

Thomas Nagel on the Meaning of Life

Final paper for 'The Good Life and The Meaning of Life'

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1 Introduction

Let me start with a passage from the humorous science-fiction series *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams: *Some time ago, a group of hyper-intelligent pan dimensional beings decided to finally answer the great question of Life, The Universe and Everything. To this end they built an incredibly powerful computer, called Deep Thought. After the great computer programme had run for seven and a half million years, a crowd gathered to hear the answer finally being announced. The computer spoke: "The Ultimate answer to Life, the Universe and Everything is... You're not going to like it... is... forty-two." Of course the beings, who had been waiting for millions of years to finally find out the answer, reacted angrily: "Forty-two?! Forty-two?! This is what we have been waiting for all this time?!" To which the computer replied: "Yes, forty-two. It would have been simpler to have known what the actual question was."*¹

The problem with the question about the meaning of life is not that it is difficult to find an answer. Many answers are available to us, none of which seem to be satisfying: live happily; love and care for others; serve God in all his glory; make the world a better place, forty-two. The problem is rather that we cannot imagine what the question is. It would have to be a question whose answer gives a rational explication of the point of human existence. In order to give such an explanation, we would have to step outside of ourselves and view our lives as a whole. From this external position however, the problem only grows bigger. We now look at ourselves as we would look at a group of bees swarming from their hive—and all meaning disappears. Why would a human's existence have a point that a bee's existence lacks? Maybe a super computer—or a true philosopher who has ascended from the cave of shadows—can think of the right question and find an answer that explains the point of life. But how would that brilliant insight confer a point to our lives as we live them? What would satisfy our need for meaning?

I do not think this need can be satisfied and I doubt whether looking for the meaning of life is a task suited for philosophers. Thomas Nagel approaches the problem differently. He explains that the deeply human tendency to look for a point of it all is a result of the way people view themselves. Unlike other animals, humans have the ability to transcend themselves in thought. From within a particular perspective, life makes perfect sense and there is no trouble in finding a reason or justification for action. Viewed from a distance that transcends the personal viewpoint however, that same life

¹Originally, the series was a radio comedy broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in 1978. It was later adapted to other formats, including a series of five books first published between 1979 and 1992, the first of which was titled *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. The passage given here includes sentences from that book, but it is not a literal quotation.

lacks reason and justification. If someone asks what the point is of being alive at all, the answer will be that there is no point. But if I know this is true, that person may ask, how can I still attach importance to what I do? How can I continue to take my life seriously after I have realized that it is a meaningless endeavour? Doesn't that make me look ridiculous? Nagel's reply is that it does indeed: not only is life meaningless, but we also have to put up with it being absurd.

This paper is about the claim that life is absurd. Most of what I have to say is based on the article *The Absurd* by Thomas Nagel. I do not deviate far from the author's position, nor do I hide my admiration for his attempt to clarify the ungraspable problem of meaning by framing it in terms of absurdity, but I am not without reservations either. Allow me to make two short remarks on the structure of this paper before I begin. Firstly, rather than postponing my criticism until the end, I have tried to be critical in my commentary throughout all seven sections—a concluding evaluation is not present. Secondly, instead of summarizing the content of my discussion in this introduction to provide structure, I hope the short descriptions that form the title of each section suffice.

2 Failing arguments to point out absurdity

According to Nagel, the facts about our lives that we commonly associate with absurdity—our smallness and brevity compared to the universe—are not what make life absurd. If our short lives are what make us absurd, that would not change if we lived twice as long, and if we lived forever, that would make our lives infinitely absurd. However absurd it may be that a human being is utterly insignificant in terms of size compared to the universe, if the universe were a billion times smaller, that would not make us any less insignificant. The connection between us humans being short-lived specks of dust and the meaning problem seems strong, but it is not clear what that connection is precisely. Therefore, arguments that attempt to explain the meaning problem solely in terms of our relativity to the universe will not be adequate. Nagel claims that the absurd does not arise because the world cannot meet our demand for meaning.² It arises instead from the way we view ourselves within the world.

