PHILOSOPHICAL SUICIDE

Byron J. Stoyles

We often judge that death is bad for the person who dies – that my death, for instance, will be bad for me when it occurs. It is not easy, however, to explain, justify, or defend this judgment. As Epicurus argued more than 2000 years ago, death is ‘nothing to us’ because ‘when we exist death is not present, and when death is present we do not exist.’ (*Letter to Menoeceus*, 124–125)

Despite the Epicurean view, common sense leads us to think death is bad for the person who dies for the reason that death deprives that person of any future goods the person could or would have experienced if she hadn’t died. One variation of this argument is captured by Bernard Williams whose view is that death is bad when it deprives us of the opportunity to satisfy categorical desires and life-projects – those desires and projects for the sake of which we want to continue living. Put differently, this is the view that death is bad when it ruins our lives by interrupting what gives those lives meaning.

This view has some intuitive appeal. Indeed, what else could ruin a life to the same extent? Whatever else might interrupt my projects and stand in the way of my desires – tragic accidents, bad luck, failed relationships, whatever – nothing puts an end to my pursuits and nothing thwarts the satisfaction of my desires to the same extent as death puts an end to my pursuits and thwarts my desires. In this contest, death wins by ending *me*.

Despite its intuitive appeal, this view has the odd consequence that we protect ourselves from the harm of death if only we avoid beginning any project that could be interrupted and any desire that might go unsatisfied. Death

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cannot interrupt my projects if I have none. Death cannot thwart the satisfaction of my desires if I have none. More generally, death cannot deprive me of any future goods if I live my life in such a way as to ensure that I have nothing to lose. And, to be sure, I have nothing to lose if I have nothing: no projects, no desires, no interests, no relationships, ... you get the idea. Though I might ensure that death cannot ruin my life in this way, it seems I do so at the expense of what gives my life meaning. In this, it wouldn't be that I cut off my nose to spite my face, but that I destroy my face to spite my nose.

To live this way is to ensure that I have little reason to live at all. Indeed, if I succeed in doing away with all of those projects and desires for the sake of which I desire to continue living, suicide might be the best option available. This would be especially true, on the account I am considering, if my only remaining desire is to die. In this, ending my life would end my boredom while, simultaneously, satisfying my sole remaining desire.

The irony of protecting my interests by killing myself is not lost on me. Suicide is not an option I take seriously as a means to protect myself from a bad death. I am committed to the position that it is more important to live a good life than to be invulnerable to death's harm. Taking this position as my starting point, my approach in this paper is to consider the meaning of life as something that ends at death rather than to consider the value of death as that which can ruin a life. This approach focuses on what's important: what it means to live a meaningful life. In what follows, I will consider, specifically, two responses to the myth of Sisyphus – one from Albert Camus and one from Thomas Nagel – both of which take our lives to be absurd. Ultimately, I argue for a form of what Camus calls *philosophical suicide* by embracing my categorical desires and life-projects as meaningful even in the absence of proof.

According to the ancient myth, Sisyphus angers the gods and is thus condemned to Tartarus – the lowest of the

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underworlds – with an order to push a large stone boulder to the top of a hill, repeatedly, for all of eternity. Sisyphus labours the stone to the summit to watch it roll back down. Sisyphus labours the stone to the summit to watch it roll back down. And again, and again, forever.

The myth of Sisyphus has received attention from philosophers for the reason that it appears to depict a life devoid of meaning. Sisyphus' project is one given to him, not one chosen for its own sake. The project consumes Sisyphus' time and energy. The project is, itself, futile and pointless in so far as it comes to nothing repeatedly. It is troubling, then, when we recognize that our lives might resemble the Sisyphean struggle.

Reflecting on this resemblance, Camus writes,

> Rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, according to the same rhythm... (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 19)

Richard Taylor adds,

> Look at a busy street any day, and observe the throng going hither and thither. To what? Some office or shop, where the same things will be done today as were done yesterday, and are done now so they may be repeated tomorrow. [And, ...] if we think that, unlike Sisyphus, these labours do have a point, that they culminate in something lasting and, independently of our own deep interests in them, very worthwhile, then we simply have not considered the thing closely enough... ('Does Life Have Meaning', 115)

Because Sisyphus is condemned not to die, his project will never end and he is without hope of reprieve. Taylor notes that, if Sisyphus were allowed to die, death 'would at least

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bring this idiotic cycle to a close' (112). Nevertheless, Taylor warns that we shouldn't jump to the conclusion that our life-projects have more meaning just because our lives are not eternal.

