not *existentially* distinct. That is to say, it might be true that if our lives were meaningless, then—given our deep human desires or aspirations—our lives would be absurd. That would depend, assuming the Nagelian viewpoint, on the extent to which the meaninglessness of our lives and our desires or aspirations clashed or, in other words, on whether the discrepancy, if there inescapably were one, was conspicuous. Perhaps the fact

that so many people take meaningless human existence to be synonymous with absurd human existence indicates that the clash (discrepancy) would indeed be great enough (conspicuous), and hence that meaningless human existence and absurd human existence are not existentially distinct. At any rate, Nagel's notion of conspicuous discrepancy may help us to understand not only why we are mistaken conceptually to equate meaningless human existence and absurd human existence, but also why it is quite easy to make that mistake.

The Erewhon Argument

I now want to go beyond the claim that Nagel's notion of conspicuous discrepancy clarifies the concept of absurdity and suggest one way in which we might actually use this notion—and, more specifically, the notion of a conspicuous discrepancy *between pretension and reality*—to argue that human existence is absurd, one way, that is, which Nagel himself has not considered. Although I have not concluded it is sound, I happen to think this argument I have in mind is, at least on its face, compelling. However, my purpose here is not to offer a full-length defense of the argument, but only to explain it and to show that it is a serious argument. This purpose is appropriate, I think, given my primary interest in this chapter is to point out ways in which we may profit from Nagel's thoughts and ideas on absurdity. I hope it will become evident that the following argument for absurdity is Nagelian, and perhaps in more ways than one.

Samuel Butler, in his novel *Erewhon or Over the Range*, describes the imaginary community Erewhon (basically 'Nowhere' spelled backward) in which its members hold views that are backward in relation to views of Butler's Victorian England, as well as in relation to views common to the whole of human civilization. For example, Erewhonians perceive the moral delinquent as we perceive the sick, and they perceive the sick as we perceive the moral delinquent. The moral delinquent, in their eyes, is a victim who is to be pitied and treated, certainly not blamed and punished. The Erewhonians have their

"straighteners" who, with a good nurse's compassion, do their best to cure the poor delinquent of his or her infirmity. Here, for instance, the narrator relays how one Erewhonian described another Erewhonian who is a known embezzler: "'He is a delightful man . . . but has suffered terribly from' (here came a long word which I could not quite catch, only it was much longer than kleptomania), 'and has but lately recovered from embezzling a large sum of money under singularly distressing circumstances; but he has quite got over it, and the straighteners say that he has made a really wonderful recovery; you are sure to like him.'" On the other hand, Erewhonians view a person in bad health as a bad person, deserving contempt and chastisement, which in many cases turns out to be imprisonment. They regard typhus fever, for instance, "as one of the worst of all crimes." And pulmonary consumption, while no longer punishable by death, is no minor wrongdoing either. In the following passage, an Erewhonian judge is delivering a sentence of life in prison to a convicted consumptive. (The narrator tells us he cannot give "more than a faint idea of the solemn, not to say majestic, severity with which it was delivered.")

> Prisoner at the bar, you have been accused of the great crime of labouring under pulmonary consumption, and after an impartial trial before a jury of your countrymen, you have been found guilty. . . . [Y]ours is no case for compassion: this is not your first offense: you have led a career of crime. . . . You were convicted of aggravated bronchitis last year: and I find that though you are now only twenty-three years old, you have been imprisoned on no less than fourteen occasions for illnesses of a more or less hateful character. . . . It is all very well for you to say that you came of unhealthy parents, and had a severe accident in your childhood which permanently undermined your constitution; excuses such as these are the ordinary refuge of the criminal; but they cannot for one moment be listened to by the ear of justice. . . . You are a bad and dangerous person, and stand branded in the eyes of your fellow-countrymen with one of the most heinous known offences.[8]

Our first reaction upon hearing about the Erewhonian treatment of the sick, and in particular the actions and views expressed by this judge, might be to exclaim to ourselves,

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[8]Samuel Butler, *Erewhon or Over the Range*, ed. Hans-Peter Breuer and Daniel F. Howard (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1981), 97, 102, 114.