Another inadequate argument to prove the absurdity of life, is to say that all our efforts make up to a journey leading nowhere. We work to sustain ourselves, year after year, and in the end we will die anyway, so what's the point? In a highly interesting passage in his book *Freedom and Fulfilment*,

²(Nagel, 1970, p. 721)

Joel Feinberg uses the kind of argument Nagel is trying to refute. Feinberg coins the term “supermarket regress” to refer to the feeling of meaninglessness he experienced when trying to justify the actions of shoppers he saw one day. “Why are all those people standing in line before the cash registers? In order to purchase food. Why do they purchase food? In order to stay alive and healthy. Why do they wish to stay alive and healthy? So that they can work at their jobs. Why do they want to work? To earn money. Why do they want to earn money? So they can purchase food. And so on, around the circle, over and over, with no ‘significant culmination’ in sight. Vindicating purpose and meaning are constantly put off to another stage that never comes, and the whole round of activity looks more like a meaningless ritual-dance than something coherent and self-justifying.”³⁴

Feinberg uses the “supermarket regress” as an example to the argument that shows that human life is pointless, because the justification given for any part of human life is indefinitely postponed. Nagel believes that the argument fails. It would be a mistake to assume that life consists of a sequence of activities which find their purpose somewhere later on in 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.”⁵ What Nagel means here, is that most of the things we do are justified easily: we go to school because we want to get a diploma, we go to a bar because we’re looking for company, etc. We need no further justification related to life as a whole to do these things, we just do them because we think we should or because we feel like it. Even if we wish to provide further justification for things that most people regard as self-justifying—or for what most people just don’t think about—then that justification must end somewhere too. The demand that every justification must have its own justification outside itself, will lead to an infinite regress. In fact, all reasons come to an end somewhere, so we have no choice but to accept that it is impossible to give a final justification for our activities. I will leave further treatment of the discussion between Feinberg and Nagel to a footnote.⁶

³(Feinberg, 1980, p. 308)

⁴As Feinberg himself acknowledges, this example will only show the absurdity of life, if we believe that no human activity has value *in itself*, but must derive its value from something else, which in turn is not valuable in itself, and so on *ad infinitum*. The possibility of intrinsic value in life is a different puzzle which I cannot discuss here.

⁵(Nagel, 1970, p. 717)

⁶In the same book, Feinberg replies to Nagel’s criticism. I do not think the disagreement between the two is as big as Feinberg makes it appear. First of all, when Nagel says that “no further justification is needed to make it reasonable to take aspirin for a headache, attend an exhibit of the work of a painter one admires, or stop a child from putting his hand on a hot stove,” (Nagel, 1970, p. 717), he does not imply that these activities have “a genuine point beyond themselves”, as Feinberg suggests (Feinberg, 1980, p. 310). All Nagel says is that these activities need no further justification, and that any attempt to

3 What makes life absurd

What makes our lives absurd is not that attempts to justify our actions lead nowhere. In fact, when we look at our lives from a personal point of view, we normally do not experience absurdity. Most actions make perfect sense to us and we do not generally have the tendency to try and explain them through and through. Absurdity comes from an inevitable clash between two points of view. The first point of view is one in which we take ourselves seriously and attach importance to our actions. The second is a backward step, in which we question our seriousness and discover that the whole system of justification with which we explain our lives, rests on habits and mechanisms that we never question. It is not, as Feinberg says, the failing chain of justification that gives a sense of absurdity, it is the realisation that we have no choice but to use this mechanism of justification. We cannot live our lives without devotion and seriousness, not without making choices that reflect that we find some things more important than others. But at the same time, we always have a point of view outside of our particular lives, from which the seriousness seems gratuitous. That these two inescapable viewpoints collide, is what creates absurdity. We have doubts that cannot be settled, yet we continue to live seriously in spite of those doubts.

