VI. Life Absurd? Don’t Be Ridiculous

http://books.openedition.org

Electronic reference
Macbeth says that life is a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing. This description fits Thomas Nagel’s definition of absurdity: “a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality”. Nagel offers his own examples: “[S]omeone gives a complicated speech in support of a motion that has already been passed; a notorious criminal is made president of a major philanthropic foundation; you declare your love over the telephone to a recorded announcement; as you are being knighted, your pants fall down.” We might add: “An idiot tells a tale that signifies nothing.” The idiot aspires or pretends to tell a tale, and he talks nonsense instead.

Yet Macbeth’s metaphor suggests that Nagel’s definition of absurdity is off the mark. In Macbeth’s metaphor, what is absurd is not the idiot’s pretense of telling a tale; what’s absurd is the tale itself: it signifies nothing. An idiot’s attempt to tell a tale is not absurd; it’s ridiculous — worthy of ridicule, derision, mockery. Similarly with Nagel’s examples. If your pants fall down in front of the Queen, it’s ridiculous, not absurd.

Nagel dismisses the traditional tropes of life’s absurdity:

It is often remarked that nothing we do now will matter in a million years. But if that 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. (11)

As much as I enjoy seeing Nagel turn the tables on this cliché, I think that his reasoning is flawed. True enough, facts about the remote future are of no importance in the present, but Nagel is talking about facts that aren’t strictly about the future; they’re about the relation between the future and the present. The latter facts are about the present, too, and so they matter already. I would be thrilled to learn that this essay would still be


DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0029.06
read a million years hence, but not because I would be thrilled about that future state of affairs in itself; the thrill would be the long-lastingness of my words, which would be a million-year-long fact, beginning now. I would of course be foolish to feel disappointed about not being read in a million years, but only because any such hope would be ridiculous. Again, a discrepancy between aspiration and reality yields ridiculousness, not absurdity.

Ultimately, Nagel improves on his initial definition of the absurd, by shifting his attention to a more pertinent discrepancy than that between pretension and reality. I will offer an interpretation of his ultimate conception of absurdity. Then I will consider how it gets played out in the metaethical debate over moral relativism, belief in which is sometimes thought to make life seem absurd.

The contradiction

Nagel appears to contradict himself at various points. On the one hand, he denies that the source of absurdity is our lack of a justification for taking things seriously. Such justifications are easy enough to find:

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. (12)

On the other hand, Nagel says that the purpose of these actions is open to question — a kind of question that he compares to skeptical doubt:

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 frameable 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. (19)

These passages seem incompatible. How can we doubt whether to bother with our own comfort if, as the first passage assures us, no further purpose is needed?

The contradiction is not Nagel’s, however; the contradiction is ours — and that is Nagel’s point. His point is that “the absurdity of our situation derives not from a collision between our expectations and the world, but from a collision within ourselves” (17). Specifically, it derives from “the collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the
perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt” (13):

These two inescapable viewpoints collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd. It is absurd because we ignore the doubts that we know cannot be settled, continuing to live with nearly undiminished seriousness in spite of them. (14)

We wonder why we should bother about our comfort, but then we go ahead and take an aspirin anyway.

These views come into collision because they do not just alternate; they coexist. We see the arbitrariness of our pursuits while still seriously engaged in them. “[W]hen 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” (15).

Nagel illustrates the point by imagining what would happen if a mouse became self-aware:

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 meagre yet frantic life, full of doubts that he was unable to answer, but also full of purposes that he was unable to abandon. (21)

Thus, absurdity lies not where the pretension involved in taking things seriously collides with the reality of their arbitrariness; it lies rather in our seeing the collision and continuing to take things seriously all the same. To revise Nagel’s initial examples, we are like a person who continues to speak in favor of a motion not just after it has been passed but after having realized that it has been passed; we are like a person who continues a marriage proposal after having recognized the voice on the other end of the line as a recording.

Thus revised, these examples succeed in illustrating absurdity after all. Indeed, they illustrate absurdity snatched from the jaws of ridiculousness. If a speaker perseveres after having realized that his speech is ridiculous, he can turn his audience’s laughter into puzzlement at the absurdity of his

2 “And that is the main condition of absurdity — the dragooning of an unconvinced transcendent consciousness into the service of an immanent, limited enterprise like a human life” (726).
performance. Nagel’s corresponding vision of human life can be restated as follows: Taking our arbitrary pursuits so seriously would be ridiculous if not for the fact that we know they are arbitrary, so that our seriousness is absurd instead.

**Arbitrariness**

Notice that Nagel describes our ordinary pursuits as both arbitrary and open to doubt. He doesn’t distinguish between these conditions, but they are not the same. We need to consider how arbitrariness and doubt are related to one another and how both are related to absurdity.

**Arbitrariness and doubt**

The concept of arbitrariness properly applies to a decision taken on no basis whatsoever, without justification. But there are two ways for a decision to be baseless, and only one of them leads to doubt. On the one hand, we may be unable to provide a justification where one is called for, and so our decision may be subject to a standard of success or correctness that we cannot show it to meet. Then our decision is open to doubt. On the other hand, there may be no applicable standard, hence no call for justification. The invitation to pick a number from one to ten presupposes that there is no correct answer, and so our choice, though arbitrary, will not be open to doubt.

Nagel is speaking of choices that seem to need justification, hence to be threatened by arbitrariness of the first kind. Yet that threat does not appear to be realized in these cases, because our choices are not baseless after all:

> [H]uman beings do not act solely on impulse. They are prudent, they reflect, they weigh consequences, they ask whether what they are doing is worth while. Not only are their lives full of particular choices that hang together in larger activities with temporal structure: they also decide in the broadest terms what to pursue and what to avoid, what the priorities among their various aims should be, and what kind of people they want to be or become. [. . .] They spend enormous quantities of energy, risk, and calculation on the details. (14–15)

Because these choices are made on the basis of reasons, they are not arbitrary. So where does arbitrariness come in? How can Nagel say that our pursuits are arbitrary while also saying that they are guided by such painstaking deliberation?
Maybe arbitrariness enters because deliberation and justification must come to a stop at some point, and the stopping point is necessarily arbitrary: it cannot itself be a matter of deliberation or justification, lest they go on forever. Maybe, then, the arbitrariness lies in our choice of when to stop looking for reasons.

Yet Nagel says that there is a point, a non-arbitrary point, at which we feel no need for further reasons. “Justifications come to an end,” Nagel says, “when we are content to have them end — when we do not find it necessary to look any further” (16). Here we have reached “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” (19). We are content to have justification end at this point “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” (17–18).

So we do not arbitrarily decide to stop demanding justifications; we simply hit the bedrock of our own constitution. We stop because we see that justifications cannot go on forever and it is in our constitution to be content with the justifications already in hand.

The question therefore returns: Where is the arbitrariness? Here is another possibility: Maybe what’s arbitrary is our constitution, the bedrock that brings justifications to an end: 3

This explains why the sense of absurdity finds its natural expression in those bad arguments with which the discussion began. Reference to our small size and short lifespan and to the fact that all of mankind will eventually vanish without a trace are metaphors for the backward step which permits us to regard ourselves from without and to find the particular form of our lives curious and slightly surprising. 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. (21)

But how can the human form of life be arbitrary? If we know that justifications must come to an end somewhere, and if we are satisfied with

3 Nagel makes clear that he is concerned with human life in general rather than particular lives: “Many people’s lives are absurd, temporarily or permanently, for conventional reasons having to do with their particular ambitions, circumstances, and personal relations. If there is a philosophical sense of absurdity, however, it must arise from the perception of something universal — some respect in which pretension and reality inevitably clash for us all” (718).
justifications that end with our constitution as humans, then where is the unsatisfied demand that makes for arbitrariness?

Arbitrariness and specificity

In the end, I think, Nagel doesn’t mean that human life is arbitrary, strictly speaking. He is using the term, I suspect, as if it were equivalent to the other terms on his list, such as “idiosyncratic” and “highly specific”. That these other terms are his real concern is suggested in another passage:

[H]umans 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. (15)

Nagel returns to this topic in an essay published more than ten years after his essay on the absurd. There he expresses a sense of wonderment at his own personal specificity:

[How] too I be merely a particular person? The problem here is not how it can be the case that I am this one rather than that one, but how I can be anything as specific as a particular person in the world — any person.

In these passages, Nagel seems to conflate particularity with specificity, and specificity in turn with peculiarity. That is, he seems to presuppose that a particular thing, numerically distinct from other particulars, must have some combination of qualities by which it can specified — qualities specific or peculiar to it, idiosyncrasies. And then he seems to equate having such peculiarities with being odd, strange, alien. Thus, he says that despite taking an external perspective from which we become spectators of our lives, “we continue to lead them, and devote ourselves to what we are able at the same time to view as no more than a curiosity, like the ritual of an alien religion” (20–21). The rituals of an alien religion are peculiar in the sense that they are encrusted with details that are specific to them and therefore odd to outsiders. What Nagel finds absurd, then, is the collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the

---

simultaneous awareness that human life is peculiar, strange, one among countless possible forms of life.