"Absurd!"[9] For the Erewhonians do not simply misunderstand sickness; they *radically* misunderstand it, and the price their victims pay for the misunderstanding is high indeed. If we imagined this practice actually occurring in our world, we no doubt would be outraged at the obvious injustice of the practice, horrified by the needless pain and suffering it caused, dumbstruck by its utter stupidity, nauseated by the pomposity and self-confidence of its perpetrators. When we hear about a ten year old boy just diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor, our hearts break. We feel tremendous sympathy for this poor child. And we know our feeling and attitude are justified. The mere thought of chastising the boy for his ultimate misfortune—say, barking contemptuous words at him and then putting him in prison—is so repugnant, so very short of making any sense as to make it extremely hard even to entertain. Simply put, the general practice of blaming and punishing people for bad health is preposterous. Just as in the case of Nagel's board members of a philanthropic foundation who elect a notorious criminal as their president, the Erewhonians have got things, not just wrong, but *terribly* wrong. In both cases, there is a striking incongruity between, on the one hand, what people take, very seriously, to be the case and, on the other, what actually is the case. That is, there is a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension and reality.

But of course that is the make-believe land of Erewhon, certainly not our land. Erewhonians are absurd perhaps, but we are not Erewhonian. Indeed, regarding their treatment of criminals and the sick, we and the Erewhonians are polar opposites. So it seems I may have just corroborated the view that we humans are *not* absurd.

Well, Butler (the young Butler of the first edition of *Erewhon*, anyway) was a wily fellow, and I am at least trying to be. His ultimate target was not Erewhon but his very

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[9]This was the narrator's reaction too. He regards the Erewhonian trial of the consumptive as one of the "infinite absurdities with which I came daily in contact" (Ibid., 113). Referring to the judge a few pages later, the narrator states: "Yet for all this, old and learned as he was, he could not see things which one would have thought would have been apparent even to a child" (Ibid., 120). This last comment, incidentally, may bring to mind my discussion of strikingly false propositions as evidently false propositions.

own England, and perhaps human civilization in general. Likewise, my ultimate target is humanity. Let me explain, beginning with Butler's motives.

Except for the particular words naming the offense, the Erewhonian judge's words in the passage above actually come straight from an English newspaper report. Butler basically replaced 'theft' with 'pulmonary consumption' and inserted the newspaper report in his novel.[10] Why? He is trying to get his reader to see a connection between moral delinquency and physical disease that he thinks is probably true: just as disease is beyond our control, so too is moral delinquency. Butler uses the "malcontents" in Erewhon, who object to the Erewhonian view and treatment of the sick, as mouthpieces for this view of his regarding moral delinquency (for 'these malcontents' and 'these radicals' read 'Butler' and for 'illness' and 'consumption' read 'moral delinquency'):

> [These malcontents] assert illness to be the inevitable result of certain antecedent causes which were beyond the control of the individual, and that therefore a man is only guilty for being in a consumption, in the same way as fruit is guilty for being rotten; it is true, the fruit must be thrown on one side as being unfit for man's use; and the man in a consumption must, in like manner, be put in prison for the protection of his fellow-citizens; but these radicals would not punish him further than by loss of liberty and strict surveillance. So long as he was prevented from injuring society, they would allow him to make himself useful by supplying whatever of society's wants he could supply.[11]

Might it be the case that the thief in the newspaper report had no more control over his stealing than that man in Erewhon had over his contracting pulmonary consumption? If so, then the English judge's behavior may approximate the absurdity of the Erewhonian practice of blaming and punishing the sick. In fact, his behavior, Butler would say, ought to be more like how the Erewhonians treat the moral delinquent. As it turns out, then, Butler's main point in describing the way in which the Erewhonians treat the moral delinquent and the sick is not to lampoon their lives and praise ours—quite the

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[10]See editor's footnote 3 (Ibid., 116).

[11]Ibid., 121.

opposite. His main point is to show that it may be we who are crazy and the Erewhonians who are sane, at least as far as the treatment of the morally delinquent is concerned.[12]

And that, at last, is basically my point too. If our wrongdoers really have no control over what they do, then our views, attitudes, and actions regarding them may be as "childish"—that is, as silly, foolish—as the Erewhonian treatment of the sick, epitomized by the travesty of justice in that Erewhonian trial.[13] The Erewhonian judge says to the consumptive: "It is all very well for you to say that you came of unhealthy parents, and had a severe accident in your childhood which permanently undermined your constitution; excuses such as these are the ordinary refuge of the criminal; but they cannot for one moment be listened to by the ear of justice." This is exactly what we say to our criminals and moral wrongdoers. In both our legal proceedings and our personal relations, we assume our wrongdoers do have control, categorically could have done otherwise. When they suggest otherwise, we are outraged. However, if they are correct, then it is we judges and judgers, not they, who are the proper subjects of outrage. It is we judges and judgers who are outrageous.

What, then, I am suggesting here is nothing other than a certain conspicuous discrepancy between pretension and reality that makes our lives absurd. The pretension is our propensity to treat wrongdoers as though they have control over their actions. The reality is the fact that they do not. Just as with the Erewhonian treatment of the sick, several related factors contribute in making the discrepancy conspicuousness: the obvious injustice of the practice, the needless pain and suffering it causes, its utter stupidity, the

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[12]However, I gather Butler thinks the Erewhonian attitude toward and treatment of the moral delinquent are a bit unrealistic, and perhaps go a little too far. They seem to ignore the truth there is in deterrence. It seems Nietzsche, for one, would concur. He argues that we should treat the criminal as we treat the insane, although, he adds, "not with haughty mercy but with the physician's good sense and good will." Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Dawn*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 86.

[13]What I count here and below as *having control* is what the libertarian (contra-causalist) does, not what the compatibilist does. I am suggesting that our views, attitudes, and actions regarding wrongdoers are libertarian ones.

pomposity and self-confidence of it perpetrators. All of these factors add up to a *striking* incongruity that characterizes our lives, and so makes them absurd. For convenience, I shall call this argument for absurdity the Erewhon Argument.

Before critically examining the Erewhon Argument, I want to pause a moment to note a curious connection between Butler and Nagel regarding conspicuousness and the argument. To the extent that they would be sympathetic with the argument, they both might add to my list of factors comprising conspicuousness, or even substitute for them, *the perpetrators' believing, deep down, the reality, yet carrying on with the pretension.* In certain parts of the Erewhonian judge's speech, parts which I have not quoted, Butler makes it pretty clear that the judge, jury, and courtroom audience believe, deep down, the defendant's contracting consumption was beyond his control. And Butler reinforces the view that they know by some of the narrator's comments, such as: "It was impossible that any one in the court should not have known that it was but by an accident of birth and circumstances he was not himself also in a consumption . . ."[14] Now it seems for Butler this awareness, at least in part, is what makes the Erewhonian treatment of the sick absurd. As for Nagel, we already know he thinks awareness of the reality is just what makes the pretension-reality discrepancy resulting in absurdity conspicuous (he does so, anyway, in "The Absurd"). Therefore, it may be correct to say that if either Butler or Nagel were to present the Erewhon Argument, they might want to describe the conspicuousness in the pretension-reality discrepancy as *our believing, deep down, that people have no control over their wrongdoing, yet carrying on as though people do have control.* Now as I indicated in chapter 2, while I think such awareness may heighten the extent to which something is absurd, I do not think it is, generally speaking, a necessary condition of absurdity. I am inclined to think the Erewhon Argument represents no exception. In fact, I think that if the Erewhon argument depended on such an awareness,

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[14]Butler, 120.

it would be unsound, for it seems to me many people do *not* believe, deep down, that wrongdoers do not have control over their actions.

Evaluation of the Erewhon Argument

Now it is easy to state in general terms how one might attack the Erewhon Argument. One might attack the alleged pretension, the alleged reality, or (granting the discrepancy) the alleged conspicuousness of the discrepancy. Let me, then, examine these attacks. What I shall say on their behalf, and then in defense of the Erewhon Argument, will be quite sketchy but, I hope, enough to show the argument is worthy of further discussion. I shall begin with the second of the three attacks, since my guess is that it would be the most popular one.