According to Nagel, absurdity in everyday life occurs when there is a notable mismatch between pretension or aspiration (what we think should be happening) and reality (what really is happening). If life itself is absurd, there has to be a universal philosophical sense to absurdity, a way in which pretension and reality clash for all of us. Nagel argues that 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.”⁷ This collision is between two ways of viewing, which both are unavoidable. On the one hand, there is the particular viewpoint from within our lives, in which we attach worth and importance to the things we do. Every person takes her life seriously,

provide further justification will end up in an infinite regress. I don’t see a disagreement there. Second of all, Feinberg says: “One can think of human life as an endlessly circular quest for a vindicating point that is never to be found, even though some individual acts in the generally pointless pursuit do have *their* points.” (Feinberg, 1980, p. 310). Again, I don’t think that Nagel disagrees. After all, Nagel holds that activities can have a justification within a person’s life, but that it is impossible to justify life as a whole. The disagreement really is about the process of justification itself. Feinberg’s argument “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.” (Nagel, 1970, p. 718) While Nagel’s accusation is serious, it is also too abstract and theoretical for me to verify. The two agree on the main point, namely that the impossibility of justifying life as a whole is a source of absurdity.

⁷(Nagel, 1970, p. 718)

whether her life is a serious one or not. We pursue our lives, sometimes with zeal, sometimes with sloth, but always with self-consciousness. Even the decisions we make that are based on immediate need instead of careful reflection follow a process of adhering to a general system of habits. This personal viewpoint is inescapable.

Yet, at the same time, a different viewpoint outside our particular lives is available to us as well. This external, detached viewpoint lets people observe their lives *sub specie aeternitatis* and view themselves “with the detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand.”⁸ We can take a step back from our subjective concerns, and watch what we are doing from the outside. This viewpoint creates the realisation that the life we are so serious about, in fact consists of adhering to an arbitrary system of habits. When you look at yourself struggling like this from a great height, you abstract from the engagement you normally have with your life. You see this person, who exists and has no choice but to continue what he’s doing until he dies. Naturally, he does his best to accomplish what is important according to his form of life. But you also see that it wouldn’t matter if he failed in his aims or even if he never existed at all. Like the ant, he’s just one of the billions of replaceable creatures.

When we see ourselves externally, what becomes clear is the contingency and specificity of our aims and goals in life. The absurdity lies not in our capacity to take up an external viewpoint. What is absurd is that “when we take this view and recognize what we do as arbitrary, it does not disengage us from life”⁹. You still are the same person, regarding your own ultimate concerns from the outside and seeing that they are futile while at the same time not being able to do away with them. As I understand it, the absurdity lies in the fact that I can be a skeptic about the underlying mechanisms of my life, but that in order to be that skeptic, I use the same capabilities that I am putting into doubt. This is indeed absurd. We could compare this with an example of absurdity in everyday life. Consider a managing director who’s company undergoes a reorganisation. The branch he leads is to be merged with the company’s headquarters, thereby rendering his own job redundant. Before he is fired however, he is asked to stay for a few months. During this period he has to make sure that his exit will go smoothly by finding replacements to take over his former tasks, thinking of a new use for his old office and reorganizing the structure of responsibilities so his personnel doesn’t end up not knowing what to do. In short, his job is to ensure that his job is indeed redundant. We are in a similar predicament as this poor man: we shake at the fundamentals underlying our habits and responses, but all the while we cannot escape the system we try to undermine.

⁸(Nagel, 1970, p. 720)

⁹(Nagel, 1970, p. 720)

4 Escaping the absurd

Since absurdity results from the insight that what we take seriously is in fact small and insignificant, one may try to escape his absurd position by concerning himself with concerns that are too large and important to take a step back from. One could take on a role in something with grand importance and try to confer meaning to their lives by serving society, caring for the less fortunate or partaking in the glory of God. The problem is that any larger purpose that supposedly brings significance to our lives can be put into doubt from the external view the same way as our own personal purposes. If we can step back and reflect on the arbitrariness of our projects, we can also step back and put into question the progress of human history, the power of God, the political ideals that would better the world, etc. Making a difference on a smaller scale, by helping or caring for others is no solution either, since the lives of the beneficiaries are insignificant in the same way as that of the beneficent.

