**ABSURD RELATIONS**

**(Final Draft)**

**Abstract**

Absurdist accounts of life’s meaning posit that life is absurd because our pretensions regarding its meaning conflict with the actual or perceived reality of the situation. Relationary accounts posit that contingent things gain their meaning only from their relationship to other meaningful things. I take a detailed look at the two types of account, and, proceeding under the assumption that they are correct, combine them to see what the implications of such a combination might be. I conclude that another way of looking at the absurdity of life is to see it as a conflict between our dual beliefs that there exist intrinsically meaningful contingent things, and that contingent things may only gain their meaning extrinsically through their relationships to other meaningful things. In this way, I provide another lens through which feelings of life’s absurdity may be interpreted and analysed: as the conflict between the simultaneous beliefs in both intrinsically and relationally meaningful contingent things. Looking through this lens gives us an entirely different framework for analysing life’s absurdity than that which Nagel described in 1971, providing opportunity for more potential avenues of analysis and discussion.

**1. On Absurdity**

Most people tend to consider their activities, and hence their lives, important and therefore meaningful. In everyday life we act as if what we do matters, and, on this day-to-day level, we believe this to be true. However, when we look at things from outside the context of our lives, we might find reason to question whether our activities are objectively arbitrary, and therefore whether they are in fact meaningless. Once we take a step back from the context in which our purposive activities are embedded, we might seek justification for the common pretension that what we do matters.

This stepping back from our subjective perspective is one that Nagel says results in “the absurd” (1971). Our sense of life’s absurdity results from the conflict between the internal perspective, which sees our lives as significant, and the external perspective, which realises the arbitrary nature of this judgment. The divorce between these two perspectives generates this sense of absurdity.

Absurdity in ordinary life, Nagel tells us, occurs when a situation “includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality.” (1971, p. 718). When discussing life’s meaning, we might say that the discrepancy is between our belief that there is meaning *in* life—that individual lives may exhibit a positive quality of ‘meaningfulness’—and understanding that in reality there is no meaning *of* life—that there is no ultimate justification or purpose which grounds this. These two ways of viewing the world are inseparable from us (Nagel, 1986, p.221). As one author puts it: “On Nagel’s view, then, the absurdity of human life derives from our capacity to recognize the arbitrariness of our ultimate concerns and our simultaneous incapacity to relinquish our commitment to them.” (Gordon, 1984, p. 19).

For some, the reflection upon life’s absurdity is a gloomy one, as is expressed by Roquentin, the protagonist of Sartre’s *Nausea*, who laments, “I am free: I haven’t a single reason for living left, all the ones I have tried have given way and I can’t imagine any more.” (Sartre, 1963, p.223). For those like Roquentin, the step back into an objective perspective is accompanied by the realisation that there is no reason for living.

For others, like Camus, the reflection is one that is regrettable but combatable. Life’s absurdity is regrettable, but it should be revolted against. Strangely, the result of this rebellion is happiness; and of Sisyphus, the Greek king condemned by the gods to the absurd fate of repeatedly pushing a rock up a hill for all eternity, Camus says, “one must imagine [him] happy” (1955, p. 99). This, however, should not mean that life’s absurdity itself is a positive thing—rebellion and scorn are reserved for those things we do *not* like, after all.

Where Camus sees the disparity as being between our pretensions and the world’s failure to meet them, Nagel sees it as one which arises from the two perspectives which we cannot help but take up. He says that “the absurdity of our situation derives not from a collision between our expectations and the world, but from a collision within ourselves.” (1971, p.722). Whilst

this is an important distinction between the two philosophers’ conceptions1, under both accounts the result is the same: we are confronted with absurdity.

Whilst Camus and Sartre think that this is a reality which is to be regretted, Nagel does not. He ends his essay by saying, “If *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that doesn’t matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of despair.” (1971, p.727). Still, even if life’s absurdity is cause for irony rather than rebellion and denial, the fact remains that we do tend to prefer escaping or avoiding the absurd situations of everyday life. Would it not therefore be better if life wasn’t absurd?

**2. Avoiding Absurdity**

Should we accept the premise that if there exists this conflict then life is absurd, there are still ways we might attempt to avoid absurdity. We might deny that there is a conflict, or otherwise that the conflict is relevant to life’s meaning. First, we might say that either (1) our pretensions, or (2) the perceived reality of the situation, is irrelevant to life’s meaning. Second, we might say that from the external standpoint we *do* see life’s meaning, and this is what gives rise to our internal belief.

In the first case, there are two options: we may reject the relevance of either the internal or external standpoint. If the internal standpoint is irrelevant to life’s meaning, then an everyday belief in life’s meaning would never conflict with its actual arbitrariness; and if the external standpoint is irrelevant, then there is no connection between the ultimate arbitrariness of our activities and the meaningfulness of life.

In the second case, we might think that we may either ground the internal in the external, or the external in the internal. However, grounding the external in the internal does not make sense. To do this would be to say, ‘Whether there is a meaning of life external to us and independent of our beliefs is a result of our everyday belief in the meaningfulness of life.’ But a meaning of life *independent* of our beliefs cannot be grounded in one of our beliefs. An external meaning of life must be independent of our beliefs, in the same way that a god’s existence is not affected by whether or not we believe it exists. So, we may attempt to ground the internal in the external, but not vice versa.

**3. Relationary Meaning**

*The Thesis*

In his *Philosophical Explanations*, Nozick presents meaning as ‘relationary’ (1981, pp. 594-651). For any contingent thing to be meaningful, it is only so because it is connected to something else meaningful. He tells us that “some recent theories of language have come to see a word or sentence or utterance’s having meaning not as its being related to a metaphysically special entity, a meaning, but rather as its standing in some type of (functional) relationship.” (Ibid., p. 599). X gains its meaning from its being embedded in a context of meaning Y, and Y from Z, and so on. Clearly the chain must end somewhere, but for the relationary theorist that end-point only occurs when we reach something which is *necessarily* meaningful, which “cannot be conceived as having a relationship with anything else.” (Metz, 2016, p. 1249).

It might be remarked that we tend to know the meaning of many things without relating them to a wider context. Cooper tells us that “it may be enough, say, to point to an object or to mention a ritual to enable someone to grasp what a certain word or gesture signifies.” (Cooper, 2005, p.127). However, he goes on to remind us that “this is because ‘elementary’ explanations rely upon a massive, implicit, background understanding of the ‘whole scene of our language-games’ (Wittgenstein 1969: §179).” (Ibid.). In other words, we already understand the larger framework of contextualisation which allows us to infer meaning from these words or gestures. A Martian would not have this framework, and we would therefore “need to educate the Martian about gesturing, greetings, friendship, community, and so on in order to enlighten him.” (Ibid.).

So, what of life’s meaning? If meaningfulness is, in fact, found in relations, then we will need to find a relationship that life has to something which is also meaningful. One might look to one’s own life, and reflect upon the activities, values, relationships, overarching narratives and purposes, or any number of other things which might make it meaningful. However, we have said that for something to be meaningful it must itself attain its meaning from something even wider. We then question why these elements of our supposedly meaningful lives are themselves meaningful, and so on in a regress of meaning-conferring conditions (Metz, 2016, p.1249). This regress is easily paralleled with a more familiar epistemological regress, because “just as we have a tendency to ask how a claim drafted in to provide epistemological justification for a prior claim is itself justified, we have a tendency to ask by what further criteria a goal or purpose that is meant to bestow meaning is itself meaningful.” (Waghorn, 2014, p.3).

From this relationary account we may plausibly say that the meaning *of* life would confer meaning upon meaning *in* life. However, we are right to then question where the meaning *of* life obtains its own meaning. This is the point where many who adhere to the relationary model of meaning utilise the notion of intrinsic meaning. The only way to end the infinite chain of regress is to say that something, at some point, obtains meaning not from anything else, but from itself. Metz, borrowing from Kant, points out that this would be the “unconditioned condition . . . of meaning.” (Metz, 2016, p.1250). There must be something which is intrinsically and necessarily meaningful, which we cannot conceive of as obtaining its meaning from anything else, in order for other contingently meaningful things to successfully obtain. Especially concerning life’s meaning, we are not satisfied knowing merely *some* of this chain, for “when the concern is the meaning of our life or existence . . . we want meaning all the way down. Nothing less will do.” (Nozick, 1981, p.599).

So, the general idea is this. A thing is meaningful when its meaning is given by a wider context which is itself meaningful. For example, a word is made meaningful by its relationship to the context of the sentence in which it is embedded, which is in turn made meaningful by its relationship to the context of the language in which it is embedded. Meaning *in* life might be given its meaning by any number of things, such as relationships or moral goodness; but these things only ever attain meaning from a meaning *of* life. Ultimate meaning, in order to prevent an infinite regression, must be intrinsically meaningful and not conceivably able to obtain its meaning from its relationship to anything else. This is allowed by the very nature of this ultimate meaning, as it would be *necessarily* meaningful, but it is not allowed by contingently meaningful things.

*An Open Question?*

My primary purpose is to draw out the implications of combining a relationary account with an absurdist account. As such, it is enough for us to accept both accounts as a given. Nevertheless, there is one possible objection to the relationary account which I found particularly unique. This objection is raised by Metz (2016, pp. 1250-2).

An initial objection to the relationary account, he says, might be that there do seem to be some meaningful aspects of life which do not involve a relationship to anything else meaningful. For example: overcoming neurosis, exhibiting integrity, being authentic, or displaying courage (Ibid., p. 1251). The strongest response to this objection from the relationary theorist, says Metz, would be that “for any putative instance of meaningfulness, one can always step back and sensibly ask about its meaning from a broader context.” (Ibid.).

Metz’s response (Metz, 2016, p. 1251-2) to this involves a comparison to G.E. Moore’s open question argument (Moore, 1971, §13). He says that the relationary theorist is using the same sort of argument as Moore, and might be relying on some of the same dubious presuppositions which have since led to the argument being repudiated by contemporary philosophy of language. Moore’s open question argument says that the fact that we can ask whether a property is identical to another property means that it cannot be identical to that property. For example, asking, ‘Is pleasure good?’ means that ‘pleasure’ is not identical to ‘good,’ otherwise we could not coherently ask the question.

Metz says, “The suggestion seems to be that the intelligibility of asking whether a feature internal to a person is meaningful, or wanting to know what its external source of meaning is, is evidence that it is not meaningful, at least not in itself.” (2016, p. 1252). In other words, the relationary theorist is saying that the fact that we can ask ‘Is X meaningful from a broader context?’ means that X is not meaningful in itself, in the same way that Moore says asking ‘Is pleasure good?’ means that pleasure is not good. The problem with this line of argument, says Metz, lies in the sense-reference distinction. Two terms can co-refer to the same thing. For example, we can ask ‘is water H2O?’ because the two terms have different connotations but the same referent. In the same way, says Metz, “the coherence of asking whether meaning truly obtains insofar as one has overcome a neurosis merely shows that the terms involved have different senses; nothing yet follows about whether the terms fail to (partially) co-refer.” (Ibid).

The problem with Metz’s objection is that it is not clear that the relationary theorist’s point *is* the same as Moore’s open question argument. Where the open question argument is dealing with identity claims, the relationary theorist’s objection is not. They are merely pointing out that the thing in question cannot be aninstanceof something which is meaningful in itself. For something to be an instance of something which is meaningful in itself, we must not be able to throw its meaningfulness into doubt by taking the step back into a wider context. An open question identity statement might be stated as, ‘Is X identical to Y?’ The relationary theorist’s statement might be stated as, ‘Is X, in itself, an instance of Y?’ These are not the same thing. First, the latter stipulates that it is only talking about X ‘in itself,’ and second, it asks only if X is an instance of Y, and not if it is identical to it. As such, the relationary theorist’s objection is not sufficiently comparable to the open question argument, and Metz is objecting to a straw man.

**4. The Relationary-Absurdist Account**

When combining the relationary with the absurdist account, the first thing we might consider is how it might respond to the objections to absurdist accounts discussed in section (2). Recall the first objection was that life might not be absurd because either the internal standpoint or the external standpoint might be irrelevant to life’s meaning; the second was that we might be able to ground our internal belief in life’s meaning in an external account of its meaning.

On the first account, notice that when we are using the relationary approach our search for meaning extends outwards. We begin by looking at things which are supposedly meaningful, then we take a step outwards, looking for a wider context which might bestow these things with meaning. In this sense, we can say that the internal standpoint is relevant to life’s meaning as a *starting point*. This is one way in which internal meaning may be relevant. Furthermore, if an account of life’s meaning is irrelevant to our internal beliefs regarding its meaning, then it is not answering the same question that we are asking. It is even more clear why the external side of the equation is relevant. Given the relationary account, if we say that the external reality of the situation is irrelevant, then we would have nothing which can confer meaning, and meaning disappears entirely.

We must remember what absurdism posits. A situation is absurd when there is a discrepancy between pretension and reality. Whether or not one says that our pretensions are irrelevant to life’s meaning, the discrepancy exists. If we say that our pretensions are irrelevant to life’s meaning we remain absurd people. By denying the relevance of our pretensions we are simply changing the object which absurdity is referencing from life itself to the people living it. But it is not clear that this change actually amounts to anything, since the existence of absurd people makes for life’s absurdity in general.