> Each man's life... resembles one of Sisyphus' climbs to the summit of his hill, and each day of it one of his steps; the difference is that whereas Sisyphus himself returns to push the stone up again, we leave this to our children. (115)

Though individuals can generate impressive holdings, buildings, businesses, and all manner of things in a lifetime, none of these last for long in the grand cosmic scheme. Holdings are dwindled, buildings crumble, businesses go under. Even in successive generations, our projects tend to be Sisyphean – cities and societies are built only to dissolve. If Taylor is right, each individual life is represented by one of Sisyphus' trips up the hill. As individuals, we contribute to the collective project of stone-rolling and history makes clear that our collective stone-rolling will lead, eventually, to future generations who are left to yet more stone-rolling.

At some point we ask, Why is life worth living? Why do we think our lives have meaning? And, in that conscious awakening, we look more carefully into what it is that makes us want to continue living given that, whatever we do in life, we end up dead. For Camus, the 'beginning' of our project of seeking the 'logic of death' is this consciousness.

Camus begins with the observation that 'in reality there is no experience of death. Properly speaking, nothing has been experienced but what has been lived and made conscious.' (21) Our knowledge, on Camus' account, ends with what we experience. Thus,

> I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that

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> meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms. (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 51)

According to Camus, we desire to be assured that our individual lives have meaning – real, absolute, meaning – and, for this, we desire to understand our lives as a part of a unified, reasonable, meaningful, universe. Most obviously we would be assured that our lives have meaning if they are according to the plan of a benevolent god. Camus is right, however, to note that logic does not lead to this world-view. *Even if* the universe is rational, we cannot grasp its unity; *even if* God does exist, he is provokingly silent.

Camus holds that the absurd man is conscious of both our 'nostalgia for unity' – i.e. our 'appetite for understanding, our nostalgia for the absolute' (38) – and the knowledge that there is no unity and no meaning for us to know. 'The world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart.' (26) The absurd man accepts 'lucid reason noting its limits' (49) and maintains the equilibrium '[b]etween the irrational of the world and the insurgent nostalgia of the absurd' (40). The absurd man does not hope – he has accepted that nostalgia is not to be achieved – nor does he despair, he 'feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world' (31–32). With this, Camus claims, 'we understand Sisyphus as the absurd hero' (108).

From the outside, 'one sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it and push it up a slope a hundred times over' (108). But this is not absurd; from the outside, the absurd man looks no different from the rest of us – on the tram, toiling at work – he differs only in that he is conscience of his plight. There can

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be no absurd outside the human mind according to Camus. It is born of the confrontation between what a man wants – unity and meaning – and what the world offers him – silence. His plight is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious. And, in being conscious, the absurd man, like Sisyphus in the reprieve as he descends the hill, 'contemplates his torment, silences all the idols' (110), and digs in to raise his rock again. 'All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing.' (110) 'Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He, too, concludes that all is well... One must imagine Sisyphus happy.' (111)

It is, of course, misleading to say 'His rock is his thing.' The absurd hero does not assume that value is to be found within 'his thing'. Ultimately, for Camus, it doesn't really matter what our 'thing' is, it only matters that we exist to have a 'thing'. Indeed, continued life is the goal:

> ... if I admit that my freedom has no meaning except in relation to its limited fate, then I must say that what counts is not the best living but the most living... the absurd teaches that all experiences are unimportant and... it urges towards the greatest quantity of experiences. (59–60)

On this account, the only obstacle is premature death. The revolt against death is all we have, the revolt gives life its value. 'A sub-clerk in the post-office is the equal of a conqueror if consciousness is common to them. All experiences are indifferent in this regard.' (66)

The trouble, as I see it, is that few of us can embrace the absurd. The desire for our lives to have meaning is too strong. When we think our lives have meaning we want to continue living. Yet, Camus' logic would have us give up any hope, and any attempt, for nostalgic escape. According to lucid reasoning, it will not do to escape (as he criticized Kierkegaard and others of escaping) by embracing nostalgia. To do so, is to revert to the 'make-belief' or 'spiritual

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adventure' of religious faith. Nothing logically prepares for faith. For this reason, Camus *takes the liberty* of calling the existential attitude 'philosophical suicide' (43) Faith in the divine involves the abandonment of logical reasoning – the leap is without logic. It is 'acceptance at its extreme'. (54)

Nevertheless, philosophical suicide *is* tempting. According to Taylor, we continually invent ways of denying that our lives lack meaning, our 'religions proclaiming a heaven that does not crumble, [our] hymnals and prayer books declaring a significance to life of which our eyes provide no hint whatsoever.' (115) And, when we are not convinced by religion, we conjure up

> earthly ideals such as universal justice and brotherhood... to take their places and give meaning to man's seemingly endless pilgrimage, some final state that will be ushered in when the last obstacle is removed and the last stone pushed to the hilltop.' (116)

Camus, however, does not allow us to escape – at least, he does not allow the absurd hero to escape – for logic demands that we embrace the absurd.

Nagel accepts many aspects of Camus' view. With Camus, Nagel thinks there is an absurdity to human life. And, with Camus, Nagel thinks the absurdity arises from our consciousness – from our ability to reflect on the meaning and significance of what we do and of the lives we live. What's more, with Camus, Nagel thinks the absurd arises only within humans. Nevertheless, Nagel does not accept Camus' characterization of the absurdity of our lives. Nagel's view is that Camus errs in tying the absurd to features of the universe. As Nagel says, 'Camus maintains... that the absurd arises because the world fails to meet our demands for meaning. This suggests that the world might satisfy those demands if it were different.' ('The Absund', 17) But this, Nagel asserts, is the wrong way to think.

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> There does not appear to be any conceivable world (containing us) about which unsettlable doubts could not arise. Consequently the absurdity of our situation derives not from a collision between our expectations and the world, but from a collision within ourselves. (17)

Nagel maintains that the absurdity of life results from 'the manifestation of our most advanced and interesting characteristics' (23), most notably, the ability to reflect on whether what we are doing is worth while. Upon reflection, we are all too aware of 'the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt.' (13) Despite this, we continue to take our lives seriously. We question and doubt the significance of our life-projects and the value of our lives and, still, we go on to 'ignore the doubts that we know cannot be settled, continuing to live with nearly undiminished seriousness in spite of them' (14). We recognize 'what we do as arbitrary, [and yet we do] not disengage... from life, and there lies our absurdity.' (15)

Part of Nagel's claim is that what we do and what we take seriously in life are arbitrary and open to doubt. His idea is that we can 'step back' from our lives to adopt a point of view that is 'outside the particular form of our lives' or 'detached' from which we ask whether what we are doing is worth while. This point of view is 'broader than we can occupy in the flesh' and allows us to act as 'spectators of our own lives' (20–21). And, it is from this point of view that the seriousness with which we live our lives seems gratuitous.

While Nagel is certainly right to observe that humans have the ability to reflect on the significance of life, his suggestion that our reflections are the result of adopting an outside point of view or a step backward from the constant efforts of life is empty. By stepping back to adopt a point of view outside the particular form of our lives, we also step outside of the framework from which we make judgments about whether our lives are worthwhile.

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Anticipating this objection, Nagel writes,

> It may be objected that the standpoint from which these doubts are supposed to be felt does not exist – that if we take the recommended backward step we will land on thin air, without any basis for judgment about the natural responses we are supposed to be surveying. If we retain our usual standards of what is important, then questions about the significance of what we are doing with our lives will be answerable in the usual way. But if we do not, then those questions can mean nothing to us, since there is no longer any content to the idea of what matters, and hence no content to the idea that nothing does. (17)

Nagel's response is that,

> this objection misconceives the nature of the backward step. It is not supposed to give us an understanding of what is *really* important, so that we see by contrast that our lives are insignificant. We never, in the course of these reflections, abandon the ordinary standards that guide our lives. (17)

The point, as Nagel sees it, is that we view our lives *as though a spectator* – 'with that detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand.' (15) But, since we cannot 'step outside our lives to a new vantage point from which we see what is really, objectively significant' (19), it must be the case that the change in perspective involves viewing our lives as though a spectator *with the same values as the person whose life is being judged.* And, with this, we see how Nagel's response to the myth of Sisyphus and to the sort of objection I am raising, misses the point.

