

# The Absurd

Fundamentally Correct?



# Bad Reasons

- \* There are two oft-cited but bad reasons to think that life is absurd:
- \* The universe is big; we are little.
- \* Chains of justification leave off with death; so, there is no ultimate justification.



# Big and Little

1. Nothing I do or say today will matter in one million years.
2. If (1), then nothing I do or say matters today.
3. So, nothing I do or say matters today.
4. If (3), life is absurd.
5. So, life is absurd.



# Feeling Blue?

1. Nothing I wear today will be blue one million years.
2. If (1), then nothing I wear today is blue.
3. So, nothing I wear today is blue
4. If (3), life is absurd.
5. So, life is absurd.



# A Problem

- \* (3) is obviously false in the case of the the attribute *being blue*. So, something is amiss.
- \* The problem is (2).
- \* Compare the attribute: *matters to someone*.
  - \* We cannot conclude that something does not matter now from its not mattering in a million years.
  - \* Indeed, if it matters now, then it will be true in a million years that it mattered now—and this even if it does not matter to anyone then that it mattered now.



# Chains of Inference

\* A chain of inference from the dawn of philosophy (Aristotle, *EN* 1094a17-21):

1. If there is an end in the sphere of intentional action (a) desired for itself, and (b) such that other things are desired for it, then, unless (c) our actions are end-directed ad infinitum, this end will be the best good (τὰγαθὸν καὶ τὸ ἄριστον).
2. There is some end in the sphere of intentional action which is (a) desired for itself, whilst (b) other things are desired for it.
3. If our actions are end-directed ad infinitum, then all of our intentional actions will be empty and futile (*EN* 1094a20; κενὴν καὶ ματαίαν τὴν ὄρεξιν).
4. It is not the case that all of our actions are empty and futile.
5. So, some end is the best good (τὰγαθὸν καὶ τὸ ἄριστον).
6. So, there is something which is the best good (τὰγαθὸν καὶ τὸ ἄριστον).



# One Glum Thought

- \* You will die. When you die (let us say), your chains of justification come to an end: you are no more.
- \* In such a case, one might think, all to that point was done in vain.
- \* If all was done in vain, then life is absurd.



# Unsatisfactory

- \* This argument misunderstands 'final end':
  - \* An end is not *later in a sequence*, but *prior in justification*.
- \* Perhaps Aristotle was wrong: lots of chains of inference break off.
  - \* I take an aspirin because I have a headache.
    - \* End of story.
- \* Or, if he is right, it does not follow that every justifier must be justified by something outside itself.
  - \* That is what it was (and is) to be a *final end*.



So. . .

- \* ‘The standard arguments for absurdity appear therefore to fail as arguments. Yet I believe they attempt to express something that is difficult to state, but fundamentally correct.’ —*Nagel* (*MQ*, 13)



# How so?

- \* We are in absurd situations when we perceive a 'perspicuous discrepancy between a pretension or aspiration and reality'.  
E.g.
  - \* You complain vehemently about someone's ignoring you over the telephone; you demand an apology for their indifference; you threaten to break it all off if they don't start paying attention to you.
    - \* Waiting for her/his response, you hear: beeeep. You have been speaking to an answering machine all along.
  - \* You fall in love with someone and think they love you too; you have received their kindly attention as an expression of reciprocity; you declare your love.
    - \* They gently tell you that they are gay (and you are not); that they have a partner already; and that they thought you knew that and were simply being friendly.
- \* These are garden-variety moments of absurdity, familiar to us all.
  - \* They are absurd moments *in* life, not the absurdity *of* life.



# Something similar?

- \* Our lives are inevitably, inescapably significant *to us*.
- \* Yet we can, as humans, step outside of ourselves, temporarily, and see the seriousness of our lives as gratuitous.
- \* When we see a child anguished because ice-cream has melted on her wrist, we disvalue the experience; we think it is not really of moment.
- \* We can adopt a similar attitude towards ourselves, and see that *sub specie aeternitatis* we are but little children to our own engrossing concerns.



# A Sort of Absurdity?

- \* We cannot but take our own lives seriously.
- \* We cannot but, occasionally, step outside of ourselves and look at ourselves from the third-person point of view and grow, at least temporarily, sceptical about the seriousness of lives.
- \* These two points of view, from within and without, are jointly unsatisfiable but also individually inescapable.
- \* ‘We see ourselves from outside, and all the contingency and specificity of our aims and pursuits become clear. Yet when we take this view and recognise 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.’ —Nagel (*MQ*, 15)