Chapter Thirteen

ABSURD SELF-FULFILLMENT

A recent author adds a twist to the ancient legend of Sisyphus, who was condemned by the gods to perpetual life spent pushing a large rock to the top of a hill from which it fell down the other side, once more to be pushed to the top, and so on forever. "Let us suppose," writes Richard Taylor, "that the gods, while condemning Sisyphus to the fate just described, at the same time, as an afterthought, waxed perversely merciful by implanting in him a strange and irrational impulse, namely a compulsive impulse to roll stones . . . e.g. through implanting some substance that has this effect on his character and drives." Such a modification would be merciful but also "perverse," Taylor maintains, "because from our point of view there is clearly no reason why anyone should have a persistent and insatiable desire to do something as pointless as that."

Taylor's remodeled Sisyphus, meaningless as his activities may seem to us, at least can find his rock-pushing career fulfilling. Insofar as a powerful disposition to push rocks has been built into him, he is only doing what he is inclined by his nature to do when he pushes the rock, just as a dog fulfills his nature by chasing a rabbit, or a bird by building a nest. One can criticize Taylor, however, for his apparent confusion of self-fulfillment (doing what it is in one's nature to do) with compulsion. In Taylor's revision of the legend, a substance in Sisyphus's blood forces him to "want" to push stones, just as repeated injections of heroin into the veins of an unwilling prisoner would impose an addiction to heroin on him and make him "want" his subsequent fixes. The causal mechanism employed by the gods, however, need not be that crude, and we can imagine that they remake Sisyphus's nature in a more thoroughgoing way so that the disposition to push large objects, stemming from a reconstructed complex of glands and nerves and basic drives, becomes an integral part of Sisyphus's self rather than an alien element restraining him. Let us add a twist to Taylor's twist then, and have the gods provide Sisyphus with a new nature rather than imposing an addiction on his old one. We can think of a rock-pushing Sisyphus as no more "addicted" to his characteristic activities than we are to walking upright or to speaking a language. Our new Sisyphus's activities, furthermore, are self-fulfilling, not simply because they satisfy his de-

2 Ibid.
sires, nor simply because they involve his own willful acquiescence, but rather because they express some basic genetic disposition of his nature.

Taylor does not use the word "absurd" in describing Sisyphus’s peculiar activities, but a whole tradition, one of whose most prominent recent members was Albert Camus, finds that term eminently appropriate. The words Taylor uses are "meaningless," "pointless," and "endless." Perhaps endless repetitive cycles of pointless labor with no apparent purpose or result is only one species of absurdity, or perhaps pointlessness is only one among several grounds for judging an activity to be absurd. (The closely related but distinct characteristic of futility through purposeful but self-defeating actions may be another.) In either case, pointlessness and generic absurdity are not identical notions. But few would deny the synthetic judgment that there is an absurdity in pointless labors that will plainly come to nothing. Taylor isolates this absurdity by contrasting it with both painfulness and loneliness. It is not because Sisyphus’s labors are arduous and body-brusing that they are absurd, for we can imagine that his rock is small and his labors undemanding. They would be no less pointless, and therefore no less absurd for that. Moreover, as Taylor suggests, we could give Sisyphus some partners so that the rock-moving activities are conducted by teams of two or more persons. That would reduce the loneliness of the enterprise but not its silliness. The essential absurdity of pointless activity is captured in a non-Sisyphian example that Taylor himself provides: "Two groups of prisoners, one of them engaged in digging a prodigious hole in the ground that is no sooner finished than it is filled in again by the other group, the latter then digging a new hole that is at once filled in by the first group and so on endlessly."