The doubt with regard to the limited aims of individual life is inescapable, since we have no choice but to end the search for justification at a certain point in life (the other choice option is an infinite regress), while the external view demands more than that: it asks for the real reason of our existence. The doubt with regard to a larger purpose is subject to the same inescapability. It is natural that the quest for the meaning of life takes us beyond the particularity of personal lives, that we try to find ultimate justification in something larger than ourselves. But the quest for meaning is fulfilled only when we reach the point that we can finally stop asking questions. From the internal view, that point can be reached easily, by choosing not to look for further justification. From the external view, that point it is out of reach: once we start the process of fundamental doubt, it continues indefinitely: any justification we find can always be questioned further.

Let me say some more on the appeal to religious meaning. If you believe that the point of your life comes from fulfilling the purpose of God, that has its own point and it needn't have a purpose outside of itself. The problem however, is that the idea of God seems to be something that can explain everything, but cannot be explained itself. If we rely on religious meaning, we would have to accept that there is something which gives a point to life, but whose own point cannot—or does not have to?—be explicated. Nagel does not accept this: “If God is supposed to give our lives a meaning that we can't understand, it's not much of a consolation.”¹⁰ I too have problems understanding how the concept of God can give meaning to life. But I do know that for many people, religion as a source of meaning is in fact a consolation. It may be impossible to explain God, but this changes nothing

¹⁰(Nagel, 1987, p. 100)

about the actual role that religion can play as a source of meaning in the lives of those who believe in Him. Nagel should be careful not to confuse the sense of meaning which can play a guiding role in people's lives, with the intellectual difficulties in explaining the source of that meaning. This disagreement aside, I agree with Nagel on the urgency of the fact that if we cannot explain the point of our lives as a whole, we will have the same difficulty in explaining the point of something larger.

5 Is the absurd an illusory problem?

Another strategy to show that absurdity is escapable is to hold that the conflict between viewpoints is illusory. The detached amazement that comes from viewing yourself from a distance is something that most people—especially those interested in philosophy—have experienced. But is this view really a source of absurdity? Apparently, it is possible to look at my life in abstraction from the fact that it is my life. By taking a step back, I reach a position of objective detachment from which I judge my subjective engagement futile and unimportant. The attitude of detachment and the resulting judgment of arbitrariness however stem from a viewpoint that is wholly different from the personal point of view. Doesn't this mean that the judgment is of concern only to this external viewpoint and bears no relation to my personal life? If that is the case, the existence of two perspectives is not at all problematic, since they do not collide with each other. To say that my life matters from the inside but not from the outside is just as unproblematic as to say that an egg looks round when viewed from above and oval when viewed from the side.

According to Nagel, this strategy misinterprets the clash between viewpoints that is the source of absurdity. Human beings do not have the capability to take up a third standpoint, from which they view the two relative viewpoints as being incompatible. Instead, they occupy both of the conflicting standpoints and the resulting attitudes at the same time. "The trouble is that the two attitudes have to coexist in a single person who is actually leading a life toward which he is simultaneously engaged and detached."¹¹ The problem is that the external viewpoint is not a mere spectator of the subjective life, it is a part of it. In a way, we consist of a subjective and an objective self. The objective self is trapped in the engaged life he sees as arbitrary, constantly stating a demand for justification which he know is not satisfiable. The absurd is the result of this juxtaposition: while a part of me finds my life objectively insignificant, that part cannot extricate itself from my life and the unqualified seriousness with which I live it.

¹¹(Nagel, 1986, p. 216)

It is important to note that people do not judge their lives objectively insignificant because they compare it to a standard of objective significance that exists somewhere outside of them which could be used to replace the failing justifications of everyday practice—the content of such a standard is unimaginable. In that sense, the problem of the meaning of life can be compared to that of epistemological skepticism. When I ask myself ‘How can I be sure my sensory experiences are real and I am not dreaming?’ I question what I have taken for granted about knowledge. The only justification that can be given to prove that I am not dreaming is circular: an explanation in terms of the same experience that I am putting in doubt. Skepticism does not offer me the possibility of adopting another epistemological standard. It is the same in the case of the absurd: I cannot choose to do away with the standards of ordinary practice, but I can doubt them nonetheless. Skeptical arguments, however convincing they may be, cannot cause us to abandon our beliefs about the world. We have no choice but to go on in the same way, even if we failed to find convincing reasons for what we do or think. Trying to find justification for what we do is not a solution to the problem of meaning. In fact, if we try at it too hard, the beliefs by which we live our lives could collapse, making life impossible. By being skeptical, we do not try to undermine our lives, we become a spectator of our lives. We continue to live the life that we at the same time view as a no more than a strange collection of curious habits.

Finally, there is another way in which the absurd could be considered an illusory problem. One could say that identifying with the objective self results in a disturbed view of our true identity—the external viewpoint makes us lose track of who we are. Looking at himself from a great distance, a person indeed looks like a silly little ant, pretending that what he does is important. But if this alienating point of view is the source of absurdity, why would someone identify with it? There is something deranged in looking at yourself objectively, so why would it matter anything to you? In *The View from Nowhere* Nagel answers that this criticism misunderstands the role objectivity plays. The capacity for objectivity is a vital part of the development of our humanity—without it, we would not be human—and we cannot break free of it. However natural and appealing it is to try and force ourselves to withdraw from the external demand for justification that gives rise to the problem, this is not possible. Objectivity cannot merely “remain a servant of the individual perspective.” Instead, “it has a life of its own.”¹² The aspiration for transcendence that is embodied by the objective self is not something that can be switched on and off at will. It may feel so that the external perspective blurs our identity, but in fact it is an inseparable part of it. To ignore the operation of objectivity is to be cut off from who you are just as abandoning your subjective individuality would.

¹²(Nagel, 1986, p. 221)

However valid the claim is that our capacity to be objective is an integral part of our humanity, it can be questioned whether Nagel exaggerates the importance of objectivity. Nagel is right in saying that the objective view is inescapable, in the sense that we cannot ignore its claims completely. I think however that we do have a choice in the extent in which the external demands of this view have an impact on our personal lives. Whereas the realisation of the objective unimportance of our lives amounts to a personal crisis for some, others may be able to choose to disregard or at least relativize the implications of that realisation. Nagel does acknowledge the possibility of a life that does not “involve the engagement of a transcendent awareness in the assiduous pursuit of mundane goals.” But he thinks that this would require a continuous effort which comes at “considerable dissociative cost.” (Nagel, 1970, p. 726) But why couldn’t we inverse this claim by saying that including a transcendent awareness in our everyday lives is a costly and tiring effort? Is it really true that the external demand of objectivity comes natural to us humans, that we do not have the option to ignore it and that all we can do is find a way to deal with its absurd conclusions?

Nagel does not hide his own unqualified belief in the inescapable impact of the objective viewpoint—as is apparent not only from his reflections on the problem of meaning but even more so in his moral theory—and I do think he has done a good job in motivating his belief. However, he has not made entirely plausible that the objective is a universal aspect of humanity in the sense that its unqualified—and unanswerable—demand for justification clashes with the personal viewpoint for everyone inevitably. Maybe one could suggest that the absurd, as the result of this clash, is only inescapable for those who share Nagel’s appraisal of the objective. Even if this suggestion could be proven true (something that I will not attempt here) however, the absurd would still remain an interesting philosophical concept. Nagel has succeeded in using this concept to show how the problem of meaning has its source in the way human beings function. He has made explicit that the absurdity originates in the confrontation between two deeply human capacities that function simultaneously and unarbitrarily. The fact that some deal better with this confrontation than others, or that the objective capacity plays only a minor role in the lives of some, does not challenge the philosophical validity of absurdity.

6 Coping with absurdity: the plea for irony

Now we have established—with certain reservations—that nothing can be done to escape the absurdity of life, we could ask what can be done about it. Several extreme solutions are available. We could retreat completely

from the subjective commitment to our personal goals and spend our days in isolation, meditating only on objective and eternal truths. Or we could do the opposite by giving in to our animal nature and letting our impulses drift uncontrollably, leaving no room for our ability to reflect on what's important to us. The final escape is suicide. But before considering giving in to these draconic and escapist solutions, Nagel suggests that we consider if the absurdity of life truly presents us with a problem to which a solution must be found.

Like in epistemological skepticism, our ability to transcend ourselves in thought is a distinctly human characteristic that makes it possible to see and question our limitations. The insight of absurdity stems from the fact that we have to fit in this transcendent consciousness in the utterly limited enterprise of human life—that we question who we are by being who we are. But if the absurdity of life is an inseparable part of it, why should it be a source of agony or despair? Being dramatic about our objective unimportance is not a way of acknowledging it, it is a failure to acknowledge it. “If *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that doesn't matter either”.¹³ Pretending that it does flies in the face of our objective unimportance. We could of course agonize about our absurd situation anyway, but there is no reason why we should choose this option, rather than embracing our absurdness as a part of who we are.

The recommendation is to approach our absurd lives not with despair but with irony. The unavoidable conflict between the objective and subjective viewpoint, the knowledge that together, those two incompatible positions form who we are, makes our lives ironically absurd, not unbearably absurd. The way to deal with the realisation is to acknowledge it, but not take it too seriously. The fact is that my concerns about my own life are more important than anything. This fact may be mocked to the point of absurdity by the idea that those concerns have no basis outside themselves, but it remains true nonetheless. As Nagel himself has put it:

*“If you ever ask yourself the question, “But what's the point of being alive at all?”—leading the particular life of a student or bartender or whatever you happen to be—you'll answer “There's no point. It wouldn't matter if I didn't exist at all, or if I didn't care about anything. But I do. That's all there is to it.”*¹⁴

Before moving on to Nagel's view on morality, I would like to say some more on the attitude towards life the absurd combination between viewpoints yields. The quote above suggests that the attitude towards one's life is

¹³(Nagel, 1970, p. 727)

¹⁴(Nagel, 1987, pp. 100-101)

inevitably dominated by the fact that it is one's own. Does this mean that the objective viewpoint falls into the service of the subjective? The coping strategy recommended by Nagel does indeed imply this: the only way I can deal with the fact that nothing matters objectively, is to decide that things matter *to me*. This attitude cannot however diminish the role of reasonable objective insights to the extent that we can ignore it. If that were the case, life could be explained solely in terms of subjective importance, nullifying the immanence of the meaning problem as explained in this paper. Luckily, Nagel offers a solution. He says that while objective reason serves the passions, it retains its external recognition that those passions belong to a particular individual and that their importance is derived from that. Objectivity plays the two roles at the same time. On the one hand, it is a *participant*, devoting itself to the interests and ambitions of the person it belongs to. On the other, it is a *spectator*, recognizing that this person is one among many and not the creator of the scale on which importance or value can be measured.¹⁵ ¹⁶

7 Nagel on value

The dual role objectivity plays, dividing it in 'spectator' and 'participant', is especially relevant for Nagel's discussion of value.¹⁷ The objective perspective safeguards against the claim that the subjective passions are the sole possessor of the measure of worth. This does not mean that, as a substitute, an objective standard decides what is valuable and what isn't. In my discussion above, we have seen that life cannot be understood from the external perspective alone: if our concerns are to make any sense to us, we must acknowledge their subjective importance. The same way the absurd consists in the realisation that there is no externally applicable standard for meaning or importance which can be successfully applied to a particular life, we cannot find a standard for absolute value when restricted to a person's subjective preferences. However, the lack of external justification for the worth of particular interests does not mean these interests are worthless: their worth is derived from the fact that we, as a person, care about them.

¹⁵(Nagel, 1986, p. 221)

¹⁶I have completely disregarded the question of intersubjectivity. The discussion on the problem of meaning would certainly benefit if we take into account the insight that what people find important, meaningful or valuable is heavily influenced by intersubjectively shared ideas on these subjects. However relevant this insight is, I do not think it plays a large part in Nagel's theory. I leave it to others to decide whether it should.

¹⁷I will give very shallow description of this discussion, based on Nagel's book *The View from Nowhere*. His moral theory certainly warrants deeper examination, but I must leave that for another time. Regrettably, I do not have the room to divulge too far from my discussion of the problem of absurdity.

