THE ABSURD

Thomas Nagel
Three Short Movies

- The film shorts we began class with can be found at the following links:
  - Carl Sagan: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVbu1PeeNxU
  - Powers of Ten: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fKBhvDjuy0
  - AMNH: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17jymDn0W6U
Overview

• Nagel thinks that our lives are absurd, and so, in some sense, meaningless.

• Of course, most of us proceed in our ordinary lives by seriously treating our lives as meaningful and have value. If they do not have meaning or value, our lives would be absurd since reality clashes with our pretensions.

• If we come to recognize that our lives are absurd, Nagel thinks we should not be bothered by this. He says that “it need not be a matter of agony unless we make it so” and that we ought to “approach our absurd lives with irony”.

• Nagel’s suggestion seems to be if we stop taking our lives seriously, the clash between pretension and reality will disappear, and our lives will no longer be absurd.

• If we came to correctly recognize that our lives are indeed absurd, meaningless, or without value, it is hard to take Nagel’s recommended treatment seriously. What we primarily care about is that our lives have value! Perhaps the “clash” will vanish if we don’t act like they do, but that’s cold comfort.
Bad Reasons?

- Nagel begins by considering four common reasons for the thinking that our lives are absurd (or better: just meaningless). He thinks that all of these reasons are bad.

  - (R1) Our existence will not matter a long time from now.

  - (R2) We are tiny little ants, crawling on a tiny blue planet in a remote corner of an unimaginably vast universe, and we will crawl on this planet for only a blink from the point of view of a cosmic timescale.

  - (R3) We are mortal. We do not live forever. Our lives are finite journeys which end in a return to dust.

  - (R4) If something justifies or gives value to our lives, it must itself have value. But if all value comes from something external to it, there will be an infinite chain of value givers. And an infinite, never-ending chain of value givers can’t give value to anything.
Rejecting (R1) - (R3)

- Against (R1), Nagel writes: “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.”

- Is the symmetry principle Nagel is appealing to true?

- Against (R2), Nagel points out that being small is irrelevant, for just making us bigger wouldn’t automatically cause our lives to have meaning if they didn’t have it already.

- While Nagel thinks that considerations of smallness aren’t relevant, he thinks that they help us step back and consider ourselves from a detached, disengaged perspective which contributes to our understanding of the absurdity of our lives.

- Against (R3), Nagel holds that a life without meaning couldn’t come to acquire meaning just by extending it. The extension of an absurd or meaningless life would just yield more absurdity and meaninglessness.
Suppose I offer you a valid deductive argument for conclusion (C). You see that the argument is valid. Suppose you are justified in believing the premises, (P1) and (P2), of the argument. Presumably, if you deduce the conclusion (C) from the premises, and believe (C) because you so deduced it, you come to be justified in believing (C).

In order to come to be justified in believing (C) on the basis of the argument, however, you had to be antecedently justified in believing (P1) and (P2). What caused you to have a justified belief in those premises?

Perhaps another argument? This would be to extend the chain of justification. There are three options for such chains. They are either (i) circular, or (ii) they go on forever, or (iii) they terminate at some point with beliefs that are justified by something other than an argument.

If we are ever justified in believing something on the basis of an argument, then (iii) must be true. And since we are sometimes justified in believing things on the basis of an argument, chains of epistemic justification terminate within our lifetimes. Similarly, Nagel notes that chains of meaning justification may so terminate.
A Good Reason?

- Whatever we think about (R1) through (R4), Nagel thinks there is a much better reason for thinking that our lives are absurd. If (R1) through (R4) are bad reasons for thinking our lives are absurd, what might a good reason be?

- To answer this, we have to begin by understanding what Nagel thinks it is to say that our lives are absurd.

- The basic idea seems to be that our lives are absurd because we live as if they have value. We take them very seriously. But once we take “the step back” and observe ourselves leading our lives which such seriousness, we appear to have no reason for thinking that they have value or for taking them seriously.

- Why do we appear to have no reason for thinking that they have value? The answer here seems to be that we cannot supply any ultimate justification for the claim that they have value. We cannot defend the claim that they do have value without reasoning in a circle, and that is no defense at all. We simply assume, when leading them, that they have value, but this assumption appears shallow from the disengaged viewpoint.
Formalizing the Argument

Here is an attempt at formalizing Nagel’s argument:

- (P1) Once we take a step back, we see that we cannot provide a defense of the claim that our lives have value.

- (P2) If, once we take the step back, we see that we cannot defend the claim that our lives have value, then they do not have value.

- (C1) So our lives do not have value.

- (P3) If we lead our lives as if they have value, but they do not, then our lives are absurd.

- (P4) We lead our lives as if they have value.

- (C2) Therefore, our lives are absurd.
What’s nice about this version of the argument is that it’s valid. So the only question is whether or not the premises are true.

There are only four premises, and I propose to grant (P3) and (P4) without argument. Those look pretty good to me. How about you?

This reduces assessing the argument to evaluating (P1) and (P2).

Let’s begin with:

• (P1): Once we take a step back, we see that we cannot provide a defense of the claim that our lives have value.

• We won’t ask whether or not (P1) is true. Instead, we’ll ask how Nagel defends it.
Matrix Skepticism

• In the movie *The Matrix*, humans are enslaved and envatted in liquid, while their brains are stimulated in such a way that it appears to them as if they are leading ordinary lives. Their sensory experiences make it seem to them as if they are walking around or sitting in a classroom, for example. Of course, they are not walking around or sitting in any classrooms. They are floating in vats of life-sustaining liquid.

• Do you think that you are justified in believing that you are not envatted?

• It seems that you cannot rule out the possibility that you are envatted, given your sensory evidence. For all that evidence is perfectly consistent with you being envatted.

• Once you take the epistemological step back, it appears that you cannot provide a defense of the claim that you are not envatted (without reasoning in a circle, which is no defense at all). You might reason: I am sitting in a classroom. If so, then I am not envatted. Therefore, I am not envatted. But this is question-begging.
Hume on Skeptical Doubts

• Of course, these philosophical concerns will probably soon cease to bother you. Nature does a good job of keeping you from entertaining these sorts of questions, the answers to which we perhaps cannot defend. Witness Hume:

• “Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours’ amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain’d, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.” -Hume, *Treatise*, 1.4.7.
Nagel’s point is that just as, once we take the epistemological step back, we see that we cannot defend the claim that we are not envatted, we see that we similarly cannot defend the claim that our lives have value once we take a step back and view them “from the outside”. Of course, Nature tends to make us assume that our lives do have value. That is why we lead them as if they do. But the step back calls all this into question.

In short, Nagel seems to be committed to the following claims, along with their antecedents (and so their consequents):

- If we cannot answer skeptical doubts, then we cannot answer doubts about the value of our lives.

- If we cannot defend the claim that we are not envatted, then we cannot defend the claim that our lives have value.

This points to a way to resist Nagel’s defense of (P1). We might reject some of these six claims Nagel is committed to. If one could successfully do this, one would show that Nagel has not given us a reason to accept (P1). This wouldn’t show that (P1) is false, but it would still undercut Nagel’s argument for it.
On to (P2)

- Recall that (P2) went as follows:

  - (P2) If, once we take the step back, we see that we cannot defend the claim that our lives have value, then they do not have value.

- What do you think about this?

- I say that it is almost surely false. Or at least, since it confuses metaphysical and epistemological issues, I know of no good reason to believe it.

- The way the world is with respect to whether or not our lives have value is one thing. Whether or not we can know (or have a good reason to believe) that our lives have value is quite another.

- In short, the following is possible: Our lives have value and it is impossible for us to defend the claim that they do, know that they do, or have a good reason to believe that they do.

- Compare: If I cannot defend the claim that there is a rock weighing exactly two tons which is orbiting Pluto, then there is no such rock orbiting Pluto.
Nagel has not defended (P2). I think it is probably false. Similar claims are obviously false. If it is false, Nagel’s argument is unsound, and so while valid, provides no good reason to believe its conclusion.

Perhaps one could try to defend (P2) as follows. One might think that if our lives have value, we would be able to defend the claim that they do. And if one thinks that we can’t defend that claim, then we could conclude that (P2) is true.

What do you think about this?

Even if (P2) is true, I submit that Nagel has not provided any good reasons to think it is. Thus (at least if you don’t antecedently like (P2), Nagel has failed to provide you with a good reason to think that your life is absurd.

I conclude that Nagel’s defense that life is absurd fails in the sense that Nagel has not established that our lives are absurd.
Final Remarks

- I have attempted to extract Nagel’s argument. You might think I have failed. Fair enough. You’ll have an opportunity to try to do better later if you want to.

- Suppose I am right, and Nagel’s argument does in fact fail. Is there an argument in the vicinity that might cause consternation?

- I think there might be. Perhaps we cannot settle or defend “once and for all” and in a “fully satisfactory way” that our lives have value, just as, perhaps, we cannot settle or defend “once and for all and in a fully satisfactory way” that we are not envatted.

- Such a defense would “remove all doubts” about whether or not our lives have value, and “remove all doubts” about whether or not we are envatted. But it looks like it is going to be hard to remove all such doubts.

- If this is correct, then we might well worry (at least from time to time) that our lives are absurd. And such worries might well cause us some amount of existential angst.

- Another way of putting this point might be that we can’t be certain that our lives have meaning. And so we can’t be certain that they are not absurd. And perhaps that is worrisome?