Many philosophers have said that insofar as human existence is absurd, there is a ground for certain negative attitudes—suicidal despair, detached cynicism, philosophical pessimism, Camus’s haughty scorn or existential defiance. Other philosophers, addressing a somewhat different datum, have said that insofar as a given human life is self-fulfilled it is a good life, and provides a reason for certain positive attitudes toward the human condition—hope, satisfaction, acceptance, or reconciliation. Often the "optimists" say that some lives, at least, are completely fulfilled and most lives fulfilled to some degree or other. There is no antecedent necessity that they all be fulfilled or that they all be unfulfilled; it all depends on skill or luck. "Pessimists," on the other hand, claim that all lives are necessarily absurd (meaningless, pointless, futile), so their view is more sweeping. In any event, "absurdity" and "self-fulfilment" are quite different notions so that optimists and pessimists are not even talking about the same thing. Taylor suggests, quite plausibly, that life might be both absurd and at its best, sometimes, self-fulfilling. What are we to make of that combination of truths? What are the consequences for optimism and pessimism? What general attitudes are appropriate if it is accepted? These questions call for closer examination of the concepts of "absurdity" and "self-fulfilment" and how they might fit together, and some comments on the question of how we can judge the rational appropriateness of cosmic attitudes.

### Absurdity in Individual Lives

We should attend to the undeniable examples of absurdity in life before raising the subject of the absurdity of life. Since some elements in any life are absurd, we can focus our attention on these familiar occurrences and inquire what it is we are saying about them when we judge them to be absurd. Thomas Nagel provides some useful instances of absurd events that, since they are easy to respond to playfully, are irresistibly comic: "Someone gives a complicated speech in support of a 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 knighted your pants fall down." Some of Nagel's examples are human actions that can be criticized as reasonable or unreasonable in relation to the actor's presumed motives and ends. Others are mere happenings leading directly to states of affairs that themselves can be thought of as irrational relative to some larger presumed purposes: The image of a great statesman or scientist standing bare-legged with his trousers around his ankles as the queen tries to award him his knighthood conflicts irrationally with the presumed purpose of the ceremony, which in part is to create a dignified and moving spectacle. If the pants-dropping incident had been deliberately chosen it would have been subject to the charge of irrationality, since it could have been anticipated to produce results that would defeat the larger purposes for which it was chosen. In this indirect way, even mere occurrences and unchosen states of affairs can be judged "irrational," and sometimes irrational to the point of absurdity. In addition to doings, activities, careers and lives, mere happenings and states of affairs, we also judge beliefs, hypotheses, convictions, desires, purposes, and even people to be absurd, and usually we can explain what this means in a fairly straightforward way by substituting the word "irrational" and locating the absurdity in question on a map of the various species of irrationality. On other occasions, as in the fallen pants example, a mere occurrence is related indirectly to irrationality by the showing that if it were

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3 The various essays in which Camus gives his most thorough account of absurdity have been translated into English by Justin O'Brien and published in one volume under the title *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1955).

4 Taylor, *Good and Evil*, p. 258.

thought, contrary to fact, to be somebody’s deliberate doing, that doing would be patently irrational.

The paradigmatic type of irrationality is false or unwarranted belief. When something analogous to flagrant falsity or manifestly fallacious argument is a defect of such nonbeliefs as desires, purposes, instrumentalities, actions, and states of affairs, then they too can be characterized as irrational or unreasonable, although the word “absurd” seems to fit them more comfortably. Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary tells us that when the intensifier *ab* was added to the Latin word *surdus* (dull, deaf, insensible), the result was a Latin word translatable as “not to be heard from,” and the derivative English word meaning “laughingly inconsistent with what is judged as true or reasonable.” “Falsehood” and “invalidity,” then, are not quite enough to explain absurdity. The absurd is what is palpably untrue or unreasonable, outlandishly and preposterously so, literally “unheard of” or not to be entertained. One element, then, that the various sorts of absurd things have in common is their extreme irrationality, whether that be the apparently knowing assertion of manifestly false propositions, or the apparently voluntary making of manifestly unreasonable decisions, or the apparently eager living of a manifestly pointless life.

A second element in all absurdity is implicit in the first, but deserves to be clearly stated on its own. Where there is absurdity there are always two things clashing or in disharmony, distinguishable entities that conflict with one another. This element is referred to variously as the “divorce,” disparity, discrepancy, disproportion, or incongruity between discordant objects. In general, things that do not fit together—means disreputant with ends, premises incongruous with conclusions, ideals disharmonious with practice, pretensions in conflict with realities—are found wherever there is absurdity. But having located the absurdity, we may attribute it either to the relation of disharmony itself, or exclusively to one, or to the other, of the discordant objects.

