

# Two different kinds of absurdity essays example

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The meaning of life has been one of the most significant questions that humankind has asked itself. Throughout history, different cultures have given various answers, from myths, to religion and science. After Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God, philosophers started asking themselves what they were on this planet for, giving rise to the Existentialist movement. Attempting to answer this question some saw that it did not have a verifiable response, concluding that human life was actually absurd. However, not everyone interpreted this word in the same way. Albert Camus was one of its most famous proponents, believing that the world did not meet the expectations it should to give humans an intrinsic purpose and that everything was a sort of joke. On the other hand, Thomas Nagel believed that there was no such exterior problem, but that it was an internal problem between what one expected and what one really received. Accordingly, they would theorize characters, such as Camus' fictional Meursault, in different ways. Even though they both raise some interesting points, Nagel's perspective seems to be more solid, going deeper to the cause of the problem than Camus. Although they both have sound evidence and logical reasoning that supports them, Nagel seems to have generalized the problem that Camus presented, analyzing the problem in a more precise way.

These two philosophers follow different paths to arrive at the conclusion that human life is absurd. On one hand, Albert Camus, the more famous of the two, believed that absurdity came from the tension between reasoning and the world. Camus writes that " in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and this life, the actor and his setting, is properly

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the feeling of absurdity" (6). This long quote condenses the most important parts of his philosophy, including those that differentiate his from Nagel's. Most importantly, one sees the constant tension between man and his environment, the world, reality. The onset of absurdity is due to the incapability of people to reason in the world, to make sense of it. After the philosophical death of God, man has been ripped of the notion of a lost paradise that may be regained. This eternity that gave sense to the world is now lost, leading people to directly feel the absurdity that living entails. Camus further believes that a person is nothing but a speck in this world and that his or her actions do not matter in the grand scheme of things, whether it is in terms of time or of space.

Nagel also establishes that life is absurd for humans, but in a different way. For instance, he believes that the tension is not between the mind of the person and the world, but within the person him or herself. He believes that there is a structural discrepancy between what one aspires to and reality, and this trench is what causes absurdity. Men have a capacity for abstraction that other species do not have, and this is one of the main causes of this feeling. " Yet humans 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" (Nagel). Men are not only capable of action, but also of seeing themselves as if from afar and reflecting on what they are doing. This is important because, even though there is no one supreme meaning, people still have personal purposes and justifications for going through with their lives. Nevertheless, this reasoning is often individualized and does not hold up to the generalized scrutiny that seeing one's life cosmically generates. " It would be different if <https://assignbuster.com/two-different-kinds-of-absurdity-essays-example/>

we could not step back and reflect on the process, but were merely led from impulse to impulse without self-consciousness" (Nagel). This would annul absurdity, not because then people would have an intrinsic meaning to their lives, but because there would be no room for reasoning and making the leap from personal importance to general significance.

This is one of the main critiques that Nagel would pose to Camus, yet there are many others. The former understands the latter's theory to reflect a structural difference between the world and the individual as the cause of absurdity, claiming that in his, Nagel's theory, reasoning and the sense of abstraction are more important, attributes internal to the person. "

Consequently the absurdity of our situation derives not from a collision between our expectations and the world, but from a collision within ourselves" (Nagel). Nevertheless, this distinction would give Camus pause, as one of the main reasons that absurdity arises is the difficulty of reaching the true knowledge of reality.

Furthermore, Nagel believes that man's condition is essentially absurd, not accidental like Camus would think. For the former, this is an inescapable part of human existence due to the capability of self-reflection; the latter predicates that the state of the world is such that one may not find meaning in it, leaving fist-shaking as the only option before it. However, Camus could argue that the whole point of his reflections is that the world is a certain way and that there is no way to change it. Nagel is more radical in this respect, saying that it could not be any other way, yet Camus is more open-minded as one does not really know if another universe could exhaustively satisfy our needs.

Finally, Nagel argues that some of Camus' arguments may be reduced to

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circular logic, with a necessary leap towards eternity or transcendence that negates his whole proposal. " But a role in some larger enterprise cannot confer significance unless that enterprise is itself significant. And its significance must come back to what we can understand, or it will not even appear to give us what we are seeking" (Nagel). This is the underlying problem that Camus perhaps did not take into account. The creation of meaning may have been more complicated than what he imagined and this is an objection that would give him pause. However, following the structural element that Nagel is proposing, one could look for what served as itself significant in Camus' theory. Even though this is mere speculation, one could think that defiance is supreme in Camus' personal theory, as this is what makes him argue against suicide in a meaningless world.

Following the differences between these two theories, these authors would disagree on the heroism of Meursault, the lead character of Camus' most famous novel, *The Stranger*. In summary, he lived his life indifferent towards the happenings of the world until one day he realized that the world was indifferent too, so he began to live more comfortably for a few hours. For Camus, this would have been commendable, as he would have finally come to terms with the cosmos' indifference. Nevertheless, for Nagel this would have been somewhat false, as it would not be a real following of one's own personal meaning. While he does think that the world is indifferent, this does not mean that a person should be indifferent all his life, but go through with it giving it his own interpretation.

In general, Nagel's proposal is more convincing than Camus'. His reasoning is sounder, and he destroys virtually all of Camus' proposals. Even though I think Nagel sometimes simplified Camus' arguments, or failed to see some

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rebuttals, his is the theory that holds more weight. It directly resolves what Camus believes to be the only important philosophical question in a more elegant way, by individualizing meaning instead of searching for the universal, transcendent significance that Nietzsche did away with. In general, it is a more satisfying theory as one does not have to accept the absolute insignificance of life, which automatically begs the question of why to live it, but gives an important reason to why one should keep living.

In conclusion, there are different ways to think of the universe as absurd and these different theorizations have different justifications and consequences. Due to the lack of intrinsic meaning in the cosmos, Camus believes that life is absurd because one cannot comprehend it. On the other hand, Nagel argues that life itself is absurd due to humans' condition as a self-aware being; this should not give humankind pause, but encourage them to keep living for their personal meaning. For the former, Meursault would have been a great hero, as he achieved the enlightenment that being in touch with the universe's futility gives; on the other hand, Nagel would have a problem with this because, for him, the cosmos does have a meaning that one individually constructs and this should not be the cause for indifference towards the world. As a whole, Nagel's theory is more satisfactory, as it is more reasonable and gives more answers to the questions that Camus himself poses. Living in a meaningless world is unbearable and it is great that philosophers have theorized about what to do with this lack of meaning.

## **Reference List**

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