

Thomas nagel: the absurd



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methodological point 1) articulating an author's position (what is the author saying?)

2) establishing the dialectic (we know his position, so how is it that he supports that position?)

3) defending the premises (he has presented his argument, now he must show us why we should take his side)

4) strengthening the position Nagel's position - agrees that life is absurd

- begins by defining the absurdity of some situations

- this definition is then applied to life itself How does Nagel define the

absurdity of some situations? in ordinary life a situation becomes absurd

when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration

and reality How does Nagel apply the definition of the absurdity of some

situations to life itself? defines when the sense that life as a whole is absurd

arises When does Nagel say the sense that life as a whole is absurd arises?

the sense that life as a whole is absurd arises when we perceive an inflated

pretension or aspiration which is inseparable from the continuation of human

life & which makes its absurdity inescapable, short of escape from life

itself dialectic - 2 sets of competing arguments in support of a claim

- in which it is shown that 1 set is unsuccessful in establishing the claim,

while the other succeeds

- the burden of proof is on Nagel to show that the competing arguments do

not support the notion of absurdity that he has given In establishing the

dialectic, Nagel says that he is _____ but that _____ - is going to consider

reasons usually offered in defense of the absurdity conviction

- he considers "patently inadequate" competing arguments for the absurdity

of life (bad arguments) 1) scale argument: spacial or temporal scales

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trivialize our activities

2) death argument: death interrupts any justification for our activities

scale argument-P1: Nothing that we do now will matter in a million years.

-P2: If P1, then nothing that will be the case in a million years matters now.

-C1: Nothing that will be the case in a million years matters now.

-P3: If nothing we do now will matter in the distant future and nothing in the distant future matters now, then nothing we do ever matters.

-C2: Nothing we do ever matters. begging the question a fallacy in which the claim to be argued is included in the premises of the argument

part 1 of Nagel's response to the scale argument-the argument begs the question

-a proponent of the scale argument assumes from the beginning what it

means to not matter (because there is something that affects a subject's

emotions), and then concludes that nothing matters

part 2 of Nagel's response to the scale argument-considering our tininess in the grand scale of things in both time & space:

-but if we lived forever, would that suddenly make a life not absurd?

-If we increased in size (or decreased the size of the universe), would that suddenly make our lives less absurd?

-then moves onto second argument because neither of these considerations helps in seeing the link between scale & absurdity

the death argument-P1: If chains of justification leave off without some later significance, then we have no justifications for our actions.

-P2: The chains of justification within our lives terminate when we die.

-C: There are no justifications for our actions. Nagel's response to the death argument-not all reasons for actions depend on their connection to a later sequence of activities; some actions are just worth doing (reason for taking

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medicine when you have a headache, reason to avoid pain in others [child touching stove])

--> no larger context or further purpose is needed to prevent these acts from being pointless

-argument implies an infinite regress: if a finite chain of justification needs something outside of it to justify it, then that demand can be placed on that "something outside." But then that rule can be applied again & again (& that is bad) Nagel's conclusion to the competing arguments—the standard arguments for absurdity fail as arguments, but he believes that they try to express something that is difficult to state but fundamentally correct

-now he has closed off one side of the dialectic: arguments still point us in the right direction, but now he must illustrate for us what that is What does reference to Nagel's "positive contribution" mean? reference to his argument Nagel's positive contribution a reconstruction of the argument

-P1: Subjectively, we must take our lives & the choices we make as "serious" & non-arbitrary.

-P2: Objectively, we also recognize that our choices are ultimately "non-serious" or arbitrary.

-P3: The subjective & the objective cannot be reconciled.

-C: Life is absurd. In what ways does Nagel lay out his defense of premises? his analysis requires defense in 2 respects:

1) as regards to the unavoidability of seriousness

2) as regards to the inescapability of doubt part 1 of defending the premises—the unavoidability of seriousness is established through 2 considerations:

1) we take ourselves seriously whether or not we actually lead serious lives (we expend a lot of effort, we plan, calculate, succeed, & fail in various

pursuits). This entails that we have some stake in what's going on regardless of the degree of effort

2) that we take ourselves seriously relies on a second claim: we don't act solely on impulse. We have the capacity to take a step back & reflect on the process, & act consciously upon the results of that reflection. However, this step back serves a dual purpose: it not only justifies the fact that seriousness is unavoidable; it also opens the door to doubt part 2 of defending the premises-the scope of seeing your life from the backwards step provides the basis for doubt: we know that there are good reasons to act (recall the point about taking aspirin, avoiding pain in others), & at the same time we recognize that these have no greater justification. Yet we cannot avoid acting in such a way in spite of this recognition. How does Nagel go about strengthening his claim about doubt? with an argument from analogy: a type of argument in which similarities in properties are noted between 2 things. So, what holds for one, must hold for the other (e. g. the watchmaker argument)strengthening the position-argues that perception of the absurd resembles epistemological skepticism

-the type of skepticism that he considers is that of the external world (e. g. you are deceived such that all of your perceptual inputs were manipulated by a computer to make you think that you were experiencing the real, external world)

-argues that appeals to appearances to counter the skeptical scenario are circular (e. g. this screen appears real to me, therefore it is really there

-argues that a backwards step, similar to the one taken before, will reveal that our entire belief system is subject to that kind of attack. Thus, we take all our beliefs for granted (we can't abandon them, but we are aware that we

lack sufficient grounds to justify them. We accept them with " irony & resignation"

-after the step back, we then return to our lives as we must, but our seriousness is laced with irony (not that irony enables us to escape the absurd)

-it's useless to utter " Life is meaningless..." with everything we do

-we take ourselves seriously regardless of what we say
Nagel's conclusion- Nagel takes the reflexivity of the backwards step to be unavoidable & thus a feature of the human condition.

-conclusion is that we cannot avoid the absurdity of human life, & recommends that we should take the ironic approach

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