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IS THAT ALL THERE IS?

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ABSTRACT. I take issue with two suggestions of Joel Feinberg's: first, that it is incoherent to suppose that human life as such is absurd, and, second, that a particular human life may be absurd and yet saved from being tragic by being fulfilled. I also argue that human life as such may well be absurd and I consider various responses to this.

KEY WORDS: absurd, absurdity, Albert Camus, Joel Feinberg, fulfillment, God, Godot, good, good for, justification, Thomas Nagel, pointless, pointlessness, self-fulfillment, Sisyphus, tragedy, tragic, value, worth

As a child growing up in Australia I had the great benefit of attending Glen Waverley High School. On the surface the school was unremarkable: a typical state high school in an aspiring suburb of Melbourne at the end of the train line some thirteen miles from the CBD. But even at the time I had the sense that the members of the teaching staff were special, and, as it turned out, they were. Humphrey McQueen, my history teacher, went on to become one of Australia's leading public intellectuals; John Scott, my English teacher, went on to become a prize-winning Australian novelist; and Denis Taffe, my French teacher, went on to become a legend in the world of Modern Language teaching in Australia: when he died just recently he was given a half page obituary in Australia's only national newspaper.

Mr. Taffe did not just introduce us to the French language, he introduced us to the whole culture of France in the 1960s: the world of Françoise Hardy, of Catherine Deneuve, of Jean-Paul Belmondo, and of the French existentialists. We spent a good part our class time listening to French pop songs and eating French food, and much of our out-of-class time going to see French movies and plays. It is hard to overstate the effect of all of this on an impressionable youth growing up in one of the most relentlessly suburban suburbs of Melbourne. I can still vividly remember attending a performance of *Waiting for Godot* at Melbourne University performed by Le Theatre Français, a French language theatre group. Le Theatre Français

specialised in the theatre of the absurd. I was fifteen and I was hooked. But what exactly was I hooked by?

Waiting for Godot was the first time I really appreciated *dramatic irony*.¹ The audience realises very early on that Godot is not coming, and we suspect that he cannot come. But the two tramps on stage, Estragon and Vladimir, do not, and apparently cannot, bring themselves to believe this. For example, when they try to leave because he has not come they do not get far because they remember that they have to wait for Godot. At another point in the play they resolve to hang themselves if he does not come tomorrow – which we know he will not – but we also know that when the next day comes they will have forgotten what happened the day before, including their resolve to hang themselves if Godot does not come. Moreover, we also know that they cannot both hang themselves. At best one of them could hang himself if he were lifted up by the other so that he could reach the branch of the only tree and tie his belt around it and then around his neck. But this means that the other would be left behind unable to hang himself. Suicide is thus no escape. One of them would be left waiting for Godot.

Waiting for Godot is not merely an example of dramatic irony, however. For the audience doesn't just know something that Estragon and Vladimir do not know, and what we know doesn't just make for incongruity, it makes for tragedy. Estragon and Vladimir are consumed by an utterly pointless activity, an activity whose pointlessness they seem destined never to appreciate fully. Worse still, we know, but they plainly do not, that even if they did come to appreciate the pointlessness of their activity this would not provide them with the wherewithal to do anything about it. They are therefore trapped, condemned to living utterly pointless lives. At the age of fifteen these ideas, and the obvious suggestion that, at some level of abstraction, we are all just like Estragon and Vladimir, and our circumstances are just like theirs too, were completely seductive. But that created a kind of dissonance.

On the one hand there was the pessimistic conclusion that human life as such is utterly pointless and tragic. But on the other hand there was Françoise Hardy and all of those swinging 1960s French pop songs; there was Catherine Deneuve, Jean-Paul

¹ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1997). Dramatic irony is "incongruity between a situation developed in a drama and the accompanying words or actions that is understood by the audience but not by the characters in the play" (*Merriam Webster Online Dictionary*, <http://www.m-w.com/home.htm>).

Belmondo, and those atmospheric French movies; there were the thought-provoking plays and the enthralling performances of them by Le Theatre Français; not to mention the delicious French food. Life seemed to hold out the prospect of so much that was good: so good, and yet all so totally pointless and tragic? Worse still, a crucial feature that contributes to the absurdity of Estragon's and Vladimir's lives is their radically false beliefs about the real nature of their circumstances. Yet had Beckett not done us the great favour of making us stare down the real nature of our circumstances, and, by doing so, had he not ensured that our lives, at any rate, could not be pointless in the same way that Estragon's and Vladimir's lives are pointless? Had he not liberated us from the absurdity of our situation?

Like a typical adolescent, I suppressed the dissonance. I talked the talk of the pointlessness and tragedy of human existence while walking the walk of someone who had a very vivid sense of what is good and what is bad in the way of a life to lead. In my own mind I was already on the Left Bank sitting at a cafe with my coffee, my guitar, my copy of Beckett, looking like Jean-Paul Belmondo, and talking with my beautiful French girlfriend about a movie about...a movie about the utter pointlessness and tragedy of human existence, what else?! Though the contradiction came to seem palpable to me later on, I managed to ignore it and project a surly aura of doom and gloom.

In subsequent years I would flip-flop. Sometimes pessimism would take over. Not even the Left Bank would hold any attraction. I would become convinced, not just intellectually but also viscerally, that human life as such was pointless and tragic and that this did not depend in any way on our having false beliefs about our circumstances. Other times I would be more upbeat. It would seem as plain as the nose on my face that certain human lives, my own for one, especially my life with my wife and children, were wonderful. It was of course unfair that some people got to lead good lives like ours whereas others did not, but that looked like a problem requiring a political solution, not a philosophical critique. Human life as such was not either pointless or tragic, rather human beings were all too often horrible to each other and they could and should do better.

Joel Feinberg, who addresses these issues in his splendid paper "Absurd Self-fulfillment," would I am sure agree with this last claim.²

² Joel Feinberg, *Freedom and Fulfillment: Philosophical Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 297-330.

But in his view the others are all deeply mistaken. For one thing, Feinberg thinks that it is simply wrong to suppose that human life as such is pointless. Thoughts of the cosmic absurdity of human life, even highly articulated thoughts of the kind expressed by Thomas Nagel in his foray into this topic, "The Absurd," are dubiously coherent.³ To this extent, Feinberg holds that adolescent thoughts of the absurdity of human life as such rest on a mistake, as do the more pessimistic thoughts I went on to have in later life. For another, Feinberg thinks that the adolescent dissonance I experienced is an illusion too. Even if a particular human life is pointless or absurd, he argues that that person's life may yet be fulfilling, and that this fact about their life would suffice to make it good for them notwithstanding the fact that their life is pointless and absurd. There is, he insists, no contradiction here.

If Feinberg is right, then my adolescent reactions to *Waiting for Godot* were multiply mistaken. *Waiting for Godot* simply portrays an extreme case. Nothing that Estragon and Vladimir do achieves anything worthwhile and nothing that they do is fulfilling either. Moreover their circumstances seem to prevent them from ever realizing that this is so. This is indeed tragic. They lead lives that are both pointless and unfulfilled. But the existence of the extreme case should not make us think that every case is relevantly similar to the extreme. Not all of us are engaged in activity that is pointless – it simply is not true that we are all, in our own way, doing something as pointless as waiting for Godot – and, even in those cases in which some of us are, we might find engaging in that pointless activity fulfilling in its own right, notwithstanding the fact that it is pointless. This would be *absurd self-fulfillment*: thus the title of Feinberg's essay. Cases of absurd self-fulfillment are not tragic because the fulfillment saves them from being tragic despite their absurdity.

This is an attractive picture, but I have to confess that I remain unconvinced by it. In what follows I want to take issue with both Feinberg's suggestion that a human life may be pointless and yet saved from tragedy by being fulfilled and his suggestion that it is incoherent to suppose that human life as such is absurd. My paper is in five main sections. In the first section I clarify what it means to say that a human life is absurd. In the second section I take issue with

³ Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 11–23.

