THE COST OF GOING NOWHERE:
THOMAS NAGEL, SØREN KIERKEGAARD AND THE ABSURD

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“But suppose the whole matter were really a hocus-pocus. Suppose that whatever meaning you may choose in your fancy to give to it, the real meaning of the whole was mockery. Suppose it was all folly. Suppose…”

“I have been in it,” answered the voice from the tall and strange figure, “and I know it was not.”

—G.K. Chesterton, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*

With much admiration and affection
to all those who have ennobled my life by their care and concern;
especially to General Richard Lawson, whose example and character
have made this study possible
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To all those who aided me in this endeavor I give my most sincere thanks. I individually mention and thank Drs. Robert D’Amico, Gordon Marino and Stewart Duncan; who guided and challenged my work. To those friends and family who have put up with my ramblings on absurdity these past few months, you also have my thanks.
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Thomas Nagel develops his philosophical sense of absurdity, between his Mortal Questions and *The View from Nowhere*, as the conflict between the objective and subjective perspectives regarding our lives. We can objectively doubt all of the subjective commitments of our lives, viewing them as matters of indifference. These viewpoints cannot be eliminated or reconciled, and their clash is the absurd.

Søren Kierkegaard argues that the search for objective certainty with regards to subjective matters is a futile effort; it is beyond the abilities of a person. Objective doubts can always be raised about our subjective enterprises. Despite this objective doubt, we commit ourselves to our lives with the passion of inwardness. This, one of the pseudonyms tells us, is a paraphrasing of faith.

Both Nagel and Kierkegaard believe that the absurd is inherent to human life and that it cannot be solved. Life is a matter of living with our absurdity. Both recommend reengaging our lives despite lacking rational justification for doing so. For Kierkegaard, absurdity is an occasion for faith, as reason cannot compel our reengagement. Nagel advocates a return to life with irony. For both, consciousness of our absurdity also leads to humility—a recognition that our subjective pursuits are without objective grounds.
And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, “It is a spirit;” and they cried out for fear.

But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, “Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid.”

And Peter answered him and said, “Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water.”

And he said, “Come.”

And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus. But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, “Lord, save me.”

And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, “O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?”

Matthew 14: 28-31 (KJV)
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The present work does not attempt to give an exhaustive analysis of the various senses and meanings of the term ‘absurd.’ The term has lent itself to myriad uses and, partly as a consequence of this, myriad topics. For example, in Albert Camus’ “The Myth of Sisyphus”¹ absurdity is linked with theology, free will, metaphysical realism, and the moral issue of suicide. The interweaving of these themes has much to do with the difficulty of grasping Camus’ view. The aim of this work is to carve out what I consider a central meaning of the term absurdity and to avoid, as much as possible, these other issues, as interesting as they may be. In pursuit of this narrower focus I compare the philosophical analysis of absurdity found in Thomas Nagel with some of Søren Kierkegaard’s writings on faith and absurdity. I contend that there is an interesting and important convergence of ideas between them concerning the absurd as well as how to practically live with the problem. Before concentrating on their work, it may be helpful to begin with a broad characterization of the idea of absurdity.

Why should we concern ourselves with the absurd? Absurdity seems to arise when contemplating the place of humanity in the expanse of the universe. The length of human life is a mere moment when compared to cosmic time; a human being is of miniscule size compared to astronomical objects. If we firmly immerse ourselves in our immediate lives, these thoughts may never arise. Frank Ramsey offers just such a nepenthe in commenting, “Where I seem to differ from some of my friends is in attaching little importance to physical size. I don't feel the least humble before the vastness of the heavens. The stars may be large, but they cannot think or love, and these are qualities which impress me far more than size does. I take no credit for weighing

nearly seventeen stone. My picture of the world is drawn in perspective, and not like a model to scale. The foreground is occupied by human beings, and the stars are all as small as threepenny bits.”

But we are not bound to Ramsey’s perspectival schema. We can make the jump into the stars that shrinks our concerns and pursuits. We can distance ourselves, viewing our lives as the background with the stars in the foreground. The absurd arises because both accounts remain, and yet we cannot fully marry the view from without with the view from within. This gap or incongruity is common to most senses of the absurd, whether the problem is treated as circumstantial or universal.

Camus thought this matter was connected with the question, “Ought I to live?” Absurdity is a condition we naturally seek to escape. Yet, if it is a fact of our lives, we may be forced to give the problem central significance. Camus introduces his essay by announcing, “Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.”

Jeffrey Gordon, whose comparison of Nagel and Camus will be considered later in this work, argues, “If human life is indeed absurd, it would be difficult to imagine a more important fact about it. Whatever view we might project upon the stars, it would be a fact that we humans, for whom alone it would be relevant, could not but find deeply dispiriting.” In pursuing our lives, we all occupy Ramsey’s perspective. But we can take the viewpoint of the stars, and it is that abrupt shift that is at the center of the concept of the absurd.

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3 Camus, Sisyphus, p. 3.

Like many other philosophical problems, the problem of absurdity lacks clear consequences for day-to-day life. This does not mean it is a puzzling riddle devoid of practical import. Rather, it is an issue in the way we understand ourselves; it addresses our deepest concerns. In this way, the absurd is similar to such classic philosophical questions as the clash between free will and determinism or the notion of personal identity. The conflicting intuitions that form the basis of philosophical problems often do not arise in everyday life. The present grasp of the absurd in Nagel and Kierkegaard is critical. Consciousness of the absurd has a peculiar consequence: though it changes nothing, it changes everything. We continue to do just the things that we did before our consciousness of the absurd, and yet a metamorphosis occurs in our understanding of ourselves and the lives we lead.

The sense of absurdity being carved out as central to this work is often treated comically. In Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall*, the main character as a child is seen being taken to the doctor by his mother for refusing to do his grammar school homework. When asked to explain his actions, he notes that the universe is expanding and thus eventually all matter will come apart. “What’s the point?” the child asks. The conflict between the effort required to complete his homework and the child’s grasp of cosmic impermanence fuels the scene’s absurd humor: here we glimpse the simultaneous proximity and incongruity of the absurd. Allen’s comic question is a form of that larger philosophical question, “Ought I to live?”

Thomas Nagel concludes that human existence is inherently absurd. Though we may attempt to practically confront the conditions of absurdity, Nagel contends that we cannot eliminate them. If Nagel is correct, we should be able to locate a conflict inherent to existence and understand what about the conflict is irreconcilable. Nagel’s reasoning on this issue comprises the first chapter of the present work.
Søren Kierkegaard, writing under his own name and various pseudonyms, discusses the relationship of faith and the absurd. In the second chapter I will examine a number of his works that parallel Nagel’s account. Albert Camus, whose views on absurdity in “The Myth of Sisyphus” are contrasted with Nagel’s in the second chapter, criticizes the faith of Kierkegaard for evading the absurd through irrational faith. Using Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* I show that Camus’ criticism is based on a misreading. Faith is made despite consciousness of the absurd, not in ignorance of it. Faith does not deny the impossibility of reconciling the conflicted elements. Yet, can Kierkegaard’s faith address Nagel’s way of posing the issue? We will move from *Fear and Trembling* to other Kierkegaardian works relevant to Nagel’s sense of the absurd. In the discourse “At a Graveside” as well as in the pseudonymous *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* to Philosophical Fragments, an examination of the relation of objectivity and subjectivity is developed which will bear on our understanding of Nagel.

The third chapter compares Nagel and Kierkegaard. I believe that Nagel and Kierkegaard share a common grasp of absurdity, despite their different means of arriving at this conclusion. Also, both Kierkegaard and Nagel advocate a return to living our lives despite the absurd: Kierkegaard through passionate inwardness, Nagel through the ironic distancing of objective consciousness.
CHAPTER 2
AN ABSURD CONFLICT

Irreconcilables

I begin by exploring Thomas Nagel’s development of the absurd in *The View from Nowhere*¹ and especially in the article “The Absurd” in his *Mortal Questions*.² The second part of this chapter examines the “objective perspective” as an essential feature of Nagel’s sense of absurdity, the necessity of which leads Nagel to conclude that human existence is essentially and irrevocably absurd. Nagel largely constructs his sense of absurdity in contrast to Albert Camus’ “The Myth of Sisyphus” and this chapter ends by using this contrast as a final means of clarifying Nagel’s account of absurdity.

Nagel’s sets about in “The Absurd” to describe and understand absurdity as a feeling. “Most people feel on occasion that life is absurd, and some feel it vividly and continually.”³ After noting the near universality of this feeling, Nagel’s effort is to offer an explanation of why we have this feeling. Nagel distinguishes between the feeling that accompanies absurd situations and the feeling that human life as such is absurd, beginning with the former manifestation to aide in his explanation of the latter.

Ordinary cases of circumstantial absurdity become the foundation on which Nagel develops his philosophical sense of the absurd. “In ordinary life,” writes Nagel, “a situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality . . .”⁴ He provides several examples: “[S]omeone gives a complicated speech in support of a

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⁴ Ibid.
motion that has already been passed; a notorious criminal is made president of a major
philanthropic foundation; you declare your love over the telephone to a recorded announcement;
as you are being knighted, your pants fall down.\textsuperscript{5} All these situations share the sort of
discrepancy between aspiration and reality that Nagel identifies as common to ordinary cases of
the term. The absurd conflict is apparent. However, the observer can imagine changes that
would eliminate the absurdity of these situations. Thus, these ordinary cases are neither
permanent nor universal.

The account of absurdity Nagel seeks to locate is broader than these individual cases. “The
sense that life as a whole is absurd arises when we perceive, perhaps dimly, an inflated
pretension or aspiration which is inseperable from the continuation of human life and which
makes its absurdity inescapable, short of escape from life itself.”\textsuperscript{6} This conflict, common to all
human existence, constitutes what Nagel describes as the philosophical sense of absurdity. “If
there is a philosophical sense of absurdity, however, it must arise from the perception of
something universal – some respect in which pretension and reality inevitably clash for us all.”\textsuperscript{7}
Ordinary manifestations of absurdity come and go in the course of circumstances. But if human
life in itself is absurd, what reason can be given for this? In what way do reality and pretension
inevitably clash?

This is not as clear, for often we are solemn \textit{and} have the good fortune of wearing our
pants. Nagel argues that the reasons normally given for absurdity—for instance, the brevity or
smallness of human life—could not be why there is this deeper sense of the absurd. “For

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
absurd if it lasted through eternity? And if our lives are absurd given our present size, why
would they be any less absurd if we filled the universe (either because we were larger or because
the universe was smaller)?”8 Though appeals to the brevity and minuteness of human life seem
bound up with the notion of absurdity, they cannot be the reason for the absurdity.

According to Nagel, philosophical absurdity is not produced by a conflict between
ourselves and our circumstances, as in ordinary cases, but is more properly understood as an
irreconcilable conflict within persons. “This condition [of absurdity] is supplied, I shall argue,
by the collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual
possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt.”9
Our ability to look on our lives as both a serious matter and a matter of indifference constitutes
our absurdity. These evaluations are joined in one person, combining to form the apparently
conflicted report: “Life is a serious matter of indifference.” And this, we can see, is rather
absurd.

Nagel sets himself two tasks in defending his sense of absurdity: “This analysis requires
defense in two respects: first as regards the unavoidability of seriousness; second as regards the
inescapability of doubt.” Seriousness and doubt, the conditions for absurdity, are for Nagel
inextricably intertwined with two perspectives that are essential parts of human personhood.
Nagel maintains that neither of the perspectives can be eliminated, and thus, neither can the
resulting seriousness or the doubt. As a result, absurdity cannot be eliminated.

Nagel begins with what he calls the “subjective perspective”, the first-person perspective
of the course of life. From within the subjective perspective, we grasp the importance and

8 Ibid, p. 12.

significance of our intents, actions and attachments. In this manner, we directly understand the meaning of our lives. We dedicate constant attention and effort to these pursuits; we take them seriously.

In committing great energy to the realization of our goals and aspirations we are not that different from the animals. We struggle to survive, to find a spouse, and to fulfill our needs and desires. This is not absurd for Nagel; a mouse is not absurd. The clash is not between our struggle for survival and the world, as we may at first be led to believe. There is rather an additional condition specific to human existence; namely, a perspective other than the first-person, subjective perspective.