In some cases we adopt the point of view of the standard and “laugh down” at the incongruous object, as when we delight in the undignified fall of the pompously powerful. In other cases we take the opposite viewpoint, that of the comically discrepant object itself, and we laugh at the standard, as, for example, when we laugh at cute children masquerading as adults, or in a quite different example, we laugh at a risqué story and thus have some fun with the sexual conventions violated in the tale. Perhaps not all funny things are absurd, and surely not all absurd things are funny, but discordance is an element common to many comic and absurd things.

Another form of disparity is described in Nagel’s astute account of absurdity, namely, the clash or disharmony between various perspectives from which we form attitudes and make judgments. There is an unavoidable discrepancy between the natural subjective way of viewing ourselves—as precious in our own eyes, full of genuinely important projects, whole universes in ourselves, persons who “live only once” and have to make the most of the time allotted us—and various hypothetical judgments made from a more universal perspective: we are mere specks, or drops in the ocean, or one of the teeming hive, absolutely insensate to the grand scheme of things, no more lovable in ourselves than are any of the millions of individual insects whose infinitesimally transitory lives are equally unimportant in the long run as our own. Our subjective point of view is an expression of the “seriousness” with which all living beings must view their situations, a necessary expression of our biological natures. But the broader perspectives that yield a different and conflicting picture are available to any being with imagination and modest conceptual development. Judged from these perspectives, the human expenditures of effort and emotion in the pursuit of “important goals” are just so many posturings, and we mortals are absurd figures who strut and fret our hour upon the stage. The absurdity in the human condition, Nagel tells us, consists in a special kind of conspicuous discrepancy, that between unavoidable pretension or aspiration, on the one hand, and reality as perceived from a truer perspective on the other.

Not all of Nagel’s examples of absurdity within human lives are equally plausible models for the alleged absurdity of human life as such. Applied to Sisyphus, at any rate, and to some actual Sisyphean lives, Nagel’s “conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality” seems less strikingly relevant than Taylor’s conception of absurdity as ultimate futility and pointlessness. Careful reconsideration, however, will reveal that Taylor’s “futility or pointlessness of activity” and Nagel’s “discrepancy of perspectives for viewing oneself,” while irreducibly distinct types of absurdity, are nonetheless equally proper examples of the absurd genus. Taylor’s type of absurdity applies more naturally to the Sisyphean model for the human condition, but Nagel’s conception provides another model of its own, equally challenging as a picture of the absurdity of human life as a whole, and equally familiar, as a recent New Yorker cartoon shows. Two small figures, recognizable as a well-dressed middle-class couple, are on the patio of their suburban home, while above them a full moon and vast panoply of stars glimmer and sparkle. The discrepancy between the human beings’ inevitably extravagant sense of self-importance and their actual tiny role in the whole picture is indicated by the little man’s comment to his

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little wife: "Why, no! Why should I feel small? I've just been put in charge
of the whole Eastern region."

Nagel's kind of absurdity is not necessarily involved in the Sisyphus
story, but if it is added to the pointless labor that is involved, it adds a
whole new dimension of absurdity to that already present. Moreover, Si-
syphus's labors might be motivated by a genuinely sensible purpose, and
thus be unabsurd in Taylor's sense, yet absurd anyway in a sense closer to
Nagel's. Imagine, for example, that the gods have sentenced Sisyphus only
to climb a large mountain and plant a small flag on the top. As soon as he
succeeds in doing that, his penalty has been paid once and for all. It takes
Sisyphus years (or centuries) to climb the mountain but then he finds that
he has forgotten the flag. He returns to the base, recovers the flag, and
spends another millennium or so climbing a peak only to discover that he
is on the wrong mountain. And so on ad infinitum. Sisyphus's labors
would not be pointless in that case since they would have a sensible aim,
but how genuinely absurd his constant mistakes would be whether com-
mitted in pursuit of a purpose or not! Or suppose that the gods in the
original legend had not only assigned Sisyphus his endless self-defeating
labor, but had also required him, before each trip to the summit, to write
"I am a bad boy" one hundred times on his rock. What an absurd come-
down for the proud and once mighty Sisyphus! Now his labors are doubly
absurd, both pointless and conflicting with his natural self-interest.