One may complain that it is far from obvious that we have no control over our actions. Disease is one thing. Action is quite another. Phenomenologically speaking, it certainly appears we, at least in some circumstances, do genuinely make choices, that we, and we alone, determine what we shall do. In other words, we really *feel* that sometimes we control our own destiny. While at this time we may not be able to understand fully contra-causal free will, that is not to say there is no such thing. Perhaps we are not yet smart enough to understand it fully. And it is possible we shall never be. Highly intelligent astronomers admit to not fully understanding black holes; really smart physicists do not claim to comprehend wholly the nature of the most fundamental constituents of the atom. But that does not keep these people from believing these entities exist. Thus, at the very least, a burden—and a quite heavy one at that—is on the shoulders of the proponent of the Erewhon Argument to show it is true that people have no control over what they do.

This critic, it seems to me, is quite right to demand reasons, evidence, and argument for the supposed *reality*. I think, however, that the defender of the Erewhon Argument is not at a loss for them, especially when the metaphysical view assumed to be

true is physicalism.[15] To begin, the argument's defender might appeal to correlations the scientific community has discovered between behavior, on the one hand, and nature and nurture, on the other. From genetics to neurobiology, neurophysiology, and neuropsychiatry; to biochemistry and biocybernetics; to psychoanalysis, psychobiology, psychodynamics, and psychopharmacology; to sociobiology and sociology—scientists are making more and more correlations, and more and more sophisticated correlations, between our actions and our bodies and environment. True, many correlations scientists have in the past proposed have turned out to be false; many of those that have not been disproved are quite general and rough; and many of those that have not been disproved and are relatively precise remain at this time *just* correlations. But the number of sound, relatively precise correlations is quite impressive; and while we are correct to keep in mind the distinction between correlation and cause, we have reason to believe that, in time, we shall justifiably elevate many of them to the status of cause, just as we have done, for example, in the case of the correlation between smoking and lung cancer. Evidence strongly suggests that the sufficient causes of our behavior extend outside the narrow confines of our minds.

The proponent of the Erewhon Argument might also point to the lack of scientific evidence supporting the claim that we can control our actions, that is, evidence supporting libertarian self-determination. Scientists have discovered some pretty bizarre features of our natural world, but they have not come up with any evidence corroborating the view that at some point in our evolutionary development our physical stuff reached a metaphysical boiling point and out arose self-determination bubbles that now somehow float above the fray. The metaphor here may seem uncharitable, but how better to make sense of self-determination in a world natural through and through? In fact, it is not altogether clear the notion makes sense.

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[15] I might remind the reader that the dissertation assumes this metaphysical view (see pp. 7–8 above).

It is hard enough to make sense of the idea of a self-determining Being who is immaterial, all-powerful, and eternal. About the only remark we can make is the negative one that since we do not understand spirituality, omniscience, and immortality, we cannot expect to understand the idea of a being (with these qualities) who is self-determining. At the same time, given an acceptance of the existence of an immaterial, all-powerful, eternal Being, that remark may be enough to keep the skeptic at bay, for "there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." But of course we do not have recourse to that appeal to ignorance when we accept the view that the self-mover is physical, finite, and not all-powerful. It seems there is a burden on the libertarian to make some concrete sense of the notion of a self-mover.

We are told, abstractly, that a self-determined decision is one that *originated* with the self or person. What this means is that while such a decision was causally determined by the self, the self itself was not causally determined to make that particular decision. In other words, the self could have decided otherwise. Now we might first ask what exactly this self or person is. (What is the bubble that floats?) We might also ask just how, and to what extent, the self or person is causally dis-connected from the rest of the natural world. (How does the bubble float?) Finally, we might ask why the self's free decision-making is not random, for while the self caused the decision, nothing caused the self to decide. It seems that, ultimately, it just did. One might answer by suggesting that external factors *influenced* the self's free decision-making. However, if none of these factors, individually or jointly, were sufficient causes of the self's deciding, then, once again, the self's deciding seems, when all is said and thought, to be random, a metaphysical clean jerk. Insofar as the libertarian view denies that free decision-making is random, the view appears to be incoherent.