Feinberg's suggestion that a human life may be pointless and yet saved from tragedy by being fulfilled. In the third section I take issue with his suggestion that it is incoherent to suppose that human life as such is absurd. In the fourth section I consider the possibility that human life as such is absurd and argue that it may well be. This raises an interesting practical question that I take up in the fifth and final section: how are we to respond to the absurdity of human life as such?

1. WHAT MAKES A HUMAN LIFE ABSURD?

As I understand it, Feinberg is guided by two main ideas when he attempts to clarify what makes a human life absurd.⁴ The first is that something is absurd or pointless when it is in some way irrational or incongruous. The second is that the basic cases of absurdity are activities and attitudes, and that the absurdity of a life is built up out of the absurdity of the various activities and attitudes of the individual whose life it is. Let me say a little about each of these.

Absurd activities are epitomised by the actions of poor Sisyphus who is condemned by the gods to roll a rock up a hill, and if it rolls down the other side, as it always will, to roll it back up again, and so on, and so on, forever and ever.⁵ Here the activity is absurd because incongruous with the valuable ways the world could be. There is no relationship between what Sisyphus does and anything that has value: Sisyphus brings about nothing of intrinsic worth. Absurd attitudes are epitomised by beliefs that are arrived at on the basis of clearly fallacious reasoning.⁶ Here it is the attitude of belief that is absurd because incongruous, in this case with other attitudes. There is no justificatory relationship between the derived belief and the beliefs from which it was derived.

There are, however, are all sorts of variations on these themes. Feinberg sums these up as follows.

[P]urposeful activities can be placed on a spectrum of absurdity. At the one extreme are intrinsically worthless activities that are engaged in even though they have no vindicating purpose beyond themselves. These activities are totally pointless. Then come burdensome or disliked activities engaged in only because they

⁴ Feinberg, *Freedom and Fulfillment*, pp. 299–315.

⁵ The classic discussion is Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, Justin O'Brien (trans.) (New York: Random House, 1955).

⁶ Feinberg, *Freedom and Fulfillment*, p. 300.

are expected to produce some minor advantage for which the instrumental labors are massively disproportionate. These are absurdly trivial activities. They too constitute a whole section of the spectrum, becoming less and less absurd as their achieved goals reduce the disproportion of their means. Then come the inherently burdensome activities that do have a clearly vindicating purpose but are ill-designed to achieve them. These are absurdly futile activities when it would be plainly evident to an observer that they are hopelessly inefficacious. If there is a chance of success, then the activity may be reasonable, hence unabsurd, even though in fact the vindicating objective is never achieved. To these absurdities, explained in terms of means-ends disproportion, we must add Nagel's favorite types of absurdity, which are explained in terms of other poor fits, especially the failure of pretensions and aspirations to fit objective facts.⁷

I will say a little about Nagel's favourite types of absurdity presently. For the time being, however, they are well illustrated by a description Feinberg gives of a *New Yorker* cartoon:

Two small figures, recognizable as a well-dressed middle class couple, are on the patio of their suburban home, while above them a full moon and vast panoply of stars glimmer and sparkle. The discrepancy between the human beings' inevitably extravagant sense of self-importance and their actual tiny role in the whole picture is indicated by the little man's comment to his little wife: "Why, no! Why should I feel small? I've just been put in charge of the whole Eastern region."⁸

What is absurd here is the man's inflated view of his role in the greater scheme of things. The problem is not so much that he is mistaken, as that the mistake is one of which he ought to be aware. The evidence is literally staring him in the face. If there were no such evidence, then this would reduce our sense of the absurdity of his attitudes. The inflated sense of self-importance of the only child whose parents have made him think that he is the centre of the universe, for example, is less absurd. To the extent that it is absurd at all, its absurdity consists merely in its being false that the child is the centre of the universe. There is still incongruity, this time a ridiculous gap between belief and fact, but there is less incongruity than there is in the case in which an attitude is not just mistaken, but culpably mistaken.

With this account of the absurdity of activities and attitudes in place, we can give an account of the absurdity of a life. To repeat, Feinberg holds that the absurdity of any particular human life is a function of the absurdity of the activities and attitudes of the person whose life it is. Consider two people whose activities and attitudes –

⁷ Feinberg, *Freedom and Fulfillment*, pp. 304–305.

⁸ Feinberg, *Freedom and Fulfillment*, pp. 301–302 quoting a cartoon by Handelsman in *New Yorker* (6 July 1981), p. 34.

not just their bodily movements, but also the sequencing of their bodily movements and what they bring about, and not just the nature and the content of their attitudes, but also the relations between them and their truth values – are identical in every respect. There would seem to be conceptual confusion involved in supposing that one of these people is leading an absurd life while the other is not. But if this is right then the absurdity of an individual's life is not an extra fact over and above the absurdity of that life's component activities and attitudes.

We are already in a position to draw some tentative conclusions. The absurdity of a life is a function of the absurdity of that life's component activities and attitudes, where their absurdity, in turn, consist in "means-ends disproportion" and "other poor fits" among attitudes and between pretensions and aspirations and objective facts. These are *contrastive* notions: they contrast defective cases with more favourable cases. Though we have so far focussed on the less favourable cases, it is therefore equally true that there are favourable cases in which means and ends are in proportion and there are good fits among attitudes and between attitudes and objective facts. Since the absurdity of a life is a function of the absurdity of that life's component activities and attitudes, it follows that the lives of those who exclusively engage in activities and have attitudes of the favourable kind are not absurd. It thus seems to follow directly from the account of what it is for an individual life to be absurd that human life could not be absurd as such. The class of possible humans who exclusively engage in activities and have attitudes of the favourable kind is not empty. We will return to this below.

The second tentative conclusion concerns the extent to which any of us should be worried by the possibility that our lives are totally absurd or pointless. Feinberg's account of what it is for a human life to be absurd suggests that lives might be more or less absurd. Means-end disproportion, poor fits among attitudes, and poor fits between attitudes and objective facts are, after all, matters of degree. Though Feinberg is not explicit about this, it seems to follow that the bar has been raised very high on what is to count as a *totally absurd* or *pointless* human life. A totally absurd or pointless human life would have to be a life in which the component activities and attitudes are one and all totally absurd. These would have to be lives that display maximal means-end disproportion and in which there is a maximally poor fit among attitudes and between attitudes and objective facts. Perhaps there are such lives, but if there are then the people leading

them are almost certainly in a psychiatric institution or in some other form of care. A totally absurd or pointless human life would seem to require illusion and irrationality on a grand scale.

This is not to deny that each of us can entertain the sceptical hypothesis that we are irrational on that grand scale. Perhaps someone whose experiences are exactly like those we are having right here and now is not thinking thoughts at all: their heads – and hence our heads – are full of incoherent nonsense. But those who normally contemplate the possibility that their life is totally absurd, adolescents who are affected in the way I was by a performance of *Waiting for Godot* for example, are not usually considering this sort of sceptical hypothesis. It therefore follows that, notwithstanding their rhetoric, they are not really worried by the possibility that their lives are *totally* absurd or pointless. Ordinarily talk of leading a pointless life is therefore simply a loose way of talking. What really worries most of us is the possibility that our lives are even more absurd than some imaginable alternative that is already significantly absurd, or that our lives fail to achieve anything important. So, at any rate, Feinberg's account of what it is for a life to be absurd would seem to suggest.

