

Nagel, *The Absurd*

Summary

- Many are persuaded that their lives are meaningless or absurd by reflecting on the fact that nothing they will ever do will matter in a million years. They reason as follows:

P1 Our lives will not matter in a million years.

C Our lives are absurd.

- Nagel argues that, even if true, **P1** shouldn't give us any reason to think that our lives are absurd. He reasons as follows:

P1 Our lives will not matter in a million years.

P2 If our lives now will not matter in a million years, then (by the same token) whatever will be the case in a million years does not matter now.

C1 So, nothing that will be the case in a million years matters now.
[from **P1** and **P2**]

C2 So, it does not matter now that our lives will not matter in a million years. [from **P1** and **C1**]

- Nagel similarly argues against some other reasons for thinking our lives are absurd, including the fact that we are small specks in a vast universe (*if our lives are absurd, would they stop being absurd if we were bigger?*).
- Nevertheless, Nagel thinks that our lives *are* absurd. So if the standard reasons people give for thinking life absurd aren't any good, then why is life absurd?
 - Nagel thinks that our sense that life as a whole is absurd arises from the realization that, though we take our lives very seriously, it is always possible to call those things about which we are most serious into doubt, and we are incapable of dispelling those doubts.
 - If we are incapable of dispelling these doubts, if we are incapable of non-circularly justifying our most fundamental commitments, then those commitments cannot be justified.
 - So, our most fundamental commitments are without justification, and therefore, our lives are meaningless.
 - What makes our lives *absurd* is that, even though we are incapable of dispelling these doubts, even though we are capable of recognizing, *sub species aeternitatis*, that our lives are ultimately without meaning, we continue to take our lives seriously.

- “We see ourselves from the outside, and all the contingency and specificity of our aims and pursuits becomes 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.” (p. 636)
- Nagel contends that this explains the reasons why people find the bad arguments (*nothing we do will matter in a million years; we’re tiny specks in a vast universe*) so compelling.
 - Regarding ourselves as small and finite allows us to take the objective, third-personal perspective on ourselves from which our concerns and our values appear arbitrary and our projects appear ultimately absurd.
- What should we do about the absurdity of our lives? Nagel argues that we could not stop viewing the world *sub species aeternitatis*. However, we could try to give up our values and projects, or else we could just commit suicide. But we should only do that if the absurdity of our lives presents us with a *problem*. Nagel denies that it does. He gives the following reason:

P1 *Sub species aeternitatis*, nothing matters.

C So, *sub species aeternitatis*, it does not matter that *sub species aeternitatis*, nothing matters.