Nagel calls the second perspective the “objective perspective.” “Yet humans have the special capacity to step back and survey themselves, and the lives to which they are committed, with that detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand. Without developing the illusion that they are able to escape from their highly specific and idiosyncratic position, they can view it sub specie aeternitatis – and the view is at once sobering and comical.”10 Thus the trait essential to absurdity, that one which sets us apart from the animals, is the co-presence of both external and internal views of ourselves; a life is both “me” and “it.” This external view of ourselves as “it” allows us to doubt everything we pursue as “me.”

We watch an ant and we think that the ant’s survival or extinction is a matter of indifference. We can take a similar view of ourselves and, despite the subjective feelings, see our own success or failure as a matter of indifference. Objectively we doubt the subjective standards of meaning for a personal life, for they all appear arbitrary. This evaluation is itself

10 Ibid, p. 15.
not absurd, just as the seriousness of our lives alone is not absurd. Absurdity is the collision that occurs when we commit ourselves to our own lives as though they were meaningful, even after we have taken the step back and seen that there is no external match for our commitment. We find no objective “echo” for the subjective conviction that our lives are meaningful, yet we return to living with that very conviction. As Nagel puts it, “Yet when we take this view and recognize what we do as arbitrary, it does not disengage us from life, and there lies our absurdity: not in the fact that such an external view can be taken of us, but in the fact that we ourselves can take it, without ceasing to be the persons whose ultimate concerns we so coolly regarded.”

While the subjective perspective is easy enough to understand (it is, after all, the perspective of our lives), the objective perspective may seem more mysterious. It usually takes a metaphorical form in Nagel’s descriptions. We “step back,” “regard ourselves from without,” “feign a nebula’s-eye view.” In short, as we noted before, we cease seeing a life as “me” and see it as just “it.” I will discuss the objective perspective later in this chapter; but for now only a rough grasp of the the perspective is needed for Nagel’s thesis.

Turning away from our subjective personhood, we no longer find ourselves. Instead, we find bits of organized matter in a seemingly endless expanse of matter. Philosophical absurdity arises when this view collides with our subjective feelings. Subjectively we are convinced we have significant lives. We could not dedicate the requisite effort needed to maintain our lives if we did not feel they were significant. Yet this feeling of significance cannot be substantiated from the objective perspective. From without we look with indifference upon what from inside constitutes serious and meaningful work; there is no reconciling the gap between the two perspectives.

11 Ibid.
An example may clarify this conflict. From the subjective perspective, a graduate student may view the completion of his thesis as a highly significant, watershed moment. He may even dream of the impact his words will have on the destiny of the world. Yet if he takes the objective view, and coolly distances himself, all significance deflates: some being on an insignificant planet orbiting an insignificant star in an insignificant galaxy finishes an insignificant thesis. It just does not matter; no objective reason justifies that student’s sense of the work’s import. As in the scene from *Annie Hall*, this realization may result in asking, “What’s the point?” When we continue the effort despite our inability to answer this question, we confront the absurd.

Now, of course, objective significance has been sought in a commitment to higher causes such as service to humanity, the state, or God. Relinquishing personal aspirations in order to serve a larger cause gives hope of evading absurdity. Perhaps such a course of action can reconcile the subjective and objective viewpoints in the sense that one can subjectively share in an intersubjective enterprise with real, objective value. Yet, Nagel points out, these endeavors can be deflated in the same way as an individual life was. If we detach ourselves and ask, “Why is this significant? Why does it deserve my concern? What’s the point?” no answer can be given without once again appealing to the subjective perspective. If the lives of individuals have no significance, why should a state composed of multiple lives have any significance? Higher pursuits appear the same as base needs when looked at externally: as matters of indifference. And so we can doubt their significance in just the same way.

From outside we do not see a larger purpose—rather, we see that no purpose can satisfy us beyond doubt. “We do not step outside our lives to a new vantage point from which we see what is really, objectively significant. We continue to take life largely for granted while seeing that all
our decisions and certainties are possible only because there is a great deal we do not bother to rule out.”

We can only hold onto the subjective value of our lives because of a sort of natural faith that allows us to cling to truths we do not and cannot rationally defend. If we relied solely on reason Nagel contends we could not return to our lives. This return to them without any reason, though, is absurdity.

Meaning and significance are erased in the shift from the subjective to the objective perspective. When our lives lose their place as the center of our concerns, they also lose their significance and importance, and once that erosion has begun there is no way to return to a naïve confidence in a life’s significance. Yet in returning to our subjective projects after our objective detachment, we act as though we had found that which always eludes us. We take seriously a life whose significance we doubted without finding an answer.

To Nagel, despite being irreconcilable, neither the subjective nor the objective perspective can be abandoned. Thus we have trapped within our persons the elements of the absurd conflict. This constitutes our universal absurdity, regardless of any external circumstances. “There does not appear to be any conceivable world (containing us) about which unsetttable doubts could not arise. Consequently the absurdity of our situation derives not from a collision between our expectations and the world, but from a collision within ourselves.”

Our absurdity lies in the inextinguishable possibility of both doubting and caring for the significance of any life we may live within any world of which we find ourselves.

Once he has established the essential parts played by the subjective and objective perspectives in absurdity, Nagel turns to consider possible means of eliminating or minimizing

\[\text{\footnotesize 12 Ibid, p. 19.}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize 13 Ibid, p. 17.}\]
the conflict. Since the absurd results from a conflict between the two perspectives, eliminating one or the other of them can eliminate absurdity. These efforts constitute the first two solutions proposed. A third solution seeks to dissolve the problem as unreal.

Ridding ourselves of one of the two perspectives is not worth the cost, according to Nagel, even were it possible. Giving up the subjective perspective by self-etiolation costs us our lives and all the pleasures that come with being a person. The shedding of subjective pursuits sacrifices personhood, and it demands such ascetic effort that it may, Nagel suspects, inadvertently heighten the absurdity of the person rather than eliminating it. The person must work far too strenuously and seriously in an enterprise whose value is doubtful, returning him once again to absurdity.

On the other hand, giving up the objective perspective is to rid ourselves of a knowledge of ourselves and the world that sets us above other creatures and marks our greatness. It is to caste off our highest rational faculty, one that Nagel finds essential. Much of the development of ethics, argues Nagel, involves objectively recasting the way we look at human life. Ethical thought demands objectivity; stepping beyond ourselves recognizing the subjective claims of others as well as our own. The subjective claims of multiple persons are given equal objective weight. Thus, for Nagel, ethics is a compromise between the subjective and objective perspectives.

Additionally, Nagel argues that the objective perspective cannot be consciously willed away. The capacity to assume the objective vantage, once it is developed, cannot thereafter be forgotten. Absurdity is much like the elephant in the room. As much as we may seek to ignore the elephant, once we notice its existence it becomes hard to forget. We could seek to stop the objective perspective from developing in the first place, but Nagel finds this a great price to pay.
If consciousness of the objective perspective never developed absurdity would not become an issue. We would not be able to take the step from which all our subjective engagements come under doubt. Our lives would resemble the mouse we spoke of earlier—the mouse was not absurd. To rid ourselves of absurdity we would sacrifice all the positive developments made possible by the objective perspective.

Nagel considers a third solution, which is rather a repudiation of the problem. This objection has to do with the relation of the objective and subjective perspectives, whether there truly is a conflict between them. This final objection will be discussed in the next section, where it will give occasion to more thoroughly examine the objective perspective. Glossing over this matter for the time being, Nagel concludes that the absurd is a problem inherent to human existence. That which makes us persons also makes us absurd, and the means of extinguishing absurdity also involve extinguishing ourselves as persons.

Nagel puts the problem in abbreviated form near the end of his article. “And that is the main condition of absurdity – the dragooning of an unconvinced transcendent consciousness into the service of an immanent, limited enterprise like a human life.”14 The objective and subjective views of our lives cannot be reconciled, yet we must live with them both. We can always doubt the commitments that are central to our lives. Though he suggests means of minimizing our absurdity, Nagel argues that as long as the objective and subjective perspectives coexist, the significance of a life can be put in irresolvable doubt.

Yet Nagel does not find absurdity repugnant. The recognition of absurdity is possible because of our advanced understanding of ourselves. In this regard, Nagel echoes Pascal’s Pensées: “The greatness of man is great in that he knows himself to be miserable. A tree does

14 Ibid, p. 22.
not know itself to be miserable. It is then being miserable to know oneself to be miserable; but it is also being great to know that one is miserable."\textsuperscript{15} The knowledge of our absurdity is, in a way, a price of human existence, and though it may sober us, the ability to evaluate our objective significance is a unique ability.

Having established that absurdity is real and inescapable, Nagel considers what practical steps should follow from the recognition of our absurdity. Nagel recognizes that, while suicide has been viewed as a response to absurdity, it is not. Suicide can only cease the struggle, not solve it. Instead of such action, Nagel recommends two courses to minimize our absurdity. In his article Nagel recommends returning to our lives with a certain irony. Though we reengage our lives, and begin taking them seriously again, we can view them with a sense of irony that can mitigate the subjective importance we may be tempted to feel. In \textit{The View from Nowhere} Nagel recommends humility as a means of winnowing our self-importance down to a more rationally justified level.\textsuperscript{16} Between the two works, we return to our lives with an ironical understanding of our objective unimportance and a humility that admits that, in our unimportance, we are no more important than those people around us. Our lives remain absurd, but less delusional.

\textbf{Nowhere Man}

The third solution Nagel considers in both “The Absurd” and \textit{The View from Nowhere} seeks to deny the conflict between the objective and subjective perspectives. In his article, Nagel puts the objection in the following way:

It may be objected that the standpoint from which these doubts are supposed to be felt does not exist – that if we take the recommended backward step we will land on thin air, without any basis for judgment about the natural responses we are supposed to be surveying. If we retain our usual standards of what is important, then questions about the


\textsuperscript{16} Nagel, \textit{The View from Nowhere}, pp. 222-223.
significance of what we are doing with our lives will be answerable in the usual way. But if we do not, then those questions can mean nothing to us, since there is no longer any content to the idea of what matters, and hence no content to the idea that nothing does.17

In *The View from Nowhere*, the objection takes similar form. The movement to the objective perspective is a denial of our basic humanity, and therefore it should not surprise us that human convictions concerning meaning and significance also disappear. “How can the unimportance of my life from that point of view have any importance for *me*? Perhaps the problem is a purely philosophical artefact, and not real.”18 The fact that human concerns do not matter for this constructed nowhere man does not mean that they should not matter to me. “Our objectivity is simply a development of our humanity and doesn’t allow us to break free of it.”19 The objection seeks to deflate the conflict. There is no collision between the objective and subjective perspectives when they are properly understood. Each perspective is properly distinct from the other, and the judgments they make are adequately relativized. The absurd is to be perplexed by that which is not perplexing.

Nagel responds to this solution in differing ways, emphasizing throughout the nature and importance of the objective perspective and the doubts it raises concerning subjective meaning. Nagel’s responses will give me the occasion to examine the objective perspective more closely than has thus far been possible. The viability of the third solution becomes, to use a bit of Shakespeare, a step on which we “must fall down, or else o’erleap.”20 Either the conflict is serious or it is illusory; we are stuck or we leap over what once seemed a terrible prospect.

18 Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, p. 216.
19 Ibid, pp. 220-221.
We have seen that the objective perspective allows us to view our lives “from outside” or “from far away.” Yet these distancing expressions are only a metaphorical means of relating the viewpoint Nagel is discussing. We must endeavor to understand what it is about the objective perspective that makes meaning impossible. And if objective meaning truly is impossible, should it affect the subjective perspective’s commitment to life?

In speaking of the objective perspective, Nagel has in mind a loosening of the grip that the particular concern we have for our lives bears on our reasons for engagement. I picture the universe of which I am a small part, and thereby I picture my concerns as small and insignificant. I view myself as one among billions; my life loses any privileged status. My detachment from the lives of others and my normal valuation of their lives becomes a pattern for this new, detached view of myself. Once I loosen the normal attachment, through these or other means, I become an unconcerned spectator.

Having discarded the inherent concern I have for my life in the normal course of living, I take new stock of my life. Everything now appears quite differently. The only justifications I seem to be able to give in defending my engagement in life hinge on the subjective valuations of that life. The concern I have then for my own particular life is unjustifiable when viewed from without. Not only can I not find objective reasons to care about my life, but Nagel argues that such reasons are impossible because there is a point at which justifications give out. “[W]e can ask not only why we should take aspirin, but why we should take trouble over our own comfort at all. The fact that we shall take the aspirin without waiting for an answer to this last question does not show that it is an unreal question.”21 We cannot answer the question by saying, “Well, it is my life!” since the subjective commitments are what are being doubted; we are seeking a

justification for those subjective commitments. But this search for objective justifications eventually founders: no objective reason can be given for the engagement we have toward our lives.