On the second account, it is argued that there might be an external meaning of life which grounds our internal belief in life’s meaning, and therefore there is no conflict. I agree that an external meaning of life would disprove the absurdist account. The ‘relationary absurdist’ may also agree, and then deny that there is external meaning. The denial might be empirical (it might deny that a meaning of life has been proven to exist); or it might be modal, and say that there *could never* be an ultimate meaning of life. The absurdist account has never been an attempt to prove the ultimate meaninglessness of life; it is merely a consideration of the repercussions of such a position.

**5. Implications of the Relationary-Absurdist Account**

If we accept the relationary-absurdist account, we may question where our internal pretensions come from. Why do we take life to be meaningful, day-to-day, if there is nothing to ground such pretensions? We could say that our pretensions are misplaced, but we must then look for the cause of this misplacement. Why do we think some things are meaningful when their meaning does not obtain through relations?

The answer is that our internal pretensions are implicitly grounded upon the assumption that these meaningful aspects of our lives, or some other contingent endpoint for the chain, may be intrinsically meaningful. Our activities are believed to be meaningful despite the lack of external grounding because we assume that they are meaningful in themselves or terminate in something meaningful in itself.

If this is the case, then we have another conflict: between our internal belief in the existence of contingent but intrinsically meaningful things, and the fact that contingent things may only obtain meaning from their relationships to other meaningful things. Following a relationary account, things which may reasonably have the question asked of them, ‘Is this meaningful from a wider context?’ cannot be intrinsically meaningful, but something for which there *can be* no wider context might be. This is why such attempts to ground the chain of meaning-conferring conditions have involved discussions of such nebulous endpoints as the ‘unlimited’ (Nozick, 1981), ‘mystery’ (D. Cooper, 2002) and even ‘nothingness’ (Waghorn, 2014).

So, we see that the primary conclusion to be drawn from the relationary-absurdist account is this: The conflict which results in ‘the absurd’ may also be understood as the conflict between our implicit belief that contingent things may be intrinsically meaningful, and the fact that these things may only obtain their meaning from something else which confers meaning upon them. If we accept the relationary-absurdist account, we see that absurdism may also be described as this conflict between the reality that things obtain their meaning through relations, and our everyday pretensions that these things are intrinsically meaningful.

Looking at the conflict in this way is different to the way in which Nagel described it (1971). It is not merely that our internal pretensions are in conflict with our external realisation that these pretensions are arbitrary; it is that our internal pretensions arise from an entirely different assumption regarding the meanings of contingent things. We think that they are intrinsically meaningful when they could only be meaningful if they attained their meaning through relations. Whilst Nagel describes the conflict which generates absurdity, the relationary-absurdist accounts for precisely *why* this conflict occurs, and on a deeper level. They explain the conflict not as one occurring between the internal and external standpoints utilising the same conception of meaning, rather between these two standpoints utilising two *entirely different* conceptions of meaning. The conception of meaning upon which our internal pretensions are grounded is not the same sort of meaning which grounds either our external perception of reality (per Nagel) or reality itself (per Camus).

At this point we might ask the following: If life is absurd and has no meaning, how can it matter that life is absurd and has no meaning? Why does it matter if nothing matters? This question misses the point. The point is not that it matters that nothing matters, rather it is that we cannot escape our pretension that things matter. We must therefore account for the fact of the conflict between this pretension and the real or perceived reality. In the relationary-absurdist account, this is understood as the conflict between our internal belief in the intrinsic meaning of contingent things, and the external fact or belief that meaning is relationary and must terminate in something necessarily meaningful. What matters is that this external reality is in conflict with our internal pretensions, which we cannot easily escape. If the relationary-absurdist account is correct, this conflict is one constituted of two different conceptions of meaning. Recognising this is important if only to gain a fuller understanding of the differences between the type of meaning which grounds our pretensions, and the type of relationary meaning which constitutes meaning in the world, or our external perception of it.

Regarding possible routes of successfully escaping absurdity, there are two. First, as we have discussed, one may say that there is an ultimate, external and necessary meaning of life which grounds our internal pretensions. If we know this to be correct then meaning obtains and there is no conflict.

Second, if we deny an ultimate meaning of life, we may say that there is no conflict only if we have no internal pretensions regarding life’s meaning. To lack these pretensions is to allow the lack of ultimate meaning to properly influence our day-to-day life. Such a person would never hold the pretension that contingent things can be intrinsically meaningful. However, it is not clear what such a person would look like. Even severely depressed people tend to hold on to remnants of these everyday pretensions. Perhaps only the complete Schopenhauerian ascetic, lifeless and will-less, reaches a point where all pretensions and beliefs regarding life’s meaning dissipate. At any rate, as Nagel suggests, maybe living in absurdity isn’t such a terrible fate after all, once we compare it to the alternatives.

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