2. CAN A POINTLESS HUMAN LIFE BE SAVED FROM BEING TRAGIC BY BEING FULFILLED?

Let us now consider Feinberg's bold suggestion that a pointless human life can be saved from being tragic by being fulfilled. The suggestion is an interesting one because it looks like it dissolves adolescent dissonance. There is no contradiction in supposing both that human life is pointless and that (say) the time I spent contemplating the ideas to which I had been introduced by Mr. Taffe, or the time I spent with my wife and children, was time well spent. There is no contradiction because lives can be both pointless and yet fulfilled. Moreover, according to Feinberg, the possibility of fulfillment redeems a pointless life. Cases of absurd self-fulfillment are not tragic.

As I said, this is a bold suggestion, but its plausibility depends on what precisely Feinberg means by "fulfillment." He tells us that fulfillment is a matter of an individual's having and exercising the capacities that are centrally involved in her being the individual that she is.⁹ Importantly, however, since he wants to allow that the

⁹ Feinberg, *Freedom and Fulfillment*, p. 319.

individual's life may be fulfilled and yet absurd, he places no restriction on what these are capacities to do. They can be capacities to do literally anything: it is no part of the concept of fulfillment, as he understands it, that these are capacities to bring about something of value.

An example of such a capacity at the generic level is an adult salmon's biologically given capacity to swim upstream and mate. In this case the end at which the adult salmon's activity aims is not, or anyway need not be, valuable, it is simply the end with which it was endowed by nature. But Feinberg shies away from the suggestion that human fulfillment is similarly driven by generic biologically endowed capacities.¹⁰ For though humans do have such capacities, there are also individual differences in the capacities that are centrally involved in humans being the individual humans that they are. These are dispositions to think and act that we associate with individuals having their distinctive talents and enthusiasms. It is the exercise of these capacities for thought and action that constitutes an individual's fulfillment – so, at any rate, Feinberg suggests. It is the exercise of these capacities that Feinberg thinks can save a pointless human life from being tragic.

We can now see why it is so important to emphasise that ordinary thoughts about the pointlessness of human life are not generally concerned with the possibility that life is totally pointless or absurd. For Feinberg's suggestion that a pointless human life may yet be fulfilled simply cannot be interpreted as a claim about a totally pointless life. By his own criterion, a totally pointless human life would have to be one in which there is a maximally poor fit between the individuals' attitudes and their actions. But such a life could not possibly be fulfilled in Feinberg's sense because any individual whose life is fulfilled in his sense will be an individual in whom there is a good fit between at least many of their attitudes and their actions. At the very least there will be a good fit between their individual capacities and their actions.

At certain points Feinberg shows an awareness of this. "A fulfilled life," he tells us, "may be absurd (pointless in...[a]...sense), yet not truly pointless because fulfillment *is* its point."¹¹ More precisely, then, Feinberg's view has to be that a fulfilled life is a life that may yet be *otherwise* absurd or pointless. The only good fits to be found may be those between individual capacities and actions. This means that

¹⁰ Feinberg, *Freedom and Fulfillment*, pp. 309–310.

¹¹ Feinberg, *Freedom and Fulfillment*, p. 315.

his suggestion is not really quite as bold as it initially seemed. By his own criterion there can be no cases of *totally absurd self-fulfillment*; there can only cases of *otherwise absurd self-fulfillment*. Even so, his suggestion is still bold because, as we have seen, when an individual exercises her individual capacities for thought and action that make her the individual that she is we need not assume that this contributes anything of value to her life. In the terms in which we put it earlier, leading a fulfilled life need not ensure that her life achieves anything important. Since this is exactly what we supposed adolescent thoughts about the pointlessness of human life typically amount to, it looks like Feinberg might still have a way of dissolving adolescent dissonance.

The issue to be addressed is therefore whether leading a life that is fulfilled in the sense specified by Feinberg, where this is now understood to be a life which produces nothing of value, could prevent that life from being tragic. Does fulfillment redeem an otherwise pointless life? Unfortunately, however, when we have a closer look at the argument Feinberg actually gives for this conclusion what we discover is that he thinks that fulfillment, understood in the way in which he understands it, is what makes an individual's life *good for her*. He says of the salmon, for example:

An adult salmon who has grown to maximum size and strength in the ocean, and is ready to begin his dangerous dash upstream to mating waters, is about to savour salmon existence in its purity, the salmon equivalent of "living to the hilt." "This is what being a salmon is all about," he might declare joyously. He will get battered about in the process, but if he could reason he might well conclude that the risk of injuries is justified by the inherent rewards, and like an adolescent football player preparing for his first game, he would be alive with anticipatory excitement.¹²

Talk of "living to the hilt" and "inherent rewards" here looks like it has to be understood in evaluative terms. This is what a good life for a salmon consists in.

Similarly, Feinberg proposes that the good of individual humans consists in the extent to which they are fulfilled in the sense he specifies. In other words, it consists in the extent to which that they have and exercise their individual human capacities for thought and action. He realises full well that there are other candidates for what a person's good consists in, and he admits that he does not know how to demonstrate their deficiencies:

It is perhaps not quite self-evident that my good consists in fulfillment. A hedonist might hold out for the position that my good consists in a balance of pleasant

¹² Feinberg, *Freedom and Fulfillment*, p. 315.

over unpleasant experiences while denying that the basic disposition of my nature is to seek pleasure. I cannot refute such a heroic (and lonely) philosopher.¹³

But since this is not an area in which demonstrations are to be had this does not worry him. Instead he tries to convince us of his proposal by describing various cases in the hope that we will agree.

One such case is a variation on the Sisyphus story:

Suppose...that the gods assign to Sisyphus an endless series of rather complex engineering problems and leave it up to him to solve them. Somehow the rocks must be moved to mountain tops and there can be no excuses for failure. "Get it up there somehow," they say. "The methods are up to you. Feel free to experiment and invent. Keep a record of your intermediate successes and failures and be prepared to give us an accounting of the costs. You may hire your own assistants and within certain well-defined limits you have authority to give them commands, so long as you are prepared to answer for the consequences of their work. Now good luck to you." If Sisyphus's subsequent labours are fulfilling, they will be so in a characteristically human way. His individual nature will be fulfilled by a life (endless and pointless though it may be) that fits his native bent and employs his inherited talents and dispositions to the fullest, as well as fitting his more specific individual tendencies, for example, a special fascination (perhaps also a gift from the gods) with rocks.¹⁴

Sisyphus' life might still be on balance unpleasant. But it would be a good life for Sisyphus none the less. So, at any rate, Feinberg argues. Moreover, Feinberg thinks that the fact that this is a good life for Sisyphus saves it from being tragic. There is, after all, nothing tragic about an individual's leading a life that is good for him even if it is otherwise pointless.

This, in turn, is what dissolves adolescent dissonance. There is no contradiction involved in supposing both that human life is pointless and that (say) the time I spent contemplating the ideas to which I had been introduced by Mr. Taffe, or the time I spent with my wife and children, was time well spent. There is no contradiction because it amounts to no more than a recognition of the fact that the source of my fulfillment lies in the contemplation of such ideas, or in spending time with my wife and children, a recognition that is perfectly consistent with supposing that my life is pointless. As is I hope now clear, however, to the extent that Feinberg really does think that a life of fulfillment is a life that is good for the individual whose life it is he thereby seems to contradict the premise of his entire argument.

¹³ Feinberg, *Freedom and Fulfillment*, p. 325.

¹⁴ Feinberg, *Freedom and Fulfillment*, p. 323.

Feinberg's aim, remember, is to show that an absurd or pointless human life may yet not be tragic because it is fulfilled, so the premise of his argument has to be that the life is indeed pointless, where this is construed as meaning that it is a life that achieves nothing important. But it turns out that what is supposed to redeem such a life is the fact that it may be fulfilled, where a fulfilled life does achieve something important, namely, the person's own good. This is a straightforward contradiction, given that a person's own good is something important.