Yet why should the absence of objective justification affect the subjective meaning and importance of my life? This is the basic form of the third objection. I will begin with Nagel’s answer in “The Absurd” and then move to *The View from Nowhere*.

Nagel replies that such an objection “misconceives the nature of the backward step.”22 Its purpose is not to show us a larger perspective in order to demonstrate what is really important. Rather, it reveals a perspective from which nothing matters or can matter. Nagel notes that in ordinary cases of circumstantial absurdity, our judgments depend on normal standards of seriousness. But this is not so with regard to the objective perspective and the philosophical judgment of absurdity. Nagel concludes by reiterating the difference between the philosophical judgment of absurdity and ordinary cases: “[Philosophical absurdity] departs from them only in contrasting the pretensions of life with a larger context in which no standards can be discovered, rather than with a context from which alternative, overriding standards may be applied.”23

The judgment stems not from the paltriness of our specific concerns, as an ordinary sense of absurdity might. Rather, the objective perspective causes us to doubt any and all reasons for engagement in a life, even what we normally recognize as the best reasons. Nagel likens this philosophical judgment to skepticism.24 Once the cord to our lives has been severed, no reason is sufficient to justify reconnecting it. Absurdity does not involve so much a repudiation of

22 Ibid, p. 17.
23 Ibid, p. 18.
subjective significance as a recognition of its lack of foundation. The lack of foundation allows us to doubt the subjective judgments we make in choosing to take our lives seriously.

Without our natural affinity for life, objective detachment could permanently separate us from our subjective concerns, as Nagel notes in “The Absurd”:

What sustains us, in belief as in action, is not reason or justification, but something more basic than these— for we go on in the same way even after we are convinced that the reasons have given out. 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 lost our grip on that, reason will not give it back to us. **25**

It is not by reason that we return to our lives—if this were our only means of return, we would fail and perhaps go mad. We return despite the absence of justification. Nagel quotes a famous passage from Hume’s *Treatise on Human Nature*:

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours’ amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain’d, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther. **26**

There is no means of rationally assuaging the doubts we can feel concerning any subjective reasons for involvement. Our convictions concerning the significance of our lives return when we reengage our lives; however, we also know that reason did not justify the reengagement.

In *The View from Nowhere*, Nagel considers the following response: “Even if the problem can’t be dismissed as unreal, it may have a simple solution. Is it so certain that the attitudes conflict as they appear to? Since the two judgments arise from different perspectives, why isn’t


their content appropriately relativized to those perspectives, rendering the conflict illusory?"  

Nagel objects that the two judgments are made by one and the same person concerning one and the same thing. It is I who say both “this is meaningful” and “this is meaningless” about my life; the collocation of these judgments is what is absurd. Nagel laments: “The trouble is that the two attitudes have to coexist in a single person who is actually leading the life toward which he is simultaneously engaged and detached.”

Nagel does consider a compromise between the two perspectives. The objective perspective can recognize the role of the subjective perspective in the leading of a life. In *The View from Nowhere* he compares the objective perspective’s grasp of meaning to a deaf man’s grasp of music:

> The fact that the point of something can’t be understood from the objective standpoint alone doesn’t mean it must be regarded objectively as pointless, any more than the fact that the value of music is not directly comprehensible to someone deaf from birth means he has to judge it worthless. His knowledge of its value must depend on others. And the objective standpoint can recognize the authority of particular points of view with regard to worth as it can with regard to essentially perspectival facts.

Though from the objective perspective life is a matter of indifference, we can objectively recognize the subjective values that are central to the living of a life. But this does not justify the concern I feel for my life, and in this regard it is insufficient as a solution to absurdity. The chasm between objective and subjective evaluations remains unbridged. From the objective vantage, I can see the subjective convictions, but I cannot discover a way that leads to that place. For Nagel, the search for independent, objective justifications for living a life cannot be discovered.

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27 Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, p. 216.

28 Ibid.

This absence of justifications leaves us seriously undertaking tasks that may not warrant our concern, like the boy who questions doing his homework. The objective perspective makes us cognizant of this possibility. Thus we seek to find an inherent meaning to justify our engagement before we take life seriously. When the objective perspective fails to find this justification, yet we continue, we have absurdity in the philosophical sense.

Thus Nagel finds all attempts to reconcile the two perspectives, or to eliminate their conflict, unsatisfactory. The objective and subjective perspectives, necessary to human life and yet at odds, render human life absurd. Living is a matter of maintaining an uncomfortable peace between these two vantages in the pursuits of subjectivity.

**Proximity**

Nagel contrasts his sense of absurdity with Camus. Camus, in opposition to Nagel, locates the conflict of absurdity between a person and the world. It may be of value to delve more deeply into the salient differences between Camus and Nagel, and the reasons for their differing conclusions.

There are two main differences between Nagel and Camus. Nagel’s absurdity is constituted by our failure to find objective reasons to justify the concern central to our lives. The doubt that arises from consciousness of the objective perspective collides with the commitments of the subjective perspective. Until this objective consciousness awakens in us, we are not absurd, for the conflict is not present. For Camus, absurdity is a feature of our confrontation with the external world and consciousness is not an essential part of absurdity, but is only a way to recognize absurdity that exists regardless of this awareness. Thus Nagel holds that there is no possible world in which human existence would not be absurd, while for Camus absurdity comes about because of the world that we by chance find ourselves inhabiting.
For Camus, the absurd is born of a search for a meaning that this world cannot satisfy. Several passages from “Sisyphus” make this clear: “This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world.”30 “The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation.”31 “[T]he Absurd is not in man (if such a metaphor could have a meaning) nor in the world, but in their presence together.”32 Our natural longing for meaning cannot be fulfilled by this world, and this confrontation is absurdity.

Camus grants that consciousness of our absurdity can make us tragic, but it is not the source of absurdity. Camus makes this clear when he speaks of Sisyphus’ fate: “If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious.”33 Thus, the absurd person becomes conscious of absurdity and lives with it, but his consciousness is not a constitutive element of his absurdity—absurdity is simply a fact of the world as it is.

In some passages Camus writes as though it is a fact of the world that it lacks meaning. But he also makes a skeptical argument that we simply do not know if it has such a meaning:

I don’t know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? What I touch, what resists me—that is what I

32 Ibid.
33 Ibid, p. 121.
understand. And these two certainties—my appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle—I also know that I cannot reconcile them. What other truth can I admit without lying, without bringing in a hope I lack and which means nothing within the limits of my condition?34

Here Camus treats the problem as epistemic: transcendent meaning may not be knowable. This sense of absurdity is not the same as that in which the world as a fact has no objective meaning. But Camus ignores this difference in stating the problem.

Nagel distinguishes his conception of absurdity from that of Camus in the following way, part of which we have already seen:

Camus maintains in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that the absurd arises because the world fails to meet our demands for meaning. This suggests that the world might satisfy those demands if it were different. But now we can see that this is not the case. There does not appear to be any conceivable world (containing us) about which unsetttable doubts could not arise. Consequently, the absurdity of our situation derives not from a collision between our expectations and the world, but from a collision within ourselves.35

In Nagel’s account the absurd has nothing, constitutively, to do with the world: thus the question of absurdity may be raised concerning any possible world. Absurdity results from the opposition created when the subjective and objective perspectives are taken of any possible world. Disputes about the facts of the world have no bearing on absurdity.

This explains why, according to Nagel, humans are absurd while animals are not. As Nagel notes, “A mouse . . . is not absurd, because he lacks the capabilities for self-consciousness and self-transcendence that would enable him to see that he is only a mouse. If that *did* happen, his life would become absurd . . .”36 Consciousness of the objective perspective, from which our lives appear as matters of indifference, is necessary to render our caring for those lives absurd.

34 Ibid, p. 51.
We are absurd because we nonetheless rededicate ourselves to our lives given this objective indifference.

Camus in contrast argues: “If I were a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this life would have a meaning, or rather this problem would not arise, for I should belong to this world. I should be this world to which I am now opposed by my whole consciousness and my whole insistence upon familiarity. This ridiculous reason is what sets me in opposition to all creation.”\textsuperscript{37} In spite of the phrase “would have meaning,” Camus comes close in this passage to Nagel. Absurdity has to do with an ability to divorce ourselves from the world and look at it as though one were not a part of it, “from without.” Our reason, giving rise to objective doubts, sets us in opposition to the lives we lead and the world of which we are a part.

Camus also agrees that the problem is not to be solved:

The rule of method alluded to above appears here. If I judge that a thing is true, I must preserve it. If I attempt to solve a problem, at least I must not by that very solution conjure away one of the terms of the problem. For me the sole datum is the absurd. The first and, after all, the only condition of my inquiry is to preserve the very thing that crushes me, consequently to respect what I consider essential in it. I have just defined it as a confrontation and an unceasing struggle.\textsuperscript{38}

Like Nagel, Camus identifies the absurd as a conscious struggle that cannot be assuaged.

For Camus, absurdity is connected to the issue of suicide. This is clear from his own synopsis of essay: “The fundamental subject of ‘The Myth of Sisyphus’ is this: it is legitimate and necessary to wonder whether life has a meaning; therefore it is legitimate to meet the problem of suicide face to face.” While the precise connection between absurdity and suicide may seem unclear, and I will not explore it further here, Camus held that suicide was a possible rational response to consciousness of the absurd. But Camus then examines another course.

\textsuperscript{37} Camus, \textit{Sisyphus}, p. 51.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, p. 31.
Suffering can be avoided through hope: “Is one to die voluntarily or to hope in spite of everything?” Thus hope becomes a means of eluding absurdity while continuing to live.

Though we may not understand the meaning of the world, while it may elude us completely, it can still be hoped for by way of faith. While Camus notes several philosophers who embrace such a view, he rejects this appeal to faith. Camus specifically attacks the idea of the leap of faith as he found it in the writings of Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and Dostoevsky:

“Prayer,” says Alain, “is when night descends over thought.” “But the mind must meet the night,” reply the mystics and existentials. Yes, indeed, but not that night that is born under closed eyelids and through the mere will of man—dark, impenetrable night that the mind calls up in order to plunge into it. If it must encounter a night, let it be rather that of despair, which remains lucid—polar night, vigil of the mind, whence will arise perhaps that white and virginal brightness which outlines every object in the light of the intelligence.

Camus rejects those who would dissolve the absurd conflict through faith and thereby rid it from their consciousnesses. One cannot rationally resolve the conflict, and so faith jumps over reason. Camus specifically argues against Kierkegaard, believing that Kierkegaard, in his call for faith, demands the resignation of reason in the face of absurdity. “Christianity is the scandal, and what Kierkegaard calls for quite plainly is the third sacrifice required by Ignatius Loyola, the one in which God most rejoices: ‘The sacrifice of the intellect.’” His solution, then, is not a solution of the conflict but a suspension of our consciousness of it. We abandon reason and remain (or willingly become) ignorant of our absurdity. The accuracy of Camus’ characterization of Kierkegaard and faith will be considered in the next chapter. Central to Camus’ critique is a belief that Kierkegaard calls for a Pyrrhic abandonment of consciousness in defiance of the meaningless appearance of the world.

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39 Ibid, p. 16.
40 Ibid, p. 65.
41 Ibid, p. 37.
We can see why such an action, even if accepted, would not dissolve human absurdity if we return to Nagel’s sense of the absurd. Faith in the meaningfulness of the world does not eliminate the distance between objective and subjective perspectives. One can ask, even if the world is objectively meaningful, “Why should I bother?” This question cannot be answered in the way that justifies our subjective commitments.

Having faith that the world has a meaning does not justify participation; it bypasses justification entirely. Camus seems to assume that religious belief is an easy means of avoiding the question of absurdity, but Nagel recognizes that belief is not enough to justify involvement. Belief concerning the metaphysical nature of the world is something entirely different from the reasons that justify my involvement in that world.

Jeffrey Gordon notes this broadening of absurdity from Camus to Nagel. The problem of absurdity came to the fore in the wake of a particular movement in the history of ideas, in a particular setting. Yet Nagel takes this development and poses it in such a way that it becomes a universal human condition, independent of any metaphysical realities or beliefs. Gordon alludes to Nagel when he asks rhetorically, “Could it be, however, that the relation between the theme of the Absurd and its historical occasion, the so-called "death of God," is wholly contingent?” Gordon sees Nagel’s development of the philosophical sense of absurdity as just such a broadening. Absurdity is not a contingent fact about the world, but a feature of the clash between objective and subjective perspectives regardless of the world.

Gordon rejects Nagel’s account of the absurd, and defends Camus by a line of thought akin to the third solution to absurdity discussed by Nagel: the demands of the objective perspective cannot be fulfilled. Gordon argues that this should not surprise us. “No longer in a position to

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be affected by those issues, we are at the same time no longer in a position to *appreciate* their significance.\textsuperscript{43} The objective perspective is too far out of touch to recognize significance when it sees it.

Rather than refuting Nagel, Gordon reinforces Nagel’s point. We do not assume the objective perspective to discover what is really significant; rather, from the objective perspective we discover something very hard to notice when caught up in the subjective perspective: we discover that all our subjective concerns are open to objective doubt. Gordon acknowledges that we can always occupy a viewpoint from which our concerns appear as matters of indifference, and the doubts that this fact raises cannot be dispelled. This *is* the Nagelian sense of the absurd. Yet Gordon argues, similar to the third objective, that since the doubts the objective perspective raises cannot be answered, we ignore them.

Though Gordon errs in his criticism of Nagel, I agree with his characterization of the broadening of absurdity from Camus to Nagel. Gordon’s point can be seen in the example of Sisyphus. Sisyphus’ mythical fate is a natural expression for the absurd, according to Camus, because it evokes the absurdity of all human life. Condemned forever to the backbreaking and fruitless labor of rolling a rock up a hill, the pretension of Sisyphus’ labor is impossibly at odds with the reality of his situation. Likewise for Camus our absurdity lies in the conflict between our longing for meaning and the world we inhabit. The world is a rock, and cannot fulfill our desires. If Sisyphus *could* accomplish his task, he would not be absurd. If our longing for meaning *could* be fulfilled, we would likewise not be absurd.

Yet Sisyphus may just as well serve as an example of Nagel’s broadened sense of the absurd. Sisyphus may, if he becomes conscious of his fate, question the objective significance of

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, p. 28.
his task. Then Sisyphus would be absurd in Nagel’s sense, for he would remain committed to a
task whose serious undertaking he could doubt, seeing it as a matter of indifference. Yet even if
Sisyphus could complete his task he could still ask why he should be interested in rolling rocks
up a hill. He will still fail to find objective reasons to participate in this work, despite his new
reality. Thus, his ability to accomplish his task has no bearing on its objective significance. He
is absurd as long as he is conscious of this objective perspective.

The most general characterization of Camus and Nagel’s senses of absurdity may be drawn
in the following way. For Camus, the human longing for meaning is absurd because it cannot be
fulfilled by the world. Thus we spend our lives pursuing a task whose consummation cannot
come about. This is our similarity to Sisyphus: earnest engagement in a task the world
precludes. For Nagel, our subjective striving is not absurd because it cannot be fulfilled, but
because it cannot be justified. Thus we can always doubt the subjective dedication that is central
to being a human person.

I turn in the next section to a consideration of Kierkegaard, and the manner in which faith
can address both senses of absurdity. We have seen why Camus rejects faith and why Nagel
feels it cannot affect our absurd condition. Yet a consideration of several of Kierkegaard’s
works may give occasion to reconsider the relation of faith and the problem of absurdity. We
will begin with Camus and the absurdity of unattainable fulfillment, and this will be a
springboard from which we will then deal with how faith can respond to Nagel and the absurdity
of unattainable justification.
In this chapter I turn my focus from Thomas Nagel’s development of the absurd to the works of Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard writes extensively on issues of absurdity and faith, and their relation. This chapter begins with a dialectical examination of Camus’ criticism of faith in “The Myth of Sisyphus.” While Camus contends that the faith of which Kierkegaard speaks denies the absurd, this is not the case. Faith must recognize the absurd to be faith. From this picture of faith as a response to Camus sense of the absurd, I move in the latter part of this chapter to examine how faith can also stand as a response to Nagel’s sense of the absurd. Kierkegaard acknowledges the conflict between objective and subjective perspective. The faith he speaks of embraces subjectivity despite objective doubts.

In “The Myth of Sisyphus”, Camus writes concerning Søren Kierkegaard, “To be sure, it is hard to outline clear propositions in so elusive a writer.”1 The use of pseudonyms is only one among many factors that make Kierkegaard so elusive. As Camus notes, it is exceedingly difficult at times to pick Kierkegaard’s voice out from the polyphonic voices of his pseudonyms. Yet, at least in this regard, Kierkegaard has given us guidance with regards to attribution. In his “First and Last Explanation”, Kierkegaard writes, “Therefore, if it should occur to anyone to want to quote a particular passage from the books, it is my wish, my prayer, that he will do me the kindness of citing the respective pseudonymous author’s name, not mine . . .”2 The pseudonyms are not Kierkegaard’s mouthpieces, and to attribute any pseudonym’s views as

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1 Camus, Sisyphus, p. 37.

Kierkegaard’s is a risky endeavor. As Kierkegaard also tells us in his explanation, “Thus in the pseudonymous books there is not a single word by me.”

For our purposes, the question of Kierkegaard’s particular views can be left aside. Rather, our investigation seeks to understand two things, ultimately, concerning Kierkegaard. First, did he deal with something similar to Nagel’s sense of the absurd in his writings, pseudonymous or not. Second, if he did, what response did he recommend to this absurdity, and in what ways, if any, does this response differ from that advocated by Nagel. Leaving aside the ever-present questions of pseudonymity that are tempting in any study of Kierkegaard, the goal of this part is to develop a single tapestry from the various threads of the pseudonyms: a tapestry that will at once resemble and diverge from Nagel’s project.

We have already briefly sketched the criticisms of faith leveled by Camus in “The Myth of Sisyphus,” centering especially on what Camus characterizes as Kierkegaard’s evasion of the conflict of the absurd. That conflict, we remember, was between the drive for meaning that is so central to human life and the meaninglessness of the world. Camus faults the advocates of faith, especially Kierkegaard, with denying one of the conflict’s elements. In making this point, Camus centers on Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous Fear and Trembling; Camus quotes directly from the work as he considers faith as a solution to the absurd.

In this section I intend to show that Camus’ criticisms of Kierkegaard are mistaken by demonstrating the essential relation of the absurd conflict with faith in Fear and Trembling. Far from dissolving the conflict by false means, for Kierkegaard the conflict is the ground of faith. The discussion of faith and the absurd in Camus’ sense will lay the foundation for a later discussion of Nagel’s sense of the absurd. In addressing Nagel, I will turn to Kierkegaard’s

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3 Ibid, p. 626.
examination of the relation of objectivity and subjectivity across a number of his works, but especially the *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*.

*Fear and Trembling*, written by Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous author Johannes de Silentio, is a study of faith primarily focused on the Biblical father of faith, Abraham. It should be noted that Camus, in “The Myth of Sisyphus,” makes no distinction between Kierkegaard and de Silentio; it seems clear that the characterization of faith Camus objects to and which he attributes to Kierkegaard is that set forth by de Silentio. This is interesting, as de Silentio tells us again and again in the course of *Fear and Trembling* that he is not a man of faith; he is a poet-dialectician. Thus it is strange that Camus would take de Silentio’s stated beliefs for the position of faith. De Silentio does not possess the faith he sees in Abraham, but this does not lead him to dismiss Abraham. Rather, he finds in Abraham a figure and trial both wondrous and appalling. Of note for our present discussion, de Silentio and Camus take strikingly opposed positions regarding a faith they both admit they do not possess. Their dialectic may aide in showing the inadequacy of Camus’ criticism of Kierkegaard’s faith. But more than that, a clearer understanding of faith may be helpful as we turn, later, to a possible Kierkegaardian response to Nagel’s sense of the absurd.

To begin, Camus’ criticism should be recalled and expanded. As Camus discusses Kierkegaard in “The Myth of Sisyphus,” it becomes clear through repetition that Camus faults Kierkegaard for dissolving one of the elements of the absurd conflict. That conflict, according to Camus, is between the human longing for meaning, which Camus in this specific section calls nostalgia, and the irrational silence of the world of which we are a part. Of these two things,

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Camus finds that Kierkegaard’s faith demands that we sacrifice our nostalgia, giving it up in an act of trust in God.

Camus finds in de Silentio’s description of this position an evasion, a cheat, a scandal. And, in truth, something like the cheat that Camus describes is present. It gives up one of the elements of the conflict—the temporal longing—and its consolation is a belief in a future resolution. De Silentio acknowledges that this is where he stands; he gives up his nostalgia, to use Camus’ term. But Camus has overlooked a key point: de Silentio does not have faith. He longs to possess it, but he cannot. Central to de Silentio’s depiction of faith in *Fear and Trembling* is what he calls the double-movement of faith. There are two movements on the path to faith: one the movement of infinite resignation, the other the movement of faith. Both are essential to faith, but de Silentio admits he has only made the first movement and cannot make the second. Thus Camus, in taking de Silentio’s position as the position of faith, makes a fatal error. Camus criticizes de Silentio on resignation, not faith.

De Silentio seeks to make the double-movement clear through an example: “Nevertheless, this marvel can so easily deceive that I shall describe the movements in a specific case . . . . A young lad falls in love with a princess, and this love is the entire substance of his life, and yet the relation is such that is cannot possibly be realized, cannot possibly be translated from ideality into reality.”\(^5\) Reality precludes the fulfillment of the knight’s love. We may already note the parallel between such an example and the conflict Camus describes as our longing for meaning in a world that cannot possibly fulfill it. De Silentio describes the double-movement of faith through the responses to this conflict of two knights: the knight of infinite resignation and the knight of faith.

\(^5\) Ibid, p. 41.
The first knight, the knight of infinite resignation, beholds the impossibility of his love and resigns himself to this impossibility. “From the moment he has made the movement, the princess is lost.” He sees the conflict, his love and reality, and he knows the princess cannot be his within the bounds of time. Thus he gives her up, seeing the conflict and knowing it cannot possibly be resolved. It appears that the movement of infinite resignation is just what Camus has fixed upon when he accuses Kierkegaard of demanding the resignation of our longing. Yet this is not an accurate critique of the knight of faith.

“Infinite resignation is the last stage before faith,” de Silentio tells us, but now we turn to the knight of faith:

Now let us meet the knight of faith on the occasion previously mentioned. He does exactly the same as the other knight did: he infinitely renounces the love that is the substance of his life, he is reconciled in pain. But then the marvel happens; he makes one more movement even more wonderful than all the others, for he says: Nevertheless I have faith that I will get her—that is, by virtue of the absurd, by virtue of the fact that for God all things are possible.

The knight of faith acknowledges the impossibility of his love being fulfilled in reality, resigns himself to this fact, and then has faith that he will get her. Camus may claim that faith simply believes that what appears impossible is really possible, yet this does not seem to be de Silentio’s point, for he says, “Consequently, he [the knight of faith] acknowledges the impossibility, and in the very same moment he believes the absurd, for if he wants to imagine that he has faith without passionately acknowledging the impossibility with his whole heart and soul, he is deceiving himself and his testimony is neither here nor there, since he has not even

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6 Ibid, p. 44.

7 Ibid, p. 46.
attained infinite resignation.”8 Recognition of the impossibility and the accompanying resignation is a requisite movement before the movement of faith can be made.

De Silentio further explains, “The act of resignation does not require faith, but to get the least little bit more than my eternal consciousness requires faith, for this is the paradox. The movements are often confused.”9 The movements are confused, it seems, when Camus characterizes faith as the evasion of one of the poles of the conflict, saying of Kierkegaard, “The entire effort of his intelligence is to escape the antimony of the human condition.”10 Yet in the movement of faith there is no denial of what Camus calls the antimony. The knight of faith holds the two conflicted elements, recognizing that their reconciliation is impossible, but believes they can be reconciled. Both poles of the conflict are necessary to faith, for the leap of faith is made while conscious of the absurdity.

Camus believes he demonstrates the weakness of faith when he writes, “For the spectator, if he is conscious, that leap [of faith] is still absurd. In so far as it thinks it solves the paradox, it reinstates it intact.”11 Yet the knight of faith is conscious of this fact; he does not imagine that the movement is not absurd. It is absurd. The conflict must be recognized if he is to leap, otherwise he would simply walk the road of reason in the light of his understanding. In this way the man of faith is very close to Camus’ own position, a dogged resistance to false resolutions. Camus’ absurd man will not give up his nostalgia or the irrationality of the world; he holds fast to both in an act of scorn. The knight of faith, likewise, gives up neither his love nor the reality

8 Ibid, p. 47.
10 Camus, Sisypheus, p. 39.
11 Ibid, p. 65.
that precludes the consummation of that love. “He resigned everything infinitely, and then he grasped everything again by virtue of the absurd.”

The same movement of faith is made by Abraham, when God commands him to sacrifice his son, Isaac. He both resigns his love for Isaac in obedience to God and believes that Isaac will not perish. De Silentio, comparing himself to Abraham, knows that he could only take the step of resignation. “The moment I mounted the horse, I would have said to myself: Now all is lost, God demands Isaac, I sacrifice him and along with him all my joy—yet God is love and continues to be that for me, for in the world of time God and I cannot talk with each other, we have no language in common.”

Where de Silentio can only resign himself to God’s love, Abraham makes the additional movement of faith. While acknowledging the impossibility of keeping Isaac after hearing God’s command, Abraham believes that Isaac will live.

Thus faith is not as distant from the conflict as Camus imagines. In seeking to distance his feeling of absurdity from faith, Camus instead demonstrates their proximity:

It [the absurd] is that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints, my nostalgia for unity, this fragmented universe and the contradiction that binds them together. Kierkegaard suppresses my nostalgia and Husserl gathers the world together. That is not what I was expecting. It was a matter of living and thinking with those dislocations, of knowing whether one had to accept or refuse. There can be no question of masking the evidence, of suppressing the absurd by denying one of the terms of its equation.

Both the absurd man described by Camus and the knight of faith described by de Silentio live and think with the dislocations Camus describes. It is de Silentio’s resignation that surrenders half the conflict; Abraham, by faith, did not deny either of the terms of the conflict, though holding to both may have been absurd. The knight of faith acknowledges the impossibility and

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13 Ibid, p. 35.

14 Camus, *Sisyphus*, p. 50.
believes. Such an internal grasp of the conflict is just what de Silentio admits he cannot do. Yet he hopes for the day he might possess faith, imagining it as the highest accomplishment. “If I ever manage to be able to make this movement, I will in the future drive with four horses.”

De Silentio’s position marks a middling way between the absurd man and the knight of faith. As Edward Mooney writes, “In the overall scheme of Fear and Trembling, resignation is a transitional stage between lack of faith and faith, between shallow unbelievers and heroic men of faith.” De Silentio believes in God but he does not possess the faith of Abraham. “I cannot make the movement of faith, I cannot shut my eyes and plunge confidently into the absurd; it is for me an impossibility, but I do not praise myself for that.” Though the movement of faith is impossible for him, he does not for this reason disparage it. “But to be able to lose one’s understanding and along with it everything finite, for which it is the stockbroker, and then to win the very same finitude again by virtue of the absurd—this appalls me, but that does not make me say it is something inferior, since, on the contrary, it is the one and only marvel.”

Though he uses the struggles of Abraham and the knight of faith to illustrate the movements of faith, de Silentio struggles with another conflict. He is not called to give up his son; he does not have the specific promise or commandment that Abraham had. Yet de Silentio recognizes a conflict that demands a faith like unto Abraham’s: the conflict between the world and God’s love. “To me God’s love, in both the direct and the converse sense, is incommensurable with the whole of actuality.” Here de Silentio makes his closest approach to

15 Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 51.
17 Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 34.
18 Ibid, p. 36.
19 Ibid, p. 34.
Camus. De Silentio cannot reconcile the world as he encounters it with his belief in God’s love. Reality does not mesh with de Silentio’s belief in God’s love. Despite this conflict, he holds fast to God’s love. “But I do not have faith; this courage I lack. I am convinced that God is love; for me this thought has a primal lyrical validity.”20 While he has consolation in God’s love for eternity, in the realm of the temporal he resigns this hope. He has made the movement of infinite resignation, but he cannot make the additional movement of faith that grasps again the temporal which was given up.

The knight of faith, after making such a movement of resignation, would then believe by faith, despite the impossibility, that God’s love and the world are reconcilable. This de Silentio cannot do; he sacrifices the world in order to keep God’s love. “I do not trouble God with my little troubles, details do not concern me; I gaze only at my love and keep its virgin flame pure and clear. Faith is convinced that God is concerned about the smallest things.”21 The knight of faith is convinced that God is concerned with even the most impossibly hard aspects of reality. Faith is convinced of a reconciliation it acknowledges as impossible.

If Camus would seek the response of faith to the absurd— that conflict between man’s longing for meaning and reality—it seems misconceived to characterize it as the resignation of the longing. The knight of resignation might make such a move, recognizing the impossibility of holding both of the elements of the conflict. But the knight of faith, after this resignation and still recognizing the impossibility, believes and is convinced of their reconciliation. He believes, despite the nature of the world, that his longing for meaning can be fulfilled. Not in eternity, but

20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
in temporality. Though he may object to such a faith for differing reasons, Camus cannot claim, as he does, that faith is a denial of the conflict.

Besides evading the conflict of the absurd, Camus finds in faith an irrational jump that he cannot make. This jumping over reason Camus cannot justify.

That transcends, as the saying goes, the human scale; therefore it must be superhuman. But this ‘therefore’ is superfluous. There is no logical certainty here. There is no experimental probability either. All I can say is that, in fact, that transcends my scale. If I do not draw a negation from it, at least I do not want to found anything on the incomprehensible. I want to know whether I can live with what I know and with that alone. I am told again that here the intelligence must sacrifice its pride and the reason bow down. But if I recognize the limits of the reason, I do not therefore negate it, recognizing its relative powers. I merely want to remain in this middle path where the intelligence can remain clear. If that is its pride, I see no sufficient reason for giving it up.22

Camus sees the human longing for meaning and the reality of the world and denies that there can be any reconciliation. “And these two certainties—my appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle—I also know that I cannot reconcile them.”23 Unwilling to give up his understanding, Camus cannot accept any superhuman reconciliation. Yet the only reconciliation he can imagine is a superhuman one, for his human measure cannot conceive of any reconciliation. He is left, then, with the absurd.

We are now in a position to see that that de Silentio, in characterizing faith, does not describe a denial of the absurd through sacrificing one of the elements of the conflict.

Kierkegaard himself, in his journal, demonstrates the intimate relation of absurdity to faith when he writes, “[T]o be a believer every person must be alone with the absurd.”24 The difference between the faith described by de Silentio and the consciousness of absurdity propounded by

22 Camus, *Sisyphus*, p. 40
23 Ibid, p. 51.
Camus is what is done with this absurd conflict once it is affirmed. Both Camus and de Silentio see the impossibility of reconciling the absurd conflict, and, likewise, neither will deny the truth of the opposed elements. De Silentio does not deny the repugnant nature of the world; Camus will not abandon the longing for meaning. The knight of faith accepts and is convinced of reconciliation, the absurd man does not and is not so reconciled. The faith of Kierkegaard, then, is not so far from the scorn called for by Camus. Scorn is to continue the absurd struggle in full consciousness, despite the fact that there can be no reconciliation; faith is convinced of reconciliation, not in infinity, but even now.

We have seen, then, that faith is not the easy and improper resolution Camus imagined it to be in “The Myth of Sisyphus.” Faith struggles with the same conflict of which the absurd man is conscious—the struggle of reconciling the irreconcilable, of understanding that which is not understandable. Or, as we find it written in Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Fragments*, “But the ultimate potentiation of every passion is always to will its own downfall, and so it is also the ultimate passion of the understanding to will the collision, although in one way or another the collision must become its downfall. This, then, is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think.”

Faith, like consciousness of the absurd, involves the acceptance of the coexistence of two realities that the understanding cannot reconcile.

**A Grave Pursuit**

In regarding Camus and de Silentio we have focused on the conflict between a person’s longing for meaning and the nature of the world. Camus and de Silentio, recognizing this conflict, develop the differing responses of scorn and faith: a faith that believes the impossible

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conflict can be reconciled and a consciousness of absurdity that denies that any such reconciliation can be realized. Yet with Nagel we remember a different problem, a problem of motivation independent of any metaphysical reality.

For Nagel absurdity is a problem that could appear whether God exists or there is simply the silence Camus found. From the objective perspective involvement in any of these realities becomes a matter of indifference. We transition now to another of Kierkegaard’s works, one that may bear more directly on Nagel’s sense of the absurd. Yet in this transition we may be aided one last time by Camus, in whose dramatization of Dostoevsky’s novel *Demons* we find the following confrontation between the character Grigoriev and the advocate of logical suicide, Alexei Kirillov:

Grigoriev: And what, in your opinion, keeps people from killing themselves?

Kirillov: The pain. Those who kill themselves through madness or despair don’t think of the pain. But those who kill themselves through reason obviously think of it.

Grigoriev: What, are there people who kill themselves through reason?

Kirillov: Many. Were it not for the pain and the prejudice, there would be many more, a very large number, probably all men.

Grigoriev: What?

Kirillov: But the idea that they will suffer keeps them from killing themselves. Even when one knows there is no pain, the idea remains. Just imagine a stone as big as a house falling on you. You wouldn’t have time to feel anything, to suffer at all. Well, even so, men are afraid and hesitate. It is interesting.

Grigoriev: There must be another reason.

Kirillov: Yes…the other world.

Grigoriev: You mean punishment.

Kirillov: No, the other world. People think there is a reason for going on living.

Grigoriev: And there isn’t any?
Kirillov: No, there is none, and that’s why we are free. It is a matter of indifference whether we live or die.\textsuperscript{26}

In this passage we find bound up those strands of absurdity, meaning, freedom and suicide which become central to Camus’ “Myth of Sisyphus.” Yet Kirillov draws attention to one point that Nagel also makes in his article, “The Absurd.” Immortality is not a solution to the question of absurdity, for as Nagel noted earlier, “[W]ould not a life that is absurd if it lasts seventy years be infinitely absurd if it lasted through eternity?”\textsuperscript{27} Appeals to eternity are an evasion of the question of absurdity, as de Silentio has already shown. The question of meaning, if it cannot be answered for the present, seems unlikely to be resolved by eternity. It is a question of reconciling the subjective seriousness of a life with the objective doubt felt when we see that, objectively, a human life is a matter of indifference. The length of a life has no bearing on its significance, or its absurdity. There seems to be no compelling, objective reason to engage in a life, even if that life is without end.

If there is to be a response to Nagel’s sense of absurdity, it should be equally applicable to a life of seventy years and an eternal life. It should address the apparent conflict between the objective and subjective perspectives. Such a response seems apparent in the next work to be considered, a work penned by Kierkegaard under his own name. In the imagined discourse, “At a Graveside,” Kierkegaard speaks about how the thought of death can be an aide in the earnest, or serious, pursuit of life. Despite acknowledging the objective nothingness of a human existence, Kierkegaard nonetheless encourages his listener to appropriate the thought of death in order to live with subjective seriousness. An objective grasp of the significance of human worth does not seem to preclude the subjective pursuit of life with earnestness.

\textsuperscript{26} Camus, \textit{The Possessed}, p. 33-34.

\textsuperscript{27} Nagel, “The Absurd”, p. 12.
Though elsewhere Kierkegaard speaks at length of the significance of the hope of eternal life for the believer\textsuperscript{28}, in “At a Graveside” the afterlife is not mentioned. Kierkegaard opens the discourse with words he reiterates throughout his speech, “Then all is over!”\textsuperscript{29} In avoiding mention of eternity, Kierkegaard pushes his listener toward the focus of the discourse: how the thought of death’s impending decision can be an aide to earnestness in life, an aide in subjective inwardness. And just as de Silentio assured us that faith is confident not in resolutions in eternity, but in resolutions even now; so Kierkegaard speaks to the role of earnestness in life without appeal to what may lie after death. His solution will be of interest to the believer, but also the nonbeliever, as a means of relating to life. This is no false appeal to eternity or infinity, but an examination of the balance between subjective and objective realities.

“Then all is over!” With these words Kierkegaard pronounces the verdict of death for the subject of his discourse. Yet, though we listen at the funeral of another, the discourse is aimed at each of us. Kierkegaard’s concern in “At a Graveside” is subjectivity and how the earnest thought of death can be an aide in subjective inwardness. The discourse concerns the individual’s relation to his own death, for this is where earnestness is to be found. Kierkegaard is quick to emphasize this essentially inward orientation of the earnest thought of death: “Death can expressly teach us that earnestness lies in the inner being, in thought, can teach that it is only an illusion when the external is regarded light-mindedly or heavy-mindedly or when the observer, profoundly considering the thought of death, forgets to think about and take into


account his own death.”

Kierkegaard sets his discourse in opposition to Epicurus at several points, writing, “A pagan has already declared that one ought not to fear death, because ‘when it is, I am not, and when I am, it is not.’” Kierkegaard identifies the jest by which Epicurus and others place themselves outside of their lives, looking in at death. Epicurus takes an objective viewpoint in regarding death, from which he disengages himself totally from his death. But for Kierkegaard the earnest thought of death is the contrary—it is a subjective encounter with death, a commingling of death with oneself. “Earnestness is that you think death, and that you are thinking it as your lot, and that you are then doing what death indeed is unable to do—namely, that you are and death also is.” Though when death is, indeed I am not; this does not preclude my appropriating the thought of death as an aide while I yet live. Here the objective admission that death is the end of life does not preclude the subjective appropriation of the thought of death as a spur to earnestness.

Kierkegaard links earnestness with subjectivity. Indeed, the listener is mistaken if he thinks something external is earnestness, for earnestness concerns the consciousness’ relation to the external. It lies in none of the external circumstances of life: “[E]arnestness is the earnestness of the inner being, not of the job.” In juxtaposing life’s earnestness with death’s earnestness, Kierkegaard notes how life often deceives one into thinking the external is the

30 Ibid, p. 73.
31 Ibid, p. 74.
32 Ibid, p. 73.
33 Ibid, p. 75.
34 Ibid, p. 74.
earnestness. A person may believe that sufferings, trials and tasks are earnestness; but this is incorrect, for earnestness is how the person subjectively relates to these things. With death this illusion is less likely, for once death is, “all is over.” Thus earnestness involves the thought of death, the inner appropriation. “Life’s earnestness is earnest, and yet there is not earnestness unless the external is ennobled in one’s consciousness; in this lies the possibility of illusion. The earnestness of death is without deception, because it is not death that is earnest but the thought of death.”35 Here again we see that the objective cannot be taken seriously unless it is made a matter of inward consciousness.

Thus Kierkegaard makes the cardinal distinction of his discourse: that between mood and earnestness. “To think of oneself as dead is earnestness; to be witness to the death of another is mood.”36 The deaths of others are external events, and though they may greatly affect us, we are mistaken if we think that these deaths create anything but mood. My own death is singularly important to me, in a way that no other death can approach. The deaths of others, being objective events, are not linked to my subjectivity as my own death is. Earnestness is the thought that I shall die, that there is a scarcity of time before me. Consciousness of this future, impending loss ennobles life, for “to think that all was over, that everything was lost along with life, in order then to win everything in life—this is earnestness.”37

The consciousness of death, the earnest thought of death, has the power of ennobling the present by aiding in the movement of inwardness. This ennoblement is glimpsed in common examples of those nearing death. Kierkegaard notes that the earnest person has always that feeling of scarcity that is usually reserved for those confronted with certain death:

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36 Ibid, p. 75.
37 Ibid, p. 76.
Death itself produces a scarcity of time for the dying. Who has not heard how one day, sometimes one hour, was jacked up in price when the dying one bargained with death! Who has not heard how one day, sometimes one hour, gained infinite worth because death made time dear! Death is able to do this, but with the thought of death the earnest person is able to create a scarcity so that the year and the day receive infinite worth—and when it is a time of scarcity the merchant profits by using time.38

Consciousness of death as a subjective reality is a spur to inwardness; and it is this inwardness that ennobles life. The urgency supplied by the thought of death helps the individual to view no time or task as too small; he dismisses such objective evaluations. He undertakes all the tasks of life with seriousness.

We see, then, that earnestness is dependent on no external circumstance, but rather ennobles all external circumstances. Death creates the scarcity of time, but it is the thought of death that ennobles time by appropriating the scarcity. Kierkegaard drives the listener to the conclusion that earnestness is a matter of subjectively appropriating the external. Nothing external can be an object of earnestness unless it subjectively matters.

And though the earnest person grasps life, the presence of objectivity is not completely lost, as is evinced in the following self-reflective statement: “Then earnestness grasps the present this very day, disdains no task as too insignificant, rejects no time as too short, works with all its might even though it is willing to smile at itself if this effort is said to be merit before God, in weakness is willing to understand that a human being is nothing at all and that one who works with all one’s might gains only the proper opportunity to wonder at God.”39 The earnest person does not lose all objective perspective. If a person would praise him, he responds with an irony not unlike that advocated by Nagel in his “The Absurd.” For objectively, he knows he is nothing. In like fashion, he spurns all comparisons, submitting himself to humble equality with

38 Ibid, p. 84.
39 Ibid, p 83.
others, which resembles the course advocated by Nagel in *The View from Nowhere*. Irony and humility accompany the earnest person, though in earnestness he grasps this very day.

The earnest person is not objectively deluded concerning his own worth. But this does not prevent his taking life seriously. For the scarcity of time makes time, by this same token, precious: “[T]he earnestness of death has helped to make a final hour infinitely meaningful; the earnest thought of it has helped to make a long life as meaningful as in a time of scarcity, as watchful as if sought by thieving hands.” The length of time has no bearing on the ennobling power of earnestness—an hour and a lifetime each obtain infinite significance. And the inevitable conclusion of all lives in death does not affect the earnestness, “Even though the equality of all the dead is that now all is over, there is still one difference, my listener, a difference that cries aloud to heaven—the difference of what that life was that now in death is over.” Indeed, all those devices of time which fuel absurdity rest on the view from which all is over. But the earnest person understands that, though all will be over, it is not over yet. “So, then, let death keep its power, ‘that all is over.’ but let life also keep the right to work while it is day; and let the earnest person seek the thought of death as an aid in that work.”

Subjectivity is central to the serious pursuit of life: this fact is central to “At a Graveside”. As Kierkegaard develops and emphasizes again and again the necessity of subjective appropriation as the basis for earnestness, he recognizes both the objective nothingness of human existence and the inability of external factors to create earnestness. An admission of the objective triviality of subjective matters does not affect the seriousness with which they are approached in subjectivity. Life only becomes ennobled when it is appropriated in earnestness,

40 Ibid, p. 84.
41 Ibid, p. 85.
42 Ibid, p. 84.
or inwardness, by the subject; otherwise life remains what it objectively is: nothing. And, even after this ennoblement, when the earnest person is forced to consider himself and his works objectively, he smiles in the knowledge that they are nothing.

This quick examination of a Kierkegaardian picture of the commingling of the external and internal, of objectivity and subjectivity, suggests the path ahead. It stands as an example of the relation of subjectivity and objectivity which Kierkegaard develops in the last pseudonymous works to be considered. These are the works *Philosophical Fragments* (henceforth *Fragments*) and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (henceforth *Postscript*), penned by the pseudonym Johannes Climacus.

Before turning completely to these pseudonymous works, we should note the similarity between Climacus and Kierkegaard regarding the issue of death and its relation to subjectivity. In the *Postscript*, Climacus develops a similar line of association between subjective appropriation and the thought of death. Climacus considers how death can be an aide in developing subjectivity: “But for me, *my* dying is by no means something in general; for others, *my* dying is some such thing. Nor am *I* for myself some such thing in general. But if the task is to become subjective, then every subject becomes *for himself* exactly the opposite of some such thing in general.” 43 Subjectivity must abandon this objective “in general” and replace it with possessive terms: my death, my life, my self. Kierkegaard recognized this general, objective orientation of the thought of death in the Epicurean pronouncement, “Death is nothing for me.” Epicurus fails to apprehend the subjective meaning of death, preferring an objective vantage in which subjective appropriation is replaced by an objective “death in general” and thus the thought of death loses its earnestness.

Climacus continues:

But if the task is to become subjective, then for the individual subject to think death is not at all some such thing in general but is an act, because the development of subjectivity consists precisely in this, that he, acting, works through himself in his thinking about his own existence, consequently that he actually thinks what is thought by actualizing it, consequently that he does not think for a moment: Now, you must keep watch every moment—but that he keeps watch every moment. Here everything becomes more and more subjective, which is natural when it is a matter of beginning to develop the subjectivity.44

Death and mortality are subjective matters and cannot be comprehended objectively. Likewise immortality, a matter that remains in the background of “At a Graveside,” cannot be thought of objectively: “Objectively the question [of immortality] cannot be answered at all, because objectively the question of immortality cannot be asked, since immortality is precisely the intensification and highest development of the developed subjectivity. Not until one rightly wills to become subjective can the question rightly arise—how, then, could it be answered objectively?”45 Climacus agrees with Nagel: questions of mortality and immortality are matters of indifference from an objective vantage.

Speculations

In common to both Kierkegaard and Climacus is a call for the subjective appropriation of that which is a matter of objective indifference. Subjectivity, both its relation to truth and its opposition to objectivity, is the theme of the *Fragments* and the *Postscript*. The pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus pens both works; an author who, like de Silentio, examines a faith he does not possess: Christianity. Climacus does not disparage or lampoon the Christian task of developing subjectivity, but becomes its champion against the movement into objectivity which Climacus found as central to the goals of speculative philosophy in his day. The speculative task

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44 *Postscript*, p. 169.

45 *Postscript*, p. 173.
of stripping away the subjective, which Climacus found to be impossible for a person, is replaced with the passionate movement of inwardness.

A crucial difference between Nagel and Climacus should be noted before proceeding. While Nagel uses the term “absurd” to describe the conflict between objective and subjective perspectives, this is not the way in which Climacus uses the term. Climacus’ discussion of the relation of objectivity and subjectivity is intertwined with a discussion of the relation of God and persons. While we will concentrate of the former passages, the absurd for Climacus is in the domain of the latter. The idea that an existing person can relate to God is for Climacus a paradox. But, above this, the Christian claim that God has actually become an existing person is the absurd. Thus, though Climacus does address Nagel’s sense of absurdity, and though he does speak of faith as a response to this conflict, he does not call this conflict the absurd. This should be kept in mind in the following discussion.

Much of Climacus’ project in the Fragments and Postscript can be characterized as a response to the drive for objectivity that he saw as central to the speculative philosophies of such systematic philosophers as Hegel. Central to these systems was the loss of subjectivity to apprehend and comprehend objective truth. As Merold Westphal describes it, “Speculation, whether Platonic or Hegelian, is a mode of objectivity in which the finitude of the subject is stripped away for the sake of an objective, universal, timeless apprehension of the truth.”

Climacus response to such speculative philosophy is of significance to our greater project, noting the proximity of this speculative goal to the role of the objective perspective in Nagel’s sense of the absurd. In addition to the Platonic and Hegelian, we will see that Climacus responses deal

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just as easily with the Nagelian form of speculative philosophy embodied in the objective perspective.

Climacus is familiar with and critical of the speculative thought advocated in his age as the cure to all human ills. Hegel and the like sought to understand subjective matters through an objective grasp. In opposition to this movement, Climacus undertakes the opposite movement of developing subjectivity as response to the philosophical assumption of objectivity as truth. Objectivity, according to speculative philosophy, is a means of reaching true reality apart from subjective prejudices. Ethics, for instance, is developed by the stripping away of subjectivity in order to understand the human condition objectively. Climacus, while identifying that such things as human vice “are to be discarded,” avoids appealing to objectivity to effect this change.

Rather, the “so-called subject” must truly become a subject:

When one ignores this little Socratically jesting and Christianly infinitely concerned distinction between being a so-called subject of sorts and being a subject or becoming one and being what one is by having become that—then the admired wisdom turns out to be that the subject’s task is to strip away more and more of his subjectivity and become more and more objective. From this it is easy to see what this guidance understands by being a so-called subject of sorts, that it thereby quite correctly understands the accidental, the angular, the selfish, the eccentric, etc., of which every human being can have plenty. Christianity does not deny, either, that such things are to be discarded; it has never been a friend of impudent antics. But the difference is simply that science and scholarship want to teach that becoming objective is the way, whereas Christianity teaches that the way is to become subjective, that is, truly to become a subject.  

Climacus’ undertaking is to develop this true subjectivity in contrast to the movement of objectivity.

The goal of speculative philosophy is errant in its denial of human reality, and as such is the source of much confusion. “That the knowing spirit is an existing spirit, and that every human being is such a spirit existing for himself, I cannot repeat enough, because the fantastical

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disregard of this has been the cause of much confusion.” Much of the perplexity that speculative philosophy grapples with is a consequence of the movement of objectivity. A human being simply cannot exist \textit{sub specie aeterni}. Existence precludes this. Yet this does not stop the speculative philosophers from seeking this vantage, despite its impossibility.

Modern speculative thought has mustered everything to enable the individual to transcend himself objectively, but this just cannot be done. Existence exercises its constraint, and if philosophers nowadays had not become pencil-pushers serving the trifling busyness of fantastical thinking, it would have been discerned that suicide is the only somewhat practical interpretation of its attempt.

Existence precludes the achievement of the speculative goal, exercising its constraint. Rather than seeking that which we cannot be, Climacus seeks that which we are, existing spirits. As Climacus entreats us, “Let us be human beings.”

The embrace of objectivity is a denial of a basic element of our existence. Climacus faults the speculative philosophers for advocating such an embrace. They act improperly in their disregard of our basic subjectivity, which he parodies in the following passage:

Of what help is it to explain how the eternal truth is to be understood eternally when the one to use the explanation is prevented from understanding it in this way because he is existing and is merely a fantast if he fancies himself to be \textit{sub specie aeterni}, consequently when he must avail himself precisely of the explanation of how the eternal truth is to be understood in the category of time by someone who by existing is himself in time, something the honored professor himself admits, if not always, then every three months when he draws his salary.

Contrary to embracing subjectivity, the speculative seeker seeks to occupy an objective perspective: “[T]he speculative thinker, on the other hand, wants to be an existing person, but an

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48 Ibid, p. 189.
49 Ibid, p. 197.
51 Ibid, p. 192.
existing person who is not subjective, not in passion, indeed, is existing \textit{sub specie aeterni}—in short, he is absent-minded."\textsuperscript{52}

Climacus maintains that this kind of objective grasp of the universe, the perspective \textit{sub specie aeterni}, is not possible for an existing person. Such a vantage is for God alone. Climacus makes this difference plain:

But the absolute difference between God and a human being is simply this, that a human being is an individual existing being (and this holds for the best brain just as fully as for the most obtuse), whose essential task therefore cannot be to think \textit{sub specie aeterni}, because as long as he exists, he himself, although eternal, is essentially an existing person and the essential for him must therefore be inwardness in existence; God, however, is the infinite one, who is eternal.\textsuperscript{53}

Climacus illustrates this distinction when he appropriates the following words of Lessing:

Lessing has said: If God held all truth enclosed in his right hand, and in his left hand the one and only ever-striving drive for truth, even with the corollary of erring forever and ever, and if he were to say to me: Choose!—I would humbly fall down to him at his left hand and say: Father, give! Pure truth is indeed only for you alone!\textsuperscript{54}

Speculative thought seeks the right hand. In so doing, it seeks a certainty that cannot be realized and distorts the subjective inwardness central to life. It seeks to go beyond faith to certainty, but this simply cannot be done. As Westphal notes:

The Hegelian project of going beyond faith is doubly mistaken, as Climacus sees it. First, it promises to replace the objective uncertainty with certainty, which it cannot do. But though Climacus sees the system as on par with faith so far as certainty goes, he will not construe it as an instance for faith. For, in the second place, it eliminates the moment of passionate, inward appropriation, reducing the self to an impersonal observer devoid of existential identity.\textsuperscript{55}

In addition to being a futile effort, the movement toward objectivity confuses subjective questions. One of the confusions of the objective movement is the effect it has on matters of

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, p. 227.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, p. 217.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, p. 106.
\textsuperscript{55} Westphal, “Kierkegaard and Hegel,” p. 115.
subjectivity, as we saw earlier with regards to subjective and objective appraisals of death.

Matters of importance to a subject become matters of indifference when regarded objectively. Climacus describes this movement from subjectivity to objectivity and its effects on the matters central to subjectivity:

The way of objective reflection turns the subjective individual into something accidental and thereby turns existence into an indifferent, vanishing something. The way to the objective truth goes away from the subject, and while the subject and subjectivity become indifferent, the truth also becomes indifferent, and that is precisely its objective validity, because the interest, just like the decision, is subjectivity. The way of objective reflection now leads to abstract thinking, to mathematics, to historical knowledge of various kinds, and always leads away from the subjective individual, whose existence or nonexistence becomes, from an objective point of view, altogether properly, infinitely indifferent, altogether properly, because, as Hamlet says, existence and nonexistence have only subjective significance. At its maximum, this way will lead to a contradiction, and to the extent that the subject does not become totally indifferent to himself, this is merely an indication that his objective striving is not objective enough. At its maximum, it will lead to the contradiction that only objectivity has come about, whereas subjectivity has gone out, that is, the existing subjectivity that has made an attempt to become what in the abstract sense is called subjectivity, the abstract form of an abstract objectivity.\(^{56}\)

Objective reflection takes what is most essential to the person, his subjective existence, and transforms it into a matter of indifference. Climacus sees the contradiction forming as the subject begins to consider his existence objectively—the conflict between the subjective and the objective ways of regarding subjective matters. It is a conflict between the answers to the questions “What does my life mean \textit{for me}?” and “What does my life mean?” The one is subjective, the other objective; and while the first may be answered, Climacus would surely fault the objective orientation of the second. Like Hamlet, for Climacus these questions have only subjective significance. As Edward Mooney notes, “To get at the makeup of the physical universe, a scientist (and often a philosopher) discounts personal standpoints, so far as possible,

\(^{56}\) \textit{Postscript}, p. 193.
but to understand an existential stance, the opposite is required.”\textsuperscript{57} To disregard the subject in matters of subjectivity is to be left with no basis for judgment.

A similar point is made in Kierkegaard’s \textit{The Concept of Anxiety}. The pseudonym, Vigilius Haufniensis, makes a note concerning the relationship between meaning and subjectivity in the course of examining the case of Macbeth. Macbeth, when he commits the act of murder, in guilt seeks to justify his action as insignificant. He takes an objective vantage which is the movement out of inwardness or subjectivity, and therefore it should not surprise us that the momentous act of murder becomes a matter of indifference. Haufniensis writes, “Yet every individual who has lost inwardness can truly say ‘The wine of life is drawn,’ and also ‘There’s nothing serious in mortality; all is but toys,’ for inwardness is precisely the fountain that springs up unto eternal life, and what issues from this fountain is precisely earnestness.”\textsuperscript{58} If the term inwardness seems an additional unclear term in the development of this theme, Haufniensis clarifies slightly: “It is no doubt difficult to give a definition of inwardness. In the meantime, I shall at this point say it is earnestness.”\textsuperscript{59} Matters of subjectivity are only significant when appropriated by the inwardness of subjectivity, similar to the earnest appropriation seen in “At a Graveside.”

This same trend of inappropriate objectification of subjective matters is parodied in an example offered by Climacus of a man who earnestly asks his wife if he is a Christian. The wife responds in the affirmative based on a geopolitical fact: They live in a Christian nation, do they not? Westphal recognizes the two-fold error made by the wife in this objectifying answer:

\textsuperscript{57} Mooney, “Understanding Abraham,” p. 103.


\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
Her husband is asking, out of personal passion and interest, how he should live his life. By moving the discourse to the area of objective facts (of more interest to population statisticians than metaphysicians, to be sure), she tells him at one and the same time (1) that his question is already answered objectively so there is nothing for him to ponder or to choose, and (2) that for this reason his question is a silly one that should never have arisen in the first place. In this way the objectivity that purports to be a fulfillment of his subjectivity is in fact its obliteration.60

Christianity, like death or immortality, is a concern of subjectivity that cannot be correctly cast as an objective matter. When couched in objective terms, the passion of subjectivity is replaced by the indifference of objectivity.

In pursuing objectivity, to the extent that human life does not become a matter of total indifference, total objectivity has not been reached. Against this movement toward objective reflection, Climacus offers the alternative of subjective reflection: “Subjective reflection turns inward toward subjectivity and in this inward deepening will be of the truth, and in such a way that, just as in the preceding, when objectivity was advanced, subjectivity vanished, here subjectivity as such becomes the final factor and objectivity the vanishing.”61 The movements of objectivity and subjectivity run in different directions, and preclude each other. That which is subjectively important is open to objective doubt.

Objectivity, it seems, is of little aide in the great existential endeavor of living a life. The motivations and concerns of living are lost in the jump to the objective vantage point. Hegel, and the other speculative philosophers, seeks an objective system that is comically incompatible with human life. The humor of this situation is pointed out by Kierkegaard himself, when he writes in his journal, “[S]omeone who is really tested in life, who in his need resorts to thought,

60 Westphal, “Kierkegaard and Hegel”, p. 114.

61 Postscript, p. 196.
will find Hegel comical despite all his greatness."62 The speculative project fails to address the struggles of the existing person.

Thus, in the movements of subjectivity and objectivity there is both subjective significance and the possibility of objectively doubting that significance as a matter of indifference. For Climacus, subjectivity is developed in spite of this objective doubt, not in ignorance of it. Climacus admits that one must embrace subjectivity without any external assurance. There is no rational justification for the embrace of subjectivity. It is another conflict, akin to those we found in Fear and Trembling, and it calls for similar action. In fashioning a definition of subjectivity as truth (a claim that need not be debated here), Climacus makes this antithesis central:

When subjectivity is truth, the definition of truth must also contain in itself an expression of the antithesis to objectivity, a memento of that fork in the road, and this expression will at the same time indicate the resilience of the inwardness. Here is such a definition of truth: An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing person. At the point where the road swings off (and where that is cannot be stated objectively, since it is precisely subjectivity), objective knowledge is suspended. Objectively he then has only uncertainty, but this is precisely what intensifies the infinite passion of inwardness, and truth is precisely what intensifies the infinite passion of inwardness, and truth is precisely the daring venture of choosing the objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite. I observe nature in order to find God, and I do indeed see omnipotence and wisdom, but I also see much that troubles and disturbs. The summa summarum of this is an objective uncertainty, but the inwardness is so very great, precisely because it grasps this objective uncertainty with all the passion of the infinite.63

The acquisition of truth involves grasping subjectivity while suspending the doubt that emanates from objective uncertainty. This movement of embracing the irreconcilable conflict may sound familiar to us, for it is similar to the faith characterized by de Silentio. Climacus tells us, “But

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63 Postscript, p. 203.
the definition of truth stated above is a paraphrasing of faith. Without risk, no faith. Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty.”

In response to his own absurd conflict, that between objectivity and subjectivity, Climacus recommends a faith that suspends objective doubt and embraces subjectivity. This is his definition of subjectivity as truth. It is similar to the movement of faith described by de Silentio: both movements recognize both the doubt and the embrace. Faith is the holding of the two things together, in both cases. With regard to fulfillment, *Fear and Trembling*’s knight of faith believes despite the impossibility. With regard to objective justification, the *Postscript*’s existing person embraces subjectivity in inwardness despite the objective doubt that renders a justification impossible.

Kierkegaard notes the difference between the faith spoken of by Climacus and de Silentio in his journal. “That there is a difference between the absurd in *Fear and Trembling* and the paradox in *Concluding Postscript* is quite correct. The former is a purely personal specification of existential faith – the other is faith in relation to a doctrine.” *Fear and Trembling* deals with personal instances of the meeting of the absurd and faith. Abraham’s trial differs from the trial faced by the knight of faith and by de Silentio himself. Yet, in the *Postscript*, Climacus speaks of the paradox that separates and relates the individual to God. This paradox exists for every person in their relating to God. “For the absurd and faith go together, which is necessary if there is to be friendship and if this friendship is to be maintained between two qualities so unlike as God and man.”

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64 Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, p. 204.
Yet, despite this difference, the faith of Abraham in relating to the absurd conflict he faced is still faith, despite its differing content. As Kierkegaard tells us:

The objection that there is conflict between the absurd in Joh. de silentio and in Joh. Climacus is a misunderstanding. Thus Abraham is also called the father of faith in the New Testament, yet it is clear that the content of his faith cannot be the Christian’s, that Jesus Christ has existed. But Abraham’s faith is the formal specification of faith. Similarly with the absurd.67

Faith, though it differs in content between de Silentio and Climacus, remains faith. The conflict between the world and human longing that Camus recognizes as the absurd has a corresponding faith with that conflict as its content. The conflict between subjectivity and objective doubts that Nagel recognizes as the absurd has a faith with that conflict as its content. In both cases faith believes that which reason cannot couple.