Moreover, to further accentuate the difference between Taylor's and Na-
gel's criteria, it can be noted that the traditional Sisyphus, before we began
tampering with the legend, was not absurd by Nagel's criterion. He had no
illusions or false pretensions, and his resigned "aspiration," although
pointless, was perfectly realistic. If his plight, therefore, is to be taken as a
model for the absurdity of the whole human enterprise, we shall have to
expand Nagel's account of absurdity to include examples from within hu-
man life of the sort Taylor emphasized, for instance, the prisoners' dig-
ning and filling in of holes, or the ordering of intricately ornamented wedding
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cakes and consuming of them before they are even wrapped, or in general giving
with one hand and taking away with the other contrary to all reason. Tay-
lor's and Nagel's conceptions of absurdity, however, do share a generic

8 Cartoon by Handelman, New Yorker, July 6, 1981, p. 34.

9 Or first taking away and then giving, as in the unfunny example of absurdity from the
Civil War: "Lincoln and Brooks lingered at the cot of a wounded soldier who held with a
weak white hand a tract given him by a well-dressed lady performing good works that morn-
ing. The soldier read the title of the tract and then began laughing. Lincoln noticed that the
lady of good works was still nearby, and told the soldier that undoubtedly the lady meant
well. 'It is hardly fair of you to laugh at her gift.' The soldier gave Lincoln something to
remember. 'Mr. President, how can I help laughing a little? She has given me a tract on the
"Sin of Dancing," and both my legs are shot off" (Carl Sandburg, Abraham Lincoln: The
War Years [New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1926], 2:293).

character. They are two distinct species of absurdity but both can be sub-
sumed, in their separate ways, under the "discrepancy" rubric. The discrep-
ancy in Taylor's case is that between the kind of labor that is normally
thought to be sheer drudgery and a purpose inadequate to justify it or to
provide it with any reason whatsoever. Ultimately, pointlessness is a kind
of discrepancy, or massive disproportion, between means and ends. It must
also be said, in fairness to Nagel, that his conception of absurdity can be
applied to some Sisyphian individuals. If in fact some of us are quite simi-
lar to Sisyphus, but we pretend to be otherwise, then we are absurd in
Nagel's sense too.

A careful perusal of absurd elements within individual human lives will
disclose still other models of absurdity in addition to Taylor's "pointless-
ness" and Nagel's "unrealistic pretension and aspiration," and these addi-
tional types of absurdity can also be treated as species of discrepancy, con-
flict, or disproportion. We must first follow up our earlier suggestion by
distinguishing pointlessness from futility. A pointless action or activity is
one that has no intelligible purpose the achievement of which gives it value
and explanation ("point" or "meaning"). Moreover, it is not the kind of
activity that carries its own reward quite independently of any further pur-
pose, but rather the sort of activity we normally think of as sheer drudgery
(like rock-pushing). Since it does not possess value in itself, but rather, if
anything, a kind of negative value, and it has no envisaged consequences
for the sake of which it is undertaken, it is utterly valueless, or worse. A
totally pointless activity will not only lack a conscious objective beyond
itself; it will also lack any unforeseen actual consequences that could confer
value back on it by a kind of fluke.

Some activities have a point, but are very little less absurd than totally
pointless activities since their conscious objective is manifestly incapable
of justifying the drudgery that is meant to achieve it. The intrinsic disvalue
of the activity is an exorbitant (hence irrational) price to pay for so trivial a
reward. Sisyphus's labors would not be totally pointless if his whole
motive was to receive a piece of candy from the gods every century or so.
His endless labors would hardly be any less absurd in that case, and the
absurdity in question would be a manifest disproportion between means and
end. Following W. D. Joske, we can call this species of absurdity
triviality.10 Obviously burdensome activities that are absurdly trivial are

(August 1974): 93–104. Joske gives an example of a whole individual life that could seem
absurd because trivial in this sense. "We find ourselves bewildered by the school master in
Guthrie Wilson's novel, The Incorruptibles, who devotes his life to parsing and analyzing every
sentence of Paradise Lost." A contrasting example of a life that is absurd because futile would
be one devoted full-time to an attempt to square the circle.
not much less absurd than burdensome activities that are wholly pointless.