Is Feinberg really committed to this contradiction? Might he instead suppose that a life can be saved from being tragic by the mere fact of its being fulfilled in his sense, even if its being fulfilled in that sense is not important? In other words, might he be thinking that his talk of an individual's good need not be interpreted in evaluative terms? Feinberg in fact addresses the question whether the concept of an individual's good to which he appeals is properly interpreted as an evaluative concept or not in a crucial passage. Here is what he writes:

There is a world of difference between the use of the word "good" as a predicate of evaluation, and its use in the venerable phrase of the philosophers – "one's own good." My good is something peculiarly mine, as determined by my nature alone, and particularly by its own most powerful trends and currents. Anything else that is good for me (or in my interest) is good because it contributes to my good, the fulfillment of my strongest stable tendencies. One can judge or evaluate that good from some other standpoint, employing some other standard, and the resultant judgement may use the words "good," "bad," or "indifferent." It may not be a good thing that my good be achieved or that it be achieved in a given way, or at a given cost. But it is logically irrelevant to the question of *what my good is* whether my good is itself "good" when judged from an external position. My nonfulfillment may not be a "bad thing on balance" in another's judgement or even in my own. My nonfulfillment may not be "objectively regrettable" or tragic. But my nonfulfillment cannot be my good even if it is from all other measuring points, a good thing.¹⁵

Unfortunately, however, the crucial passage turns out to be damning rather than helpful. For Feinberg seems to state both that when we talk of something's being good for someone we are not evaluating that thing and that we are evaluating it.

Feinberg explicitly argues that when we talk of something's being good for someone we are not evaluating it in the first sentence: "There is a world of difference between the use of the word 'good' as a predicate of evaluation, and its use in the venerable phrase of the philosophers – 'one's own good'." So when we use the word "good" in the phrase "one's own good," he thinks that we are not using it as a

¹⁵ Feinberg, *Freedom and Fulfillment*, p. 325.

predicate of evaluation. But then he more or less immediately goes on to imply that we are evaluating it a couple of sentences later: "One can judge or evaluate...[the thing that is good for me]...from some other standpoint, employing some other standard, and the resultant judgement may use the words 'good,' 'bad,' or 'indifferent'." The implication here is that when we talk of something's being good for someone we are evaluating it, albeit from a distinctive standpoint, or by employing a distinctive standard, namely, that person's own. It therefore seems that Feinberg really is committed to the contradiction.

Let us leave what Feinberg states explicitly to one side, for the moment. Let us ask instead whether the best reconstruction of his argument takes the concept of an individual's own good to be an evaluative concept or a non-evaluative concept. Unfortunately, however, it turns out that there is no good answer to this question. Feinberg's argument really does need to have it both ways. Focus on the fact that he wants fulfillment to prevent a pointless human life from being *tragic*. In that case he had better suppose that fulfillment is that in virtue of which an individual has what is good for her where this is an evaluation of her life. After all, if an individual achieves what is good for her, but that is not an evaluative fact about her life, then for all we know her achievement of her good might be bad for her, and so be part of what *makes* her life tragic. We must therefore resolve the contradiction in favour of supposing that the concept of something's being good for an individual is an evaluative concept.

Read in this way, the argument in the crucial passage just discussed is best understood as a reminder that the mere fact that fulfillment is not good in impersonal terms does not mean that it is not good at all: its not possessing impersonal value is consistent with its possessing agent-centred value. But if this is Feinberg's argument then it is a million miles away from the bold suggestion that was advertised at the outset. Indeed, his entire discussion of fulfillment in terms of a match between an individual's distinctive capacities and her actions is irrelevant. Given that what it is about the exercise of such distinctive capacities that saves an individual's life from being tragic is the fact that she thereby achieves something of value, albeit something of agent-centred value, it follows that *anything* that provides an individual's life with agent-centred value would suffice to save it from being tragic. His own account of an individual's good in terms of fulfillment is neither nor there. All that matters is that some such story can be told.

But now focus on the fact that fulfillment has to prevent a *pointless* human life from being tragic. In that case fulfillment had better be that in

virtue of which an individual's life is good for her, where the fact that an individual has what is good for her is a non-evaluative fact about her life. After all, if fulfillment makes the individual's life good for her, where this is an evaluative fact about her life – whether impersonal or agent-centred – then her life achieves something of value, namely, her own fulfillment. Such a life is therefore not pointless in the crucial sense of achieving nothing important that we identified earlier. We must therefore resolve the contradiction in favour of supposing that the concept of something's being good for an individual is a non-evaluative concept.

Read in this way Feinberg's particular theory of fulfillment turns out to be absolutely crucial. He really is trying to argue that an individual's being fulfilled in the sense he stipulates could save their life from being tragic independently of the value of their fulfillment; that is, quite independently of whether or not a person's fulfillment in the sense he stipulates is good for that person where this is understood in evaluative terms. But once we fully appreciate this it seems to me to be just very hard to believe that that kind of fulfillment could prevent an individual's life from being tragic. This is somewhat obscured in Feinberg's own discussion because he chooses to focus on cases of fulfillment that do contribute to the individual's own good where this is understood in evaluative terms. But what we need to do to test the argument, read in this way, is instead to focus on cases of fulfillment that plainly contribute nothing of value.

Consider another excellent example of dramatic irony, Randy Newman's "God's Song (That's Why I Love Mankind)."¹⁶

Cain slew Abel Seth knew not why
For if the children of Israel were to multiply
Why must any of the children die?
So he asked the Lord
And the Lord said:

"Man means nothing he means less to me
Than the lowliest cactus flower or the humblest yucca tree
He chases round this desert cause he thinks that's where I'll be
That's why I love mankind

I recoil in horror from the foulness of thee
From the squalor and the filth and the misery
How we laugh up here in heaven at the prayers you offer me
That's why I love mankind"

¹⁶ This is another example of dramatic irony because the Lord's answers to the prayers that are offered, audible to those of us who hear the song, are clearly not supposed to be audible to those depicted in the song as doing the praying.

The Christians and the Jews were having a jamboree
 The Buddhists and the Hindus joined on satellite TV
 They picked their four greatest priests
 And they began to speak
 They said "Lord the plague is on the world

Lord no man is free
 The temples that we built to you have tumbled into the sea
 Lord, if you won't take care of us
 Won't you please please let us be?"
 And the Lord said
 And the Lord said

"I burn down your cities—how blind you must be
 I take from you your children and you say how blessed are we
 You must all be crazy to put your faith in me
 That's why I love mankind
 You really need me
 That's why I love mankind."¹⁷

As portrayed by Newman, those who have religious faith—Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus alike – all have a distinctive disposition or tendency to find ever new ways to commune with God in the hope of finding favour with him. This is what their Feinbergian fulfillment consists in. To this end they exercise all of their ingenuity: they look for God in the desert, they build temples in his honour, and, most importantly, they pray. Given that, unbeknown to them, they mean nothing to God, they are of course doomed to fail in much the same way that Feinberg's Sisyphus is doomed to fail in his attempt to get rocks to stay on the top of the hill. But in another sense, much like Feinberg's Sisyphus, they are spectacularly successful. For they stick by their task notwithstanding the apparently insurmountable obstacles God puts in their way. When God takes their children from them they simply say "How blessed are we!" and get on with it. The misery of losing children might cripple most of us, but not them. And when they offer prayers that God does not answer, they are not disheartened. Instead they use all of their technology to get together and offer a new prayer in the hope that this one will be answered. Their devotion to their task and their resourcefulness is truly remarkable, if base and pathetic.

The life led by mankind as depicted in "God's Song" sounds, in crucial respects, exactly like the life led by the Sisyphus Feinberg

¹⁷ Randy Newman, "God's Song (That's Why I Love Mankind)," (1972).

describes whose nature is to look for solutions to engineering problems. Feinberg's Sisyphus exercises his distinctive talents and enthusiasms for finding solutions to engineering problems in the hope of keeping rocks on top of a hill. Those who have religious faith, at least as Newman depicts them, exercise their distinctive talents and enthusiasms for finding ways to commune with God in the hope of finding favour with him. Since Feinberg holds up his Sisyphus as a prime example of someone who leads a life that is fulfilled in his sense, it would seem that he is committed to the conclusion that the life led by mankind as depicted in "God's Song" is equally fulfilled. Since Feinberg thinks that the life of his Sisyphus is redeemed by its being fulfilled in his sense, it would seem that he is committed to the conclusion that the life of mankind as depicted in "God's Song" is redeemed by its being fulfilled in that sense too. But this is a patently false conclusion and "God's Song" makes it abundantly clear just what the difference is between the two cases.

Solving engineering problems is a genuine achievement in its own right quite independently of whether or not those solutions serve the purpose to which they are put. Solving engineering problems thus does not just answer to the talents and enthusiasms of the Sisyphus that Feinberg describes, it makes his life good for him in an evaluative sense. It means that he brings about something important. However, at least as portrayed in "God's Song," coming up with a constant stream of ways to commune with God is not a genuine achievement independently of whether or not there is success. Coming up with ever new ways to commune with God *merely* answers to the talents and enthusiasms of those who have religious faith. It therefore does not succeed in making their lives good for them in an evaluative sense.

Indeed, if anything, Newman's suggestion seems to be that acting on this particular talent is part of what makes the lives of those who have religious faith bad for them. For they are depicted as being so base and pathetic – "How we laugh up here in heaven at the prayers you offer me" – as to be out of touch with what is really important in their own lives – "I recoil in horror from the foulness of thee/From the squalor and the filth and the misery." Far from saving their lives from being tragic, the fulfillment of this particular talent therefore looks to be part of what makes their lives tragic. Their lives would be much better *for them* if they resisted this tendency, for at least they might then have the dignity to focus their attention on what really matters in their lives.

Let me sum up. Feinberg makes the bold suggestion that a pointless human life, where this is a life that achieves nothing important, can be

saved from being tragic by being fulfilled, where fulfillment is a matter of the individual's having and exercising the capacities that are centrally involved in her being the individual that she is. However Feinberg faces a dilemma. On one horn we assume that fulfillment is good for the individual involved, where this is an evaluative fact about her life. But if we conceive of fulfillment in this way then the individual's life cannot be pointless in the crucial sense of bringing about nothing important. On the other horn we assume that even if fulfillment is in some sense good for the individual involved, this is not an evaluative fact about her life. But then it seems that fulfillment is incapable of redeeming such a person's life. Fulfillment, so understood, might be part of what makes the person's life bad for them.

3. IS IT INCOHERENT TO SUPPOSE THAT HUMAN LIFE AS SUCH IS ABSURD

While many philosophers insist that absurdity is a constitutive feature of human life, Feinberg thinks that that idea is dubiously coherent. But is it really incoherent?

On the surface at any rate, Feinberg's account of what it is about a life that makes it absurd does seem to entail at least the possibility of human lives that are nonabsurd. That was the first of the tentative conclusions that we drew earlier. But he also outlines a much more explicit argument for this same conclusion. It is worthwhile considering that explicit argument in some detail because, as we will see, it fails. This is important, because the flaw in the explicit argument enables us to see what was wrong with the argument given for the tentative conclusion earlier.

Feinberg wonders,

What could human existence conceivably be like if it were to escape...absurdity? This is a crucial question that all philosophical pessimists must answer if their sweeping judgements of universal absurdity are to be fully intelligible. For unless we know what contrasting situation is being ruled out we cannot be sure what a given assertion is "including in." Unless we know what would count as nonabsurdity, if there were such a thing, we have nothing to contrast absurdity with. If all conceivable universes are equally and necessarily absurd on their face, so that one cannot even describe what nonabsurd existence would be like, it is not very informative, to put it mildly, to affirm that this our actual universe is absurd. It is a test of the intelligibility of a philosophical doctrine that it succeed in ruling out some contrasting state of affairs.¹⁸

¹⁸ Feinberg, *Freedom and Fulfillment*, p. 306.

This is not to say that Feinberg denies the possibility of individual lives that are absurd. Quite the opposite. He would no doubt agree that the lives led by the two tramps in *Waiting for Godot* are absurd but, he would argue, their lives are a special case. Most humans manage to live lives that are not absurd and pointless in the way that Estragon's and Vladimir's are. Indeed, it is the very possibility of this contrast that enables us to make the judgement that their lives are absurd. We know precisely what is missing from their lives because we see it present in the lives of others.

This argument is very powerful if it works. Let me restate it so as to make the premises more explicit:

The pessimists hold that human life is pointless as such. This amounts to the claim that human lives are necessarily pointless, or, equivalently, that every possible human life is pointless. But if every possible human life is pointless then it follows that no possible human life has a point. And if no possible human life has a point, then leading a human life that has a point is a literally unintelligible aspiration. If we cannot describe a possible human life with a point then there is no content to the idea of living a human life with a point. So, if the aspiration is to be intelligible, it must be at least possible, even if only barely conceptually possible, for a human to live a life that has a point. Assuming, then, that there is content to the idea of living a human life with a point, it follows that human lives are not pointless as such. They are not pointless as such because there are possible human lives that have a point.

As I noted, this argument is potentially very powerful if it works because it succeeds in undermining cosmic pessimism in one fell swoop: human life cannot be absurd as such. Unfortunately, however, the argument does not work. The problem lies in Feinberg's assumption that for an aspiration to be intelligible, the state of affairs that constitutes its content has to be a possible state of affairs. But in the relevant sense of "intelligible," that simply is not true.

Consider the aspiration to know things. Many of us want to know things. Some of us only want to know as much as we need to know; others want to know as much as we can know; and still others want to know as much as anyone could know. But we can certainly imagine people who want to know even more than that. These are people who want to know more than any human being could possibly know. For example, they may want to know all of the physical facts of the universe. Given that human beings can only access a very limited range of the totality of physical facts it follows that this aspiration is impossible for any human being to realise. There is no possible world in which a human being has the capacity to know all

of the physical facts of the universe. In a sense, then, the aspiration is unintelligible. But in another sense it is a perfectly intelligible aspiration. For what such a person wants is precisely not to be limited by his nature as a human being. We are capable of imagining this impossible state of affairs and, having imagined it, we are capable of desiring it.

Indeed, it seems to me that literature is replete with examples of human motivations which have to be understood on this model. For example, this is precisely the kind of motivation that John Milton imagines Satan having.¹⁹ Milton's Satan desires to emulate God: he wants to have and exercise God-like capacities. Given that Milton's Satan does not have and could not have God-like capacities, he is therefore doomed to be frustrated, for what he wants is an impossibility. Milton's Satan's desire is, we might agree, in that sense deeply irrational, and, in a corresponding sense, his desire lacks intelligibility. But this does not make his desire unintelligible in the sense of being a desire that it is impossible to conceive of someone having. For human beings all too often desire, completely irrationally, to transcend their human limitations. Milton's Satan is, in this respect, all too human, which I take to be Milton's point.

Consider another example much closer to our current concerns. The tendency of those who have religious faith to find ways to commune with God is, I take it, all too intelligible. But in the real world, unlike the make-believe world of Newman's "God's Song," one source of anxiety about this tendency that its object may not exist, not just contingently, but necessarily. The very idea of God may, for example, contain some latent incoherence. Suppose just for a moment that this is so. Then in one sense the aspiration to find ways to commune with God is unintelligible. There is no possible world in which people commune with God because the very idea of God is incoherent. But in another perfectly ordinary sense the tendency to find ways to commune with God is completely intelligible. For we know exactly what it is like to be unsure whether something that we claim to be thinking is a coherent thought – this experience is completely intelligible, because incoherence can be opaque – and we therefore know exactly what it is like to seem to have attitudes such as belief and desire with the contents of such thoughts as their contents.