For Climacus our subjectivity precludes the certainty sought by speculative philosophy. The view *sub specie aeterni* is for God alone. Because of this fact, objective doubts can always be raised without the possibility of answer. The person of faith, despite this doubt, embraces inwardness with passion. Likewise, de Silentio’s knight of faith, knowing reconciliation is impossible, believes nonetheless. Faith, in both instances, is an internal action without external guarantees or warrant. If we are to return to subjectivity, it will not be by understanding, but by faith.

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CHAPTER 4
AN ABSURD RECONCILIATION

Thomas Nagel and Søren Kierkegaard develop strikingly similar accounts of what Nagel
calls the absurd. Both Kierkegaard and Nagel, in their own ways, identify the gap between
subjective convictions and objective doubts that put those convictions into question. Both
recognize the absurd as a problem inherent to human existence, one without solution. For each,
the cost of going nowhere, of seeking objective justifications for our subjective endeavors, is an
objective doubt that cannot be answered and an absurdity that cannot be rationally dispelled.
What we find when we attempt to transcend our subjective lives is not a higher purpose or
greater grasp of meaning, but a view from which all our subjective claims to meaning and
purpose seem empty. If life is to be lived, it must be lived despite its absurdity.

For Nagel, the feeling of absurdity involves the balancing of views from both the
subjective and objective viewpoints. Part of being a person is switching between these
perspectives and reconciling these vantages. Yet, at times these vantages cannot be reconciled,
as regarding our lives. “As objectivity increases, detachment sets in and the existence from
which all of our concerns and motives and justifications begin becomes a matter of
indifference.”¹ The feeling of absurdity involves recognizing the gap between the two
perspectives. Our inability to square these accounts, yet our inability to rid ourselves of either of
them, renders our lives absurd.

For Nagel, there is no objective framework into which our lives can be placed and through
which we can gain objective meaning. Our subjective convictions concerning our own
importance float alone, without objective grounding. While in “The Absurd” Nagel remains
skeptical concerning the existence or nonexistence of objective meaning, in The View from

¹ Nagel, The View from Nowhere, p. 213.
Nowhere he embraces nihilism outright, admitting that there are no objective values.² Our natural longing to avow ourselves of significance from the objective perspective will always fail, and in this failure we will always sense our absurdity.

For Kierkegaard to reach for objective truth is to reach beyond human capacity. We cannot achieve a certain, objective understanding. Only God is capable of that sort of objective grasp. We, as persons, cannot transcend our position so as to exist sub specie aeterni. When we attempt to do so, we abandon the passion of inwardness, and the subjective matters of our lives become matters of indifference. As Climacus earlier noted, “The way of objective reflection turns the subjective individual into something accidental and thereby turns existence into an indifferent, vanishing something.”³ Our attempts to assume the objective perspective, far from reassuring us, raise doubts about the significance of our lives. These doubts cannot be dispelled. In opposition to Nagel, Kierkegaard cannot be called a nihilist. But, like Nagel, he agrees that the objective picture we long for cannot be found. It is a cup from which we cannot drink.

Both Kierkegaard and Nagel see this conflict as a real problem. It is not a product of a verbal confusion or mistakes in reasoning. As Nagel writes in the introduction to his View from Nowhere, “The perplexities do not result from mistakes about the operation of language or thought, and there is no hope of a Kantian or Wittgensteinian purity, to be attained if we avoid certain tempting missteps in the employment of reason or language.”⁴ Kierkegaard, likewise, holds that humans cannot reconcile objectivity with subjective inwardness, for reasons we have seen. Such philosophical projects as Hegelian idealism (against which Kierkegaard fought a life-


³ Kierkegaard, Postscript, p. 193.

⁴ Nagel, The View from Nowhere, p. 4.
long battle) are doomed in part because of the permanent gap between subjectivity and objectivity. This yawning abyss cannot be closed, however much we may strive to do so.

It is a matter of living with this reality, not eliminating it. Absurdity is too central to human life, too real a problem for existence, to be ignored or denied. Though it may be more comfortable to live without consciousness of the absurd, it is a false peace. Kierkegaard’s journal contains a metaphor for such awareness. “Keeping open a wound can indeed also be healthy – a healthy and open wound – at times it is worse when it closes.”⁵ To let the wound, consciousness of the absurd, close is a denial of a real aspect of human existence, an aspect that may give occasion for a better understanding of ourselves as persons. Nagel makes a similar point in *The View from Nowhere*: “Our problem has in this sense no solution, but to recognize that is to come as near as we can to living in the light of truth.”⁶

For Kierkegaard the absurd is the occasion for faith. While its experience does not compel faith, without the conflict there can be no faith. As Kierkegaard writes in his journal, “The absurd is the negative criterion of that which is higher than human understanding and human knowledge. The process of understanding is to see it as such – and then leave it to the individual to believe it.”⁷ The absurd marks the boundaries of our capacity to understand. Consciousness of the absurd brings a person to the brink of belief or disbelief. But since there is no objective rationale for our engagement with our lives, there is no hope of knowledge. In an act of trust, the believer trusts that the objective picture that eludes him or her exists and is known to God.

Faith is, viewed from without, absurd. Kierkegaard would grant that faith does not escape the reality of the situation. As Kierkegaard writes, “Not one single objection has been leveled at

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⁵ Kierkegaard, *Journals*, p. 188.

⁶ Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, p. 231.

Christianity, even by the most infuriated rationalist and scandalized person, to which the ‘genuine Christian’ cannot quite calmly answer, ‘Yes, that’s the way it is.’”8 We have not misconceived the problem of the absurd; it is not illusory, and if we are to return to our lives, it will not be by reason’s dictate.

Yet, once the movement of faith has been made, the absurd changes. “To the extent that the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd – faith transforms it, but in a weak moment it can become more or less the absurd for him again. The passion of faith is the only thing that gets the better of the absurd – otherwise faith is not faith in the strictest sense, but a kind of knowing.”9 That which is absurd from outside is, from within, not absurd. Yet the believer can admit that from without, what he believes is the absurd. This relation of faith and the absurd may be overlooked. “What is lacking here is the necessary dialectical elasticity – understanding that as far as the understanding goes it is absurd, speaking of this quite calmly to the third party, admitting the absurdity, maintaining the pressure on the other to regard it as the absurd – yet still believing it. While for himself as a believer, of course, it is not absurd.”10 Thus faith by passion grasps what the understanding cannot grasp.

Nagel also advocates our return to inward life, but colored by his disavowal of objective value. He admits that reengaging with life is completely unwarranted and does not answer the doubts raised from the objective perspective. He does not call this return faith, but it is a return to subjectivity without rational grounds. Nagel calls such a return ironic; it is an occasion for recognizing that we are ignoring our doubts. I take this irony not to be the sardonic, dismissive sense of its contemporary usage, but a Socratic irony. The sardonic sense of irony is at odds with

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10 Ibid, p. 482.
the serious reengagement with life of which Nagel speaks. For Nagel, once again we begin taking our lives seriously as before our objective doubts. Holding to our new grasp of our situation and the objective doubts that plague us without solution, we go back to where we started without illusion.

In this regard a crucial difference emerges between Kierkegaard and Nagel in responding to the absurd. It is a subtle difference, yet it is important. In drawing it out, I am once again aided by Camus’ dramatization of The Possessed. In a meeting between the atheist Nicholas Stavrogin and the Bishop Tikhon, Stavrogin unburdens himself of the great sin and grief of his past. Their dialogue leads them to a discussion of the diametrical opposition of faith in God and atheism. Tikhon admits that he has an imperfect faith, leading to the following exchange.

Stavrogin (smiling): Yes, yes. But, in my opinion, faith must be perfect or there is no faith. That’s why I’m an atheist.

Tikhon: The complete atheist is more respectable than the man who is indifferent. He is on the last rung preceding perfect faith.

Stavrogin: I know it. Do you remember the passage from the Apocalypse about the lukewarm?

Tikhon: Yes. “I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest…”

Stavrogin: That will do. 11

Though their conversation concerns faith and disbelief in God, it may be adapted to the present application of faith in engaging life despite objective doubts. Stavrogin denies all compromise with regards to matters of faith and disbelief. It is an either/or. The objective doubts and subjective seriousness, whose clash we are calling the absurd, seem to demand a similar choice.

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11 Camus, The Possessed, p. 132.
Faith embraces seriousness despite doubt; doubt sees all seriousness as superfluous. A choice must be made in light of this clash.

Nagel agrees that we cannot reconcile seriousness and doubt, but they both remain a part of our lives. “The same person who is subjectively committed to a personal life in all its rich detail finds himself in another aspect simultaneously detached; this detachment undermines his commitment without destroying it—leaving him divided.”12 We mix the heat of subjective commitment with the cold of objective detachment; what results can best be described as lukewarm reengagement in life, for always we can regard our seriousness as unwarranted and ridiculous. Hence pursuing our lives for Nagel has an ironic flavor.

Kierkegaard does not share in this compromised course. Faith suspends the objective doubts that come through detachment, embracing the movement of inwardness with passion. As Climacus writes in the Philosophical Fragments: “The conclusion of belief is no conclusion but a resolution, and thus doubt is excluded . . . . Belief is the opposite of doubt. Belief and doubt are not two kinds of knowledge that can be defined in continuity with each other, for neither of them is a cognitive act, and they are opposite passions.”13 Kierkegaard acknowledges that the objective doubts run in the opposite direction of the serious pursuit of a life. While faith returns us with serious commitment to subjective life, to the understanding absurdity remains. Thus the return to life is made, but it is made by suspending our objective doubts. Not, as in Nagel, in the ironic light of those doubts.

Yet, despite this difference, Nagel and Kierkegaard each advocate returning to life with humility. Objective consciousness stands as a check to our all-too-natural hubris. When we

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acknowledge that our subjective pursuits have no objective grounding, we may be less apt to allow those pursuits to tyrannize over our own and others’ lives. In Kierkegaard’s “At a Graveside,” the response of humility is glimpsed in the life of the earnest person. Though he lives in all earnestness, he is conscious of his true worth, “in weakness is willing to understand that a human being is nothing at all.” Earnestness and faith, though they embrace inwardness, do not make the additional move of swallowing all reality into the subjective sphere. Nagel champions a similar sentiment, “The most general effect of the objective stance ought to be a form of humility: the recognition that you are no more important than you are, and that the fact that something is of importance to you, or that it would be good or bad if you did or suffered something, is a fact of purely local significance.”

This humility can have any number of applications. In his criticism of Hegel, we have seen how Climacus argues that subjectivity cannot be rendered in objective terms; there can be no system of existence. As Climacus notes, “If a dancer could leap very high, we would admire him, but if he wanted to give the impression that he could fly – even though he could leap higher than any dancer had ever leapt before – let laughter overtake him.” Hegel’s attempt to raise subjective matters onto the objective plane was just such an attempt. In humility both Kierkegaard and Nagel admit that to fly in this way is beyond our capacities.

In a converse way, the humility of the absurd does not allow for the sort of fanaticism that clothes a life plan in cosmic certainty. If a person would claim for his or her subjective pursuits the authority of the objective, such surety runs aground on the absurd. In acknowledging our absurdity, we likewise acknowledge that our projects, plans and pursuits are not commissioned

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15 Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, p. 222.
by the view sub specie aeterni. We cannot portend to be the executors of a viewpoint whose purpose forever eludes us.

Central to both Nagel and Kierkegaard’s accounts is an admission that our lives, whether engaged in by faith or irony, are never justified by our understanding of objectivity. For Nagel, part of what it is like to be a human is the feeling of absurdity. For Kierkegaard, part of what it is to be a subject is to embrace subjectivity despite our lack of objective assurances. We cannot dispel the doubts felt when we transcend our subjective vantage point; we must choose, rather, what to do with our lives once we become conscious of those doubts. What we choose will not be given us by reason. For both Nagel and Kierkegaard, it is not a question of marrying the subjective and objective vantages, but of living with their divorce.
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Theodore Benson Randles was born on 22 March 1984 in Youngstown, Ohio, to Dr. Thomas and Emma Randles. He considers himself a native-son of Florida, however, as his formative years were spent in Madison and Panama City, Florida.

Theodore received his B.S. in history from the United States Air Force Academy in 2006 (Spaatz!), minoring in Russian and philosophy. He received his commission as a Second Lieutenant in the U.S. Air Force and was awarded the Lawson scholarship for immediate postgraduate study terminating in a master’s degree.