(A person who doesn't attach worth to his interests, truly has a meaningless life.) The role objectivity plays in revealing value consists of combining evidence of value from the different particular perspectives it inhabits, while at the same time keeping enough distance to be able to assess these claims to value externally.¹⁸

Let's move on to my meager description of some of Nagel's insights on the role of objectivity in moral theory, or—as he likes to call it, in true Kantian spirit—practical reason. In *theoretical* reasoning, we view the world objectively when we take on an external perspective in which we view ourselves as components of that world. By taking a step back, we include our perspective on the world as a part of the world—we view the world as “centerless.”¹⁹ From this impersonal, external standpoint we can ask a question like ‘what does the world contain?’ and find an answer which is closer to objective truth than if we would ask the same question from an internal or personal standpoint. Taking a step back can help us form a new and improved set of beliefs.

We strive for the same objective truth in *practical* reasoning, and here the result of taking a step back is not a new set of beliefs, but rather a new set of values. Since practical reasoning deals with practical problems, the revised set of values we arrive at from an impersonal standpoint consists of normative judgements with a motivational content. The objective standpoint in ethics aims at objective *values* which can guide our actions, not at some objective truth about our actions. Ethical thought is about how to engage in practical reason in a good way and, according to Nagel, the justification of action is to be found by transcending our subjective standpoint. The objective standpoint does not merely enable us to understand our actions better, it is a necessary step in the way to critically improve how we act.

Nagel is a *realist* about value: statements about what we should do can be true or false—regardless of what we think—and because we have the ability to transcend our subjective standpoints, we have a way to find out what is the right thing to do. This view is called ‘normative realism’²⁰ and what we hope to discover by this method is the truth about what we have reason to do. The idea that we can discover reasons for acting and that these existing reasons can motivate us apart from our preexisting subjective motives should not be confused with some kind of platonic idealism. Normative realism does contend that value is ‘out there’, but its aim is not to discover value as some aspect of the external world. Instead, it offers us a way to reorder our motives so that they are acceptable not only from a personal but also from an external standpoint. Sadly, I do not have the room to examine Nagel's

¹⁸(Nagel, 1986, p. 220)

¹⁹(Nagel, 1986, p. 140)

²⁰(Nagel, 1986, p. 139)

moral theory more closely, let alone criticize it. I hope however to have explained his position sufficiently in order to ask a critical question.

8 A question

Let me recapitulate what has been said earlier. The unavoidable conclusion that life is to be considered absurd can only be dealt with by an attitude of irony. According to Nagel, the objectively valid external insight that nothing matters is not to be ignored, nor is it to be met with denial or scorn. We should embrace it as a part of who we are. Nagel denies the validity of *solutions* to the problem of meaning, like showing it is illusory or irrelevant to our lives as we live them. Instead, he recommends irony as a strategy of *coping* with the undeniable objective meaninglessness of our life. My question is this: how can we combine this ironic stance towards life with a belief in the importance of our actions?

As Nagel has said himself, many human efforts get “their energy from a sense of importance—a sense that what you are doing is not just important to you, but important in some larger sense: important, period.”²¹ An idealistic politician who works hard—completely sacrificing her social life—to put her ideas for a better world into practice, needs to know that her efforts are important in this sense. This does not exclude that she sometimes can watch herself with detached amazement, but it does seem to exclude that she treats her life’s projects with irony. She cannot tell herself: ‘I am just a ridiculous being, striving to fulfill a sense of objective importance that I know is out of reach.’ That is to say, she could of course utter the sentence, but it should not bear negatively on the attitude towards her life of dedication to creating a better world. How can she merge the ironic stance that results from the recognition of absurdity with an attitude of dedication to her goals in life?

This question is especially pressing for Nagel if we consider his anti-Humean belief that reasons for action can be found objectively and motivate us apart from existing subjective inclinations. Practical reason is about finding ways to act well and involves looking for reasons for action from a position that transcends personal concerns. An ironic attitude fits better within the opposite view on the source of motivation. If we hold that reason alone cannot produce motivation, the dedication of the politician from my example cannot be explained without referring to her subjective inclination towards creating a better world. In that case, the insight of objective meaninglessness can never cripple her sense of importance, since she can always explain her dedication by referring to the fact that she *wants* to be serious about her

²¹(Nagel, 1987, p. 101)

goals—even if she knows this is ridiculous. Of course no amount of sheer passion could ever fully explain the evident sacrifices the woman must have made to realize her goals; it is unimaginable that reason is not a factor in her dedication.²² Furthermore, the most likely explanation of her intense efforts to make a difference is put in terms of a belief in some objective good that outweighs her personal concerns. This explanation is in line with Nagel’s view on ethics as “the process of bringing objectivity to bear on the will”²³ and with his belief in the ability to give a justification for action by expanding one’s consciousness beyond the subjective position and taking up an objective standpoint.

It should be noted that, unlike Kant, Nagel does not think the task of objective reason is to categorically decide what we have reason to do. Normative realism contends that statements about reasons for action can be true or false independently of how they appear to us, but it does not appeal to an externally applicable standard of validity. Instead, the way to discover the truth is by subjecting these appearances to critical assessment. Objectivity can do that because it is nested within a particular life: it plays the dual role of participating in that life, serving its subjective interests, while at the same time externally assessing a person’s motivations by comparing them to those of others. The role of objectivity is to help us advance to a new comprehensive viewpoint in which our former personal perspective is included. Nagel’s claim cannot be that this new viewpoint is objective in the sense that it transcends or precedes the subjective viewpoint and that it results in some categorically decisive normative guideline. That claim would be utterly incongruous with the claim that life is insignificant when considered from an objective viewpoint. Neither the significance of life nor a criterion for what is valuable in life can be discovered by stepping outside ourselves. Objectively, nothing matters.

A question still remains. Why should I be ironic about my life when I discover its objective insignificance, but not ironic about the possibility of giving objectivity a role in deciding how I should live? The short answer is that irony about the meaning of life is unavoidable but harmless, while irony about value is unnecessary but harmful. Within practical reason, objectivity can help us to form a new and improved set of motivations by including the objective view within our personal perspective. The paradoxical conflict between the two viewpoints arises in practical reason as well, but here it is not necessarily unsolvable. In fact, Nagel thinks ethical thought consists of the attempt to make the two viewpoints complimentary. I cannot give

²²Please note that the Humean view does of course acknowledge this. All it says is that reason alone cannot motivate action. It would be ridiculous to say that reason plays no role in the generation of action.

²³(Nagel, 1986, p. 139)

arguments or details here, but I think a solid moral theory should be able to meet the objective demand for justification by giving reasons for action that transcend the subjective concerns of a particular perspective. The objective step does not undermine the validity of subjective values, but it must also leave room for the recognition of values that are independent of one's personal perspective. This is not an easy task, and one may be led to conclude that an attempt to harmonize the mostly incompatible demands of the objective and subjective viewpoints is a deeply ironic endeavour. Yet to say this would be unduly pessimistic and at odds with Nagel's belief in the validity of moral reasoning.

When thinking about the meaning of life, on the other hand, the two viewpoints do conflict irreparably. The external demand for meaning that originates from a person's self-transcending objective awareness cannot be satisfied. The fact that we continue to struggle even though the reason why we struggle can never be found makes our lives as a whole absurd. This insight may lead to despair, but it doesn't have to. We also have the option to acknowledge our absurdity and go back to living our lives with dedication. When we go back, our lives have gained an ironic quality. This irony is reflected only in our attitude towards life as a whole and it does not affect the actual dedication to our goals within life. On the contrary, the irony consists in the fact that we continue to live seriously despite our objective insignificance. The politician from my example copes with the insight that she is no more than a ridiculous creature not by abandoning her dedication to a better world but by being happy that she doesn't. She cannot help but smile at this ironic given. Her deeply human capacity for conscious self-transcendence is not only the source of self-improvement that should not be taken lightly, it is also the source of self-mockery that should be taken lightly.

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