We can now see what was wrong with the argument (given earlier) for the tentative conclusion that human life could not be absurd as

¹⁹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003).

such. The argument, you will recall, was that since the absurdity of a life is a function of the absurdity of that life's component activities and attitudes, and since their absurdity consists in "means-ends disproportion" and "other poor fits" among attitudes and between pretensions and aspirations and objective facts, and since these are *contrastive* notions – that is, since they contrast defective cases with more favourable cases – it follows that there must be at least possible cases in which means-ends are in proportion and there are good fits among attitudes and between pretensions and aspirations and objective facts. But we can now see that this is a *non-sequitur*. Our aspirations may outrun our capacities and our attitudes may not have coherent contents. But if this is a characteristic feature of humans then there are no favourable cases.

In the end, then, it seems to me that we should be unimpressed with Feinberg's explicit argument for the conclusion that human life as such cannot be absurd. But of course that does not yet show that human life as such is absurd. So is it? The two reasons just given for thinking that it is at least not incoherent to suppose human life is absurd as such suggest two quite distinct lines of arguments for supposing that it is.

4. WHY HUMAN LIFE AS SUCH MIGHT WELL BE ABSURD

I said earlier that Feinberg does not spend much time discussing Nagel's favourite cases of absurdity. To repeat, these are cases in which there are poor fits between pretensions and aspirations and objective facts. This is unfortunate because Nagel's cases look like they might well succeed in making absurdity an essential part of human life, especially when combined with Feinberg's own account of what makes a life absurd.

What are Nagel's favourite cases of absurdity? Nagel is impressed by a pervasive feature of our epistemic situation: Our tendency to succumb to scepticism.

Scepticism begins when we include ourselves in the world about which we claim knowledge. We notice that certain types of evidence convince us, that we are content to allow justifications of belief to come to an end at certain points, that we feel we know many things even without knowing or having grounds for believing the denial of others which, if true, would make what we claim to know false.²⁰

²⁰ Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, p. 18.

Nagel's suggestion is thus that, to be justified, our beliefs would have to be arrived at with certainty from premises that are themselves certain. But when we reflect we realise that we are incapable of giving our beliefs this kind of justification. The upshot is that belief itself provides an instance of incongruity between aspiration and objective fact. The demand for a certain kind of justification is the aspiration. The fact that we cannot give our beliefs the sort of justification they demand is the objective fact.

David Hume gives the clearest illustration of the way in which our ordinary justifications fall short of the standard Nagel has in mind in his famous discussion of induction:

From a body of like colour and consistence with bread we expect like nourishment and support. But this surely is a step or progress of the mind, which wants to be explained. When a man says, *I have found, in all past instances, such sensible qualities conjoined with such secret powers*: And when he says, *Similar sensible qualities will always be conjoined with similar secret powers*, he is not guilty of a tautology, nor are these propositions in any respect the same. You say that the one proposition is an inference from the other. But you must confess that the inference is not intuitive; neither is it demonstrative: Of what nature is it then? To say that it is experimental, is begging the question. For all inferences from experience suppose, as their foundation, that the future will resemble the past, and that similar powers will be conjoined with similar qualities. If there be any suspicion that the course of nature may change, and that the past may be no rule for the future, all experience becomes useless, and can give rise to no inference or conclusion... Let the course of things be allowed hitherto ever so regular; that alone, without some new argument or inference, proves not that, for the future, it will continue so. In vain do you pretend to have learned the nature of bodies from your past experience... My practice, you say, refutes my doubts. But you mistake the purport of my question. As an agent, I am quite satisfied in this point; but as a philosopher, who has some share of curiosity, I will not say skepticism, I want to learn the foundation of this inference.²¹

Our beliefs about the future demand a justification. But how could we justify them except by moving with certainty from premises that are not about the future to conclusions that are about the future, something that we cannot do? Hume resists drawing the conclusion that our beliefs are therefore unjustified. Rather he expresses genuine puzzlement. He is radically uncertain whether anything else could justify our beliefs, so he simply does not know whether beliefs about the future are justified or not.

²¹ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), Section 4, Part 2.

Nagel, by contrast, seems happy to draw the bolder conclusion. Nothing short of certain moves from certain premises would justify our beliefs. Moreover, as he notes, there would seem to be no quarantining such scepticism once it takes hold. In particular, such scepticism readily extends to our beliefs about what is and is not important:

Both epistemological scepticism and a sense of the absurd can be reached via initial doubts posed within systems of evidence and justification that we accept, and can be stated without violence to our ordinary concepts. We can ask not only why we should believe there is a floor under us, but also why we should believe the evidence of our senses at all – and at some point the framable questions will have outlasted the answers. Similarly, we can ask not only why we should take aspirin, but why we should take trouble over our own comfort at all.²²

In other words, we can ask not only why something is important, but also why such reasons as we can come up with for supposing them to be important are reasons enough to suppose that they really are important. And here again we discover that we cannot move with certainty from certain premises to our conclusion. Our beliefs about what is important are thus unjustified. In this way, according to Nagel, we see that our sense of the absurd is a special case of epistemological scepticism. It is epistemological scepticism as applied to our beliefs about what is important.

If our sense of the absurdity of our situation depends on our recognition of the fact that we cannot provide our beliefs about what is important with the kind of justification that they demand, then does it follow that individuals who do not realise that their beliefs require such a justification have beliefs that are nonabsurd? The answer is that that does not follow, and the reason why is apparent when we remember Feinberg's reasons for supposing that beliefs arrived at on the basis of clearly fallacious reasoning are a paradigm case of an absurd attitude. These are a paradigm case, Feinberg tells us, because they are incongruous with other attitudes, where the incongruity consists in the fact that there is no justificatory relationship between the derived belief and the beliefs from which it was derived. It is the absence of this justificatory relationship that is crucial, not the individual's recognition of the fact that the justificatory relationship is absent.

²² Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, p. 19.

If Nagel is right, then it follows that incongruity permeates the web of belief. The only pockets of resistance will be those beliefs that are certain. But then, having permeated the web of belief, incongruity will quickly leak out and infect all intentional human action. Human actions are, after all, just bodily movements produced by desires and means-end beliefs. This suggests that for a human action to be nonabsurd these desires and means-end beliefs must themselves be congruent with fact and evidence.²³ Facts about means to ends and facts about what is of value must produce means-end beliefs and evaluative beliefs in a manner conducive to justification and knowledge, evaluative beliefs must produce corresponding desires in a way that rationalises them, desires and means-end beliefs must combine to rationalise bodily movements, and bodily movements must produce desired ends in a manner conducive to intentional conduct. But in that case it immediately follows that no human action lives up to the standard of a paradigmatic nonabsurd action. The actions inherit the absurdity of the beliefs, both means-end beliefs and beliefs about what is important, that produce them. So if (nearly) all human attitudes are absurd for the reasons Nagel gives, and if this entails, for the reasons we have just seen, that all human action is absurd as well, then it follows from Feinberg's own account that all human lives are absurd. For the absurdity of a human life is simply a function of the absurdity of the activities and attitudes of the person whose life it is.

Feinberg does not explicitly consider this line of argument. It is unclear why he does not consider it, but one possibility is that he thought it was not worth considering given that he had already shown to his own satisfaction that human life could not be absurd as such. If forced to respond, however, his response to the argument would presumably be that the claim that our beliefs demand a certain sort of justification is only intelligible if there is a possible world in which our beliefs are justified in that way. Since there is no possible

²³ For a defence of this claim, see Michael Smith, "The Humean Theory of Motivation," *Mind*, 96 (1987), pp. 36–61; "The Possibility of Philosophy of Action" in Jan Bransen and Stefaan Cuypers (eds.), *Human Action, Deliberation and Causation* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), pp. 17–41, reprinted in Michael Smith, *Ethics and the A Priori: Selected Essays on Moral Psychology and Meta-Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and "The Structure of Orthonomy," in John Hyman and Helen Steward (eds.), *Action and Agency* (Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement: 55) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 165–193.

world in which our beliefs have that sort of justification, he would therefore conclude that Nagel has an incoherent conception of what justifies our beliefs. But the problem with this response is much the same as the problem we saw with the similar line of argument we considered earlier.

The idea of a capacity to entertain certain premises and to move with certainty from those premises to conclusions is not itself incoherent. To be sure, human beings do not and perhaps cannot have that capacity with respect to all belief. We are by nature finite and so epistemically limited in our knowledge of contingent matters of fact. But we can readily imagine the impossible state of affairs in which we do have such powers of justification, powers that transcend the limits of our finite human capacities to justify our beliefs. Nagel's suggestion that our beliefs demand nothing less than maintenance by the exercise of just such capacities is thus not unintelligible in any ordinary sense. The fact that it is impossible for human beings to have such capacities is neither here nor there. All that follows from that is that human belief is as such defective. But this is what makes human life as such absurd, not a reason to suppose that it is not absurd. So far, then, it seems that we should side with Nagel against Feinberg: we should suppose that Nagel has given us good reason to suppose that human life as such is absurd.

However I want now to argue that Nagel's argument undermines itself. In the earlier discussion of *Waiting for Godot* I wondered whether it was a mistake for us to interpret Beckett's play as an argument for the cosmic absurdity of life. For Estragon's and Vladimir's radically false beliefs about the real nature of their circumstances look like they contribute crucially to the absurdity of their lives, and the achievement of *Waiting for Godot* seems to lie in its ability to convince us that, at some level of abstraction, our circumstances and Estragon's and Vladimir's are one and the same. But if this is right, then Beckett has done us the great favour of making us stare down the real nature of our circumstances, thereby liberating us from the absurdity of our lives. These same points apply to Nagel's argument in "The Absurd."

There is, after all, such a thing as *suspension of belief*. This is when we neither believe a proposition nor its negation. Moreover suspension of belief is arguably the rational course for a believer who has no justification available for either belief or disbelief. So if we are to conclude on the basis of Nagel's arguments in "The Absurd" that none of our beliefs are justified on the grounds that none (or few) are

certain, including none of our beliefs about what is important, then it seems that there is, after all, a completely rational response to our recognition of that fact: the suspension of all such belief, including the suspension of all beliefs about what is important. But if we suspend all such beliefs then we thereby remove all incongruity, for we no longer have any beliefs that lack justificatory relationships with other beliefs. And if we remove all incongruity then we remove the only source Nagel proposes for the absurdity of our lives. Like Beckett's play, Nagel's observations seem to liberate us.

Surprisingly, Nagel does not really consider this response to his argument, though he comes close in the following passage: "If we tried to rely entirely on reason, and pressed it hard, our lives and beliefs would collapse – a form of madness that may actually occur if the inertial force of taking the world and life for granted is somehow lost. If we lose our grip on that, reason will not give it back to us."²⁴ The proposal we have made is precisely that we should rely on reason for a response to the fact that our beliefs are unjustified. Reason would, after all, seem to favour the suspension of all such beliefs. But Nagel's response to this suggestion would seem to be that if we get rid of all such beliefs, then we go mad. On the one hand, then, we lead absurd lives if we believe without justification. But then on the other we go mad if we get rid of all such beliefs. Either way, our attitudes are therefore absurd.

But this is plainly a fallacious line of reasoning. It may well be true that those who suspend all belief would count as mad by ordinary, everyday, standards. But if so, then this just goes to show that our ordinary, everyday, criterion of madness does not discriminate between people who suspend belief for no good reason – let us grant that they really are mad – and those who suspend belief for excellent reasons. Since those in the latter category are not mad at all, and since recognition of the fact that a belief is unjustified is an excellent reason for suspending belief, it would seem to follow that Nagel is just wrong to suggest that relying on reason by suspending all beliefs that we cannot justify is a genuine form of madness. It is in fact a form of hyperrationality. It may of course be difficult to suspend all belief, but that is not relevant. The mere possibility of doing so undermines Nagel's argument for the cosmic absurdity of life. There are possible human lives that are not absurd.

²⁴ Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, p. 20.

So should we conclude that Feinberg was right after all, albeit for the wrong reason, to suppose that human life is not absurd as such? Not yet, for there remains another line of argument to consider. I argued earlier that a totally absurd or pointless human life would seem to be a life in which there is a maximally poor fit among attitudes and between attitudes and objective facts. Moreover, I noted that though there may well be such lives, if there are then the people leading them are almost certainly in some form of care: that a totally absurd or pointless human life would thus seem to require illusion and irrationality on a grand scale. But this was in fact too swift, for there are two quite distinct ways in which a life could be totally pointless.

If we suppose that the concept of a life's having a point, in the sense of achieving something of value, is coherent, then a life that is totally pointless is the life just described: a life in which there is a maximally poor fit among attitudes and between attitudes and objective facts. Such lives are, let us agree, few and far between. But if we suppose instead that the concept of a life's having a point is incoherent, then it seems that the idea of there being a fit among attitudes and between attitudes and objective facts is itself incoherent. All possible human lives turn out to be pointless because there is no such thing as a point for them to have. This in turn suggests an alternative, and I think much more compelling, reason for supposing that human life is absurd as such. The worry is that our evaluative concepts are incoherent.

Nor should it be thought that this sort of anxiety can be dismissed as trivial or silly. For example, suppose you believe, as John Mackie does, that a thing of a certain kind is of value only if it has an objectively prescriptive property, and suppose you also believe that the arguments for and against the possibility of there being objectively prescriptive properties are strictly philosophical arguments, not empirical: that we figure out on the basis of considerations that are available *a priori*, not *a posteriori*, what it is for a feature to be objective, and what it is for a feature to be prescriptive, and hence whether a feature's being objective is consistent with its being prescriptive.²⁵ If you believe in addition that it is no easy matter to adjudicate these matters, then you may well be uncertain whether evaluative talk is so much as coherent, and if you are uncertain about this then you will be uncertain whether any human life has a point.

²⁵ J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977). See also David Lewis, "Dispositional Theories of Value," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 63, 1989, pp. 113–137, and Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

A human life's having a point is, after all, a matter of its bringing about something of value.

Or suppose you believe, as I do, that a thing of a certain kind is of value only if it is something that people would all desire if they had a maximally informed and coherent and unified desire set, and that what it is for a desire set to be coherent and unified needs to be spelled out in terms of the rational principles that govern desires.²⁶ If in addition you think that the arguments for and against the claim that some candidate principle is such a rational principle, though *a priori*, may yet be completely unobvious, then it may once again be completely unobvious whether anything is of value or not.²⁷ Moreover, if nothing is of value then it seems that will be because nothing could be of value: it will be *a priori*, though not obviously so, that there is nothing that we would all converge upon a desire for if we had a maximally informed and coherent and unified desire set. The very idea that something is of value may once again be incoherent.

To my mind this is a much more troubling reason for supposing that human life is absurd as such. For though we seem to have all sorts of evaluative beliefs, and though we therefore seem to think of ourselves as bringing about valuable outcomes, the worry is that these beliefs are one and all false because incoherent. The point is not that our beliefs *are* incoherent – if we were certain of that to be so we would give them up – but rather that we cannot say one way or the other. Nor does suspension of belief have much to recommend it in this case. For if there are values then it seems that we are reasonably confident of what is of value. For example, if there are values then I am reasonably confident that the happiness of my wife and children is of value and that their pain and suffering is not. But now consider the suggestion that, since I cannot say whether or not my beliefs are coherent, I should suspend all evaluative beliefs. In that case I would have to be no more confident that the happiness of my wife and children is of value than that their pain and suffering is, and this in turn means that I would have to be indifferent between bringing about their happiness and bringing about their pain and suffering. But I am not indifferent and I cannot believe that my uncertainty about the coherence of evaluative

²⁶ Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994).