Yet if the seriousness with which we take our lives somehow clashes with an awareness of their peculiarity, then it must somehow incorporate a pretension or aspiration not to be peculiar, not strange, not specific in Nagel’s sense. Taking things seriously must then entail aspiring to be creatures-in-general — beings without peculiar qualities, like God. That aspiration would be ridiculous, as Nagel himself sees:⁵

I know this sounds like metaphysical megalomania of an unusually shameless kind. Merely being TN isn’t good enough for me: I have to think of myself as the world soul in humble disguise.

So maybe human life is absurd only if we are being ridiculous.

Transcending Specificity

That’s unfair. There is a familiar view that involves an aspiration to transcend specificity: it’s called absolutism about value. The absolutist doesn’t necessarily pretend to transcend specificity, but he does aspire to, for he aspires to value things that are simply to-be-valued, irrespective of contingent variations among valuers. Pursuing things of absolute value would be a form of life that isn’t idiosyncratic or peculiar: it would be the one and only Way to Live.

It’s as if there is one God whom all spiritual creatures are trying to worship and will end up worshipping alike at the ideal end of spiritual evolution. Different beings may perform different rituals, encrusted with their own peculiarities, but all are earnestly striving to shed those peculiarities, in the conviction that God demands to be worshipped in just one way. Similarly, according to the absolutist, things demand to be valued in just one way, and taking things seriously consists in striving to value them as they demand, thus striving not to be peculiar.

If there is such a thing as absolute value, then there is nothing ridiculous about this kind of seriousness, which aspires to transcend human idiosyncrasy in valuing. Nor is life absurd in the eyes of someone who believes in the possibility of such transcendence: he sees no collision between his pretensions and reality. Only someone who doubts that

⁵ Ibid., 225.
possibility might find his life absurd — that is, if he cannot moderate his aspirations accordingly.

Those of us who are relativists about value must regard our lives, and human life in general, as inevitably specific and idiosyncratic. We don’t believe in a universally valid Way to Live to which all creatures can aspire; we believe that every creature has to live its own peculiar life. We are like observant nonbelievers, knowing that there is no one true religion but still earnestly performing our rituals simply because they are ours. And isn’t nonbelieving observance a bit absurd?

When it comes to the human form of life, which appears to be Nagel’s concern, the answer is clear. Of course humans are a specific kind of creature, specifiably different from other kinds, hence idiosyncratic among all creatures. Of course, then, there are humanly valuable things that aren’t valuable in some nonspecific way. But we are content to be human — what else could we be? — and so we can be human seriously. If absolutists aspire to trans-humanity, then they go above and beyond the call of seriousness.

The question becomes more pressing when applied, within the category of human life, to its more specific cultural and individual forms. I know that my upper-middle-class American way of life, and my own personal pursuits, are specific and idiosyncratic in relation to the countless possibilities. Does that knowledge clash with my taking them seriously? No. I don’t aspire to be Everyman: being David Velleman is enough for me, no matter how peculiar I may look from another point of view. Like Nagel, I am gripped by the question “How could I be a particular person?”, but whereas the question appears to fill Nagel with anxiety, it fills me with wonder.

Moral Seriousness

But what, at last, about moral seriousness? In the eyes of many philosophers, moral seriousness requires the conviction that what we call morality is not merely our morality, not just a set of mores peculiar to our culture or community. If these philosophers are right, then moral relativism implies that our lives are absurd, given our inability to abandon moral seriousness. This threatened absurdity is the absurdum in the widely accepted reductio of relativism.
I don’t believe that moral relativism clashes with moral seriousness. Sufficient for moral seriousness is a belief in the possibility of progress in morality. In the context of moral relativism, of course, such progress cannot be progress toward a morality that better reflects transcendent moral truths. But there can still be progress toward a morality that better serves the function that moralities serve.

The view that there are different moralities specific to different communities suggests, may even entail, that all moralities share a common function; for on what other grounds would they share the title of moralities? And if specific moralities share a common function, then there is the possibility of their severally evolving in the direction of serving that function better. Each particular morality must evolve from what it already is, and there is no reason to assume that progress would bring particular moralities together in a moral consensus. They may always remain someone’s morality, specific to a particular community, but they can still get better at doing what all moralities do. If we regard our own morality as embodying our progress to date, and we aspire to further progress, then we have all the moral seriousness we need, and it is compatible with recognizing that our morality is peculiar to us and potentially alien to others.

The idea is not that the function served by moralities is valuable: such a value would have to transcend the boundaries of any particular community. The idea is rather that having a morality belongs to the human form of life. It is in our constitution to form ourselves into communities with shared values and norms expressive of particular aspects of our humanity. So much is peculiar to human nature yet easy to take seriously simply because we are human. Given that peculiarity of human nature, progress in morality is possible, and so is moral seriousness in the form of aspiring to progress.

I conclude. The truth of moral relativism need not make life absurd. And because the pretensions of relativism are more modest than those of absolutism, believing relativism is less likely to be ridiculous.