Now the critic of the Erewhon Argument might instead question the alleged *pretension*. Has all of humanity indeed judged its wrongdoers in such a way as to presuppose they had control over their deeds? If so, will it always do so? If either answer

is "no," the Erewhon Argument is unsound, for it would have failed to establish an inescapable universal pretension—a condition necessary, on the Nagelian view, to make our lives absurd in the philosophical sense, as opposed to the merely conventional sense. Now it seems the critic might really want to press the second of the two questions, especially in view of the empirical evidence the Erewhon Argument's proponent is eager to give in support of the *reality*. If, as the result of scientific inquiry—of all those ologies listed above—it *is* becoming increasingly clear that people have no control over their actions, then it stands to reason that in the not too distant future we, or at least a significant number of us, shall stop judging people as we do now. And the critic might (though need not) add that the libertarian view is the brainchild of religion, as Nietzsche was correct to point out. As religion slowly but surely continues to lose its grip on the psyche of humankind as science slowly but surely makes its weight felt, the libertarian view will lose hold as well. While Nietzsche himself was not convinced that such a transformation in time will take place, he did express optimism, and we have reason to do so as well:

> Today, to be sure, he who has been harmed always wants his revenge, quite apart from the question of how this harm might be undone again, and he turns to the courts for its sake; for the present this maintains our abominable penal codes, with their shopkeeper's scales and the desire to balance guilt and punishment. But shouldn't we be able to get beyond this? . . . Let us remove the concept of sin from the world—and let us soon send the concept of punishment after it. May these banished monsters live somewhere else henceforth, not among men, if they insist on living at all and do not perish of their own disgust. . . .
>
> Shouldn't we be able to say: every "guilty" person is a sick person?
>
> No, the hour for that has not yet come. The physicians are still lacking, above all, for whom what we have hitherto called practical morality must be transformed into a piece of their art and science of therapy; as yet, that hungry interest in these things is lacking, but some day it may appear in a manner not unlike the storm and stress of those old religious agitations. . . .[16]

However, the defender of the Erewhon Argument might use the case of Nietzsche against this critic. It has been well over a century since Nietzsche wrote those words and

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[16]Nietzsche, 86–87.

both little has changed and much has changed. What has changed little is how we regard our wrongdoers. We judges and judgers still think people have control over what they do. We blame and punish wrongdoers in the manner, and basically to the same degree, as Nietzsche and Butler's nineteenth-century European society did. Moreover, religion seems to be as much alive today as it was in the nineteenth century. Now what *has* changed is the sophistication of our science. Most of our ologies today did not exist back then. Although we still have a long way to go, we know significantly more about the connection between human behavior and our bodies and the environment. Yet with all the additional evidence against the view that people can control what they do, we still believe, and believe strongly, that they *can* control their behavior. Indeed, any politician who would suggest otherwise, even confining this suggesting to a few particular cases of (legally sane) criminal wrongdoing, would be thrown out of office in a flash—and probably would be viewed with nearly as much contempt as the wrongdoers.

The truth is, the proponent of the Erewhon Argument might go on to say, seeing ourselves anew as having no more control over our actions than the rest of nature represents nothing less, and in fact much more, than a Copernican Turn. The view that we are not at the center of the universe and the view that we are a product of evolution—even the view that we are godless—though certainly traumatic, are all perhaps views with which we are willing to live. But the view that we have no control over what we do is one that, if not differing in kind, differs in significant degree from these others. It is a Turn that we shall refuse to take, no matter the evidence produced in its favor, no matter the utter lack of evidence for the opposing view (not to speak of the questionable intelligibility of the opposing view). "Damn the truth," we say and shall continue to say regarding the issue of free will. "We are not complex machines. We shall never be. We shall never waive our last claim to distinction."

With this last response in mind, the critic of the Erewhon Argument might call into question the *conspicuousness* of the discrepancy. It seems the more at stake in

abandoning the view that people have control over their actions (and, as we have just seen, the Erewhon Argument's defender, in the effort to support the universality of the pretension, wants to stress that *much is* at stake), the more sense there is in maintaining this view. And the more sense there is in maintaining the view that people have control over their actions, the less silly or preposterous—the less absurd—it and the corresponding behavior are. In a word, if making this Copernican Turn would crush us humans, then *making* the turn would be what is absurd. But that is not all. Treating people as though they have control over their behavior deters wrongdoing. If we were to treat people otherwise, wrongdoing would overwhelm us, destroy us. Therefore, once again, relinquishing our libertarian ways, rather than holding on to them, spells absurdity. For both these reasons, we can see that while the Erewhon Argument's defender may be correct about there being a certain discrepancy between pretension and reality, this discrepancy is by no means conspicuous, and hence the Erewhon Argument is unsound.

It seems the defender of the Erewhon Argument may have at least two replies. The first is simply to deny the critic's empirical claim that abandoning the view that people have control over their actions would lead, in one way or another, to humanity's demise. Convinced that we do not differ in kind from other animals that inhabit the earth, we would get along just fine. To be sure, our self-preservation instinct would make sure of that. And in a world in which we admit that people do not have any control over their acts, wrongdoing would not run rampant. Wrongdoing, small or great, would still have negative consequences for the wrongdoer. Dangerous criminals, for example, would still be "locked up"—that is, quarantined—so as to be sure they do not harm again, although the pretense for "locking up" these people would be gone, as well as any other actions supporting this pretense.

However, even if it were the case that we would suffer as the result of changing our libertarian ways, even if there were some utilitarian sense in blaming and punishing wrongdoers as we do, that would not undo the nonsense of the pretense, at least from a

deontological perspective. From such a perspective, the wrongdoer gets treated unjustly, no matter what the consequences of the treatment, if the treatment reflects the view that the wrongdoer had control over his act when in fact he did not. Even if we were convinced that the Erewhonian dealing with the sick, such as how that consumptive was dealt with, was necessary to preserve the peace and prosperity of Erewhon, we would still throw up our arms and exclaim, "Absurd!" A world in which people blame a man for being consumptive, make him feel the ailment is his fault, and imprison him for it is—plain and simple—an absurd world. Likewise, the discrepancy between pretension and reality in our world is indeed conspicuous. Our human world is absurd.

Conclusion

And so, I think, would *begin* the defense of the Erewhon Argument. I emphasize 'begin,' for certainly what I have written in the previous section amounts to little more than an outline. Both the objections and the responses to the objections need to be honed and developed. And no doubt other objections need to be addressed. Having said that, I do believe this outline of a defense points to a credible full-fledged defense of the Erewhon Argument. At the very least, I think that just as the four arguments for absurdity that Nagel criticizes warrant further investigation, so does this one—and that perhaps is the best place to leave the issue of the argument's plausibility for the purposes of this dissertation.

I think it may be appropriate to bring my examination of Nagel's thoughts and ideas on absurdity to a close by stating a certain connection between the Erewhon Argument and Nagel that goes beyond what I have already said. What I have already said is that the argument nicely fits Nagel's general schema of human absurdity: a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension and reality. Above and beyond this, however, it seems Nagel himself unintentionally comes close to giving the Erewhon Argument. One of the main clashes between the subjective perspective and the objective perspective that he

describes in "Subjective and Objective" is between the view that we have control over our actions (a view of the subjective perspective) and the view that we do not have control over our actions (a view of the objective perspective). While Nagel stops short of stating that in this case the subjective view is mistaken, he does confess: "I do not find the concept of agent causation intelligible. . . ." Moreover, his position seems to be that this particular subjective perspective is a deeply human one (just as is its objective counterpart) and one here to stay, indicating that the discrepancy is both universal and inescapable. And, finally, Nagel gives the impression that this discrepancy is conspicuous:

> When we view actions, our own or others', merely as part of the general course of events, it seems impossible to attribute them to individuals in a way that makes sense of the attitudes we take toward someone we regard as the source of an action. Certain attitudes toward the agent, rather that just about him, lose their footing. If an individual is destructive enough we may think it would be better if he did not exist; but if he is just a disastrous part of the world, blame directed at him or guilt he directs at himself *makes no sense*, however causally or indeterministically complex his behavior and motives are.[17]

Therefore, I think Nagel goes beyond giving us the form of the Erewhon Argument; he actually provides some of its content. Does this, then, mean the argument represents yet a fifth doctrine of his? I do not believe so. Construing it as such would be going too far. However, I do not think we would be going too far in calling the Erewhon Argument a Nagelian argument. And if upon further examination the argument does turn out to be formidable, credit, I think, should go to him.

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[17]Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 198–99. Emphasis mine.

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