²⁷ Michael Smith, "In Defence of *The Moral Problem*: A Reply to Brink, Copp and Sayre-McCord," *Ethics*, 108 (1997), pp. 84–119; and Michael Smith, "Exploring the Implications of the Dispositional Theory of Value," *Philosophical Issues: Realism and Relativism*, 12 (2002), pp. 329–347, both of which are reprinted in Smith, *Ethics and the A Priori: Selected Essays on Moral Psychology and Meta-Ethics*.

concepts entails that I should be indifferent. After all, if there are values then my indifference would bring about something terrible, and if there are no values then my indifference does not bring about anything terrible, but it does not bring about anything of value either because no sense can be attached to the idea of anything's having or lacking any value at all. The materials with which I might try to construct a rational response to my uncertainty thus seems to be exactly what is up for grabs. The suspension of all evaluative beliefs thus does not seem to be a rational response to my epistemic circumstances.

Nor does it seem right to suppose that, to the extent that I am unwilling to suspend all evaluative belief, this just goes to show that I am in fact quietly confident that the concept of value is coherent. If someone asks me why I believe that there are rational principles that underwrite the fact that we would all desire the happiness of our loved ones if we had a maximally informed and coherent and unified desire set, then I find myself unable to give a good answer. I am unable to give a good answer because I cannot think of any convincing reasons to suppose that there are rational principles capable of delivering anything that we would all desire if we had a maximally informed and coherent and unified desire set. And when I contemplate this fact, I find my confidence that anything has value diminishes by the second.

This would seem to be an absurd situation par excellence. Moreover I suspect that it is because we are all in a situation of this kind that Beckett thinks that our circumstances are indeed relevantly similar to Estragon's and Vladimir's in *Waiting for Godot*. The tramps seem to think that Godot's coming and their meeting him is a condition of the importance of everything that they can do. This means that if Godot will not come then nothing they do has any importance at all. That is why their leaving has nothing positively to recommend it. To be sure, if they were in a position to know that Godot will not come then they would have to come up with something else that they want to do independently of their beliefs about what is important and what is not. But, since they seem incapable of coming to the conclusion that he will not come, they are stuck, waiting for Godot.

Similarly, the coherence of our evaluative concepts is a condition of the importance of everything that we do. This means that if our concepts are incoherent, then nothing we do is important at all. That is why abandoning all evaluation has nothing positively to recommend it. To be sure, if we were in a position to know that our

evaluative concepts are incoherent then we would have to come up with something else that we want to do independently of our beliefs about what's important and what is not. But human beings just do not seem capable of providing compelling arguments one way or the other. And since we do not know whether our concepts are incoherent or not, we are stuck. We pursue what we seem to believe is valuable but without being able to underwrite the coherence of our doing so. Our lives are therefore absurd and cosmically so. For no possible human being is in a position to remove uncertainty about the coherence of our evaluative concepts. Every possible human being is therefore, in their own way, stuck waiting for Godot.

5. HOW ARE WE TO RESPOND TO OUR RECOGNITION OF THE FACT THAT HUMAN LIFE IS ABSURD AS SUCH?

It is more than a little unsettling to contemplate the absurdity of human life as such. This is because it is hard to live with the fact that you exist in circumstances in which the materials for a reasoned response to those very circumstances are called into question.

Hume found himself in just these circumstances at the end of his discussion of what justifies belief. He described his own response in the following terms:

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 strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.²⁸

What Hume offers here is a psychological strategy for dealing with philosophical melancholy: distract ourselves. His suggestion seems to be that this is a practically rational policy to pursue, given philosophical melancholy, as it enables us to live more happily with our inability to come up with an epistemically rational policy of belief revision. But of course, that cannot be quite right either, at least not once we see that our inability to come up with practically rational policies is another cause of philosophical melancholy. For what is up

²⁸ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), Book 1, Part 4, Section 7; also quoted in Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, p. 20.

for grabs in that case is the very coherence of the idea that (say) being able to live more happily is an outcome worth bringing about.

One of the most striking descriptions of this kind of melancholy and practical response I know of is provided by Peggy Lee in her rendition of Jerry Lieber's and Mike Stoller's "Is That All There Is?"

SPOKEN

I remember when I was a very little girl, our house caught on fire. I'll never forget the look on my father's face as he gathered me up in his arms and raced through the burning building out to the pavement. I stood there shivering in my pyjamas and watched the whole world go up in flames. And when it was all over I said to myself, "Is that all there is to a fire?"

SUNG

Is that all there is?
Is that all there is?
If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep dancing
Let's break out the booze and have a ball
If that's all there is

SPOKEN

And when I was 12 years old, my father took me to the circus, the greatest show on earth. There were clowns and elephants and dancing bears and a beautiful lady in pink tights flew high above our heads. And as I sat there watching the marvelous spectacle I had the feeling that something was missing. I don't know what, but when it was over, I said to myself, "Is that all there is to a circus?"

SUNG

Is that all there is?
Is that all there is?
If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep dancing
Let's break out the booze and have a ball
If that's all there is

SPOKEN

Then I fell in love, with the most wonderful boy in the world. We would take long walks by the river or just sit for hours gazing into each other's eyes: we were so very much in love. Then one day, he went away. And I thought I'd die – but I didn't. And when I didn't I said to myself, "Is that all there is to love?"

SUNG

Is that all there is?
Is that all there is?
If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep dancing

SPOKEN

I know what you must be saying to yourselves. If that's the way she feels about it why doesn't she just end it all? Oh, no. Not me. I'm in no hurry for that final disappointment. For I know just as well as I'm standing here talking to you, when that final moment comes and I'm breathing my last breath, I'll be saying to myself,

SUNG

Is that all there is?

Is that all there is?

If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep dancing

Let's break out the booze and have a ball

If that's all there is.²⁹

The song portrays a woman who acquires all sorts of evaluative beliefs as she goes through her life, but who finds that on reflection she cannot sustain her confidence in any of them. "[S]omething was missing. I don't know what." Though many in this predicament find themselves attracted to thoughts of suicide, this woman's loss of confidence is so complete that not even that conclusion holds any attraction for her. That would require her to be confident that life is worthless, but she is not even confident about that. This, I take it, is the intended message of the final spoken verse.

So how does she move forward? At the end of the day, Lieber and Stoller agree with Hume that a kind of distraction is the only practical response. But for them, unlike Hume, distraction is not supposed to bring about anything of any worth. When Lieber and Stoller have the woman say "Let's break out the booze and have a ball," the suggestion is emphatically not that breaking out the booze is a good thing to do. Talk of breaking out the booze is, I take it, a metaphor for acting without reason and justification. Desires well up and confidence levels rise without reason or justification and, when they do, we go for it. We dance and drink and have a ball in the sense of acting on the evaluative beliefs and desires that well up. In this way we move forward in the only way we can given that a rational response to our circumstances is impossible. It is rather unsettling to realise that our pursuit of value, if that is indeed what we are doing, is underwritten by such unreasoned responses. But unfortunately, much

²⁹ Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller, "Is That All There Is?" (1969). I cannot resist drawing the following very pleasing cosmic coincidence to everyone's attention. Newman, the person who wrote "God's Song (That's Why I Love Mankind)" (Section 3), was responsible for the orchestrations on Peggy Lee's original recording of Lieber and Stoller's "Is That All There Is?"

as Lieber and Stoller suggest, when it comes to the pursuit of value, that really does seem to be all that there is.

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