It is a red herring to distinguish between contrasting points of view if what really matters for the judgments we attempt to make – i.e. the value system we employ for

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judging the significance of our life-projects and the meaning of our lives – is the same in both. In acknowledging that we bring along our ordinary values in adopting the broader perspective, Nagel must acknowledge that the change in perspective does not involve an 'outside' step at all. It would be more appropriate, perhaps, to emphasize Nagel's impulse to call the change in perspective a 'backward' step with the double-*entendre* intended.

Putting aside these quibbles, Nagel makes the important observation that the values and meaning we attach to our lives are open to doubt. Whenever I answer the question, Why is my current project significant?, my answer is open to the further question, Why do I think that makes the project significant? And, whenever I answer the question, Why does life have meaning?, it is possible to question why I think my answer is adequate. We can always question our system of justification. This is true even when we assume 'broader ultimate concerns' including when we think of our lives as serving something bigger such as society, revolution, scientific progress, or religion and God. The significance of the larger enterprise and how it is meaningful *to us* can always be questioned.

As Nagel observes, our doubt resembles epistemological scepticism. Just as epistemological scepticism leads us question the reasons for our ordinary beliefs and knowledge claims (Do I really know what I claim to know?), our doubts about the significance of our lives lead us to question our assumptions about why what we are doing matters. In both cases, we tend to put aside our scepticism or doubt when we take off our philosophers' hats and return to everyday life. As David Hume says about epistemological scepticism, 'none but a fool or madman will ever pretend to dispute the authority of experience, or to reject that great guide of human life, [though] it may surely be allowed a philosopher to have so much curiosity...' (*Enquiries*, IV.II.31). As a philosopher, I may question the legitimacy of my knowledge claims, but this won't do ordinarily. As a philosopher, I may question the meaning of my

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life, but this won't do ordinarily. To be motivated to continue living and pursuing my life, I must set aside my doubt. It is perhaps inevitable that we do this. Nagel notices that, after we step back to consider whether our efforts and lives are worth-while, we are unable

> to abandon the natural responses on which [our familiar convictions] depend, [and] we take them back, like a spouse who has run off with someone else and then decided to return; but we regard them differently (not that the new attitude is necessarily inferior to the old, in either case). (20)

Nagel adds to this that, when we continue to pursue our lives seriously, 'our seriousness is laced with irony' (20). Since we have no means of conceiving of a reality outside of our ordinary responses, there is always an incongruence between the manner in which we can doubt our reasons for taking life seriously and our persistent habit of taking life seriously. And, in this respect, Nagel's view maps onto Camus'. Whether it is because we can ask questions about, and doubt, our reasons for taking life seriously or whether it is because we do not find in the universe any absolute, rational, meaning, the absurdity arises only because we are conscious. The absurdity arises only because we can ask, What gives life meaning? While Camus would have us believe that the absurd is that which is born of the confrontation between our desire for meaning and the silence of the universe, Nagel would have us believe that the absurd is taking our lives seriously even while being in doubt about whether we should. On both accounts, the absurdity is tied to our inability to understand what makes life worth living.

Camus would criticize Nagel on the grounds that Nagel finds absurd the return to seriousness in the face of our doubt. That, on Camus' account, would amount to *ignoring* the absurd. According to Camus, '[b]elief in the meaning of life always implies a scale of values, a choice, or

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preferences. Belief in the absurd, ... teaches the contrary.' (59) What Nagel calls the absurd, then, reflects another form of philosophical suicide – an escape on par with what Camus identifies as the existentialists' leap of faith. Nevertheless, it seems an escape of this sort – a leap to find meaning in our lives – is required if we are to go on pursuing these lives. I, for one, cannot conceive of living as an absurd hero; my want for meaning is too great. With this, I think there is something to maintaining the categorical desires and life-projects for the sake of which I desire continued life. Though my carrying on as though these desires and projects really give my life meaning may amount to philosophical suicide, it keeps me from contemplating the other form of suicide - not because I am worried about how death can ruin my life, but because of my want to continue living.

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