

Does life have
meaning?



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

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Since the beginning of time people have been asking the universal question of “ What is the meaning of life?” Answers from people today may vary greatly from that of thousands of years ago. However, two key philosophers, Camus and Nagel, have both contributed greatly to what we believe gives life value. Nagel’s stance is that no matter what, we can always doubt that the world has any intrinsic value, or that everything we do matters. Camus, however, focuses on the idea of the confrontation between man’s demand for meaning/sense/value/rationality and the world’s intrinsic lack of these same values. Personally, I side with Camus and his beliefs due to the fact that each decision we make on a day to day basis is somehow correlated with each demand.

One of the key differences between Camus and Nagel is Camus maintains in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that the absurd arises because the world is unable to meet our demands for meaning. This suggests that the world might satisfy those demands if it were different. This idea depends on not only people but the world, similar to the idea of “ Sir I Exist.” One cannot be without the other. If people did not demand meaning, or if the world wasn’t meaningful enough there wouldn’t be any absurd. Then if you look at Nagel, his absurd is entirely contained within people, and the fact that people can always doubt that the world is meaningful, so, therefore, the absurd is an essential fact to that of human existence.

While each viewpoint is important, I am more interested in the response that each philosopher, especially Nagel, has to the absurd. Camus’ response to

the absurd is naturally, rebellion: the idea of being honest with yourself about the true meaninglessness of the world, but not giving up on your mandate for meaning. This, however, doesn't erase the absurd – nothing short of suicide can do that – but instead, it allows us to live with honesty, dignity, and integrity. Then there is Nagel's response, irony. Which, to me, appears that it is simply an attempt at Camus' rebellion, but it falls short and ends up amounting to philosophical suicide. Which can be explained by two opposing tendencies that lie within one's self.

Nagel argues that the sense of the absurd result from two opposing tendencies within us: To start, we take our lives, or at least activities and projects within lives, seriously, and we cannot avoid doing so. On the flip side, we are also capable of undermining the reasons for any of our projects. Nothing we do can be justified from a point of view radically outside human interests. Nagel condemns the idea of rebellion for being melodramatic and histrionic. He compares it to shaking ones' fist at the world and deems it pointless, nothing more than a ridiculous spectacle. What does Nagel then recommend? When discussing life through his eyes Nagel ultimately says that, “ if there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that doesn't matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair” (Nagel, *The Absurd*) However, that begs the question what is irony? Is it not in and of itself detachment and denial, essentially saying what one doesn't mean? This is what irony looks like, knowing that you may have absolutely no meaning in life, but you continue on your merry way with a grin on your face. Irony is taking life too seriously

while also laughing at yourself because you are fully aware of the fact that you are taking it too literally.

This is the kind of philosophical suicide that Camus would consider to be a “humiliated reason.” Irony attempts to weaken, and even, therefore, eliminate the fundamental demand for meaning. Irony reduces the demand for meaning into a simple human desire, which can then be modified or suppressed, at least to some degree. However, meaning is not a desire; but instead is a need. We need meaning almost like we need simple physiological human needs like food and water. We can’t simply laugh off meaninglessness and say, “I didn’t really need objective meaning anyway.” That doesn’t solve the problem of the absurd as Nagel says it does. That escapes the problem. To be ironic is to not be honest with oneself.

While Nagel and Camus each have their own point of view on the world, I believe that Camus perspective is far more logical and is better interpreted for everyday life.