Futile activities (still another species of absurdity) do have a point, and a reasonably proportionate one, but nonetheless are absurd because they are manifestly inefficacious means to the achievement of their nontrivial goals. If they had a chance to achieve the worthy objective that motivates them, they would not be absurd, but it is evident to us, the observers, or even in the worst case to the actors themselves, that continued participation in the intrinsically valueless activity will be fruitless, hence futile. The reasons for the absurd activity's instrumental inefficacy can be various. In the simplest cases, nature itself stands in the way and success is rendered impossible by laws of nature, as with efforts to high-jump ten feet off the ground, or by contingent individual incapacities, as when a dog repeatedly chases seagulls on a beach with the presumed intention of catching one of them, but continually fails because of its lack of speed and other requisite physical skills, but never gives up making its absurd efforts. The most interesting class of futile activities, however, are those in which the instrumental inefficacies are the result of the self-defeating character of the actor's own techniques and strategies, especially when flagrant and manifest to any observer. The tale is told of a workman who opens his lunch pail every noon, examines his sandwiches, and comments: "Ugh, tuna fish again." Finally, after weeks of witnessing this ritual, a fellow worker asks, "Why don't you have your wife make you some other kind of sandwich?" to which the first worker replies, "Oh, I'm not married. I make my own lunches." The worker's constant failure could be charged to poor memory or some other cognitive failure, but to the observer who thinks of it as absurd, it is as if the actor deliberately takes steps every day to frustrate his own purposes.

In summary, purposeful activities can be placed on a spectrum of absurdity. At the one extreme are intrinsically worthless activities that are engaged in even though they have no vindicating purpose beyond themselves. These activities are totally pointless. Then come burdensome or disliked activities engaged in only because they are expected to produce some minor advantage for which the instrumental labors are massively disproportionate. These are absurdly trivial activities. They too constitute a whole section of the spectrum, becoming less and less absurd as their achieved goals reduce the disproportion of their means. Then come the inherently burdensome activities that do have a clearly vindicating purpose but are ill-designed to achieve them. These are absurdly futile activities when it would be plainly evident to an observer that they are hopelessly inefficacious. If there is a chance of success, the activity may be reasonable, hence unabsurd, even though in fact the vindicating objective is never achieved. To these absurdities, explained in terms of means-ends dispropor-

The Alleged Absurdity of Human Life as Such: Some Philosophical Indictments

Taylor, Camus, and Nagel, each in his own way and each making his own special qualifications, looks with favor on the judgment: that there is absurdity in the human condition as such. It will be useful here to discuss critically some of the reasons given by these philosophers. We can begin with Taylor who finds all human activity to be as pointless (in the long run) as that of Sisyphus. He uses the words "meaningless" and "pointless" instead of "absurd," and as we have seen, means by them "endless repetitious activity that comes to nothing." The uselessness, no doubt, is not essential to the meaninglessness. If Sisyphus pushed his rock continuously for four score and ten years only, before being mercifully killed by the gods, Taylor could and would judge his finite career as a rock-mover to be absurd, just as he judges the finite lives of men and mice to be absurc.

Meaninglessness for Taylor is mitigated but not cancelled by achievement, because achievements do not last. Some achievements, for example Hamlet, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, and the Notre Dame cathedral, last longer than others, and might therefore qualify as less absurd than the transient and trivial triumphs in which most of us take what pride we can. But from any sufficiently broad point of view, long compared with the span of human lives or even the lives of nations and planets, but infinitely narrower than the perspective sub specie aeternitatis, the difference between the durability of Notre Dame and that of a pioneer's log cabin is utterly insignificant. All of our goals, Taylor says, are of "transitory significance," and "having gained one of them we immediately set forth for the next as if that one had never been, with this next one being essentially more of the same."11 Unlike Sisyphus, however, