THE ABSURD

QUESTION: What's the point?
Life is Absurd = Meaningless; Illogical; Futile
Suggesting that “life is absurd” points out that life is pointless and we lack a reason to continue

CAMUS ON THE ABSURD
"There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards.” — Camus, MYTH OF SISYPHUS

POSSIBLE EXPLANATION
1. Nothing Matters
   · “Nothing we do now will matter in 1 million years…”
2. Scale / Space + Time
   · “Our lives are minuscule compared to the vastness of space, and the infinity of time”
3. Chains of Justification
   · “We're all going to die...so what's the point?”
Absurdity in Ordinary Life

Source: discrepancy between pretension and reality

Think: serious moment/appointment, and some (illogical) disconnect in reality

Example: Lying, sexual assaulting, pseudo-millionaire with no political background becomes President

Resolve absurdity by changing the situation

Philosophical Absurdity (and Life)

Collision between seriousness we take life, and the arbitrariness of life + doubts about purpose/meaning

Absurdity in Ordinary Life

Elements of Absurdity

1) Unavoidability of Seriousness
   - We all pursue our life with greater/less degrees of seriousness / caring about something/someone

2) Inescapability of Doubt
   - Longing and persistent questions that doubt why we are doing what we are doing
**Absurdity in Ordinary Life**

**Analyzing: Unavoidability of Seriousness**
Seriousness unavoidable because we are rational and reflective creatures
- capable of stepping back and reflecting on life
- not solely moved by impulse / need for survival
Individuals (generally) have a desire to continue living
Enter Absurdity — view life "Sub specie aeternitatis"

**Absurdity in Ordinary Life**

**Analyzing: Inescapability of Doubt**
Stepping back "Sub specie aeternitatis" asking for further justification (in the chain)
Ordinary course of life (i.e., absorbed 'within life')
individuals do not question life (and deeper questions)
Stepping back to the external perspective exposes the arbitrariness of life ... and yet we do not "disengage"
And So Absurdity — Engagement/seriousness with which we take a life that is pointless/meaningless

**Attempting to Escape**

**Larger-Than-One self**
Attempt to escape absurdity by participating in projects that are "larger than oneself"
- Life absurd if (and only if) individual's projects / commitments too insignificant
Larger enterprise only confers significance if larger enterprise is itself significant
- Further — significant "for us" (subjectively good)
  (e.g., humans as food for aliens ≠ meaningful life)
Recall: Chains of Justification Problems
**ATTEMPTING TO ESCAPE**

**ANALYZING: LARGER-THAN-ONESELF**
Possible to doubt significance of larger enterprise for analogous reasons we doubt significance of life

**CAMUS ON ABSURDITY**
Life is absurd because the world fails to meet our demands for meaning.
*Conventional (Philosophical) Outlook — essence more fundamental than (apparent) existence*
*Existentialists’ Resolution — existence precedes essence (l’existence précède l’essence)*
*SOLUTION — “We” create meaning / significance in each of our own lives — SIGNIFICANT = does not require further justification*

**OBJECTION**

Attempt to take step back to "eternal perspective" is unintelligible
Unable to make (rational) judgments...therefore, unable to generate feelings of absurdity

**NAGEL’S REPLY**
Misconceives nature of step back to **ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE**
Step back as a way to reflect on **WHAT IS SIGNIFICANT** in life, and what is not
Looking at our lives critically from a macroscopic perspective (not every, ordinary, decision)

**PARALLELS TO SKEPTICISM**

Philosophical perception of absurdity resembles epistemological problem of skepticism
Both, (a) **JUSTIFIED TRUE BELIEF**, and (b) **MEANINGFUL LIFE**, depend on end to chain of justification
Systems of belief (e.g., epistemological, or existential) depend on taking a lot for granted
Theoretically possible to continue questioning the basis of our beliefs (epistemological + existential)
- Absurdity + Skepticism reached by (progressive) system of doubt regarding foundations of beliefs

**EXAMPLE:** Descartes Dream and/or Demon Argument(s)
**Extinguishing (Skeptical) Doubts**

How to respond to skeptical doubts and absurdity in ordinary / practical life?

**Irony and Resignation**  
Irony — act in a way that is deliberately contrary to expectations (often with a wry amusement)

**Epistemology** — Act as if you’re beliefs are true  
(even if you ultimately don’t know that)

**Meaning + Life** — Act as if things ultimately matter  
(even if they don’t ultimately matter)

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**Closing Thoughts**

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**Limits to Rational Arguments**

Cannot reason your way out of absurdity (nor skepticism)  
— all justifications infinite regress or circular reasoning

Will to life (and meaning) “more basic” — take things  
(e.g., life can be meaningful) for granted

**Moral of the Story**

**IF** absurdity presents us with a **problem**... **THEN** the  
only solution is **suicide**

However... Absurdity a “fact of life” — confront it with  
defiance and scorn — create meaning out of nothingness

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**The End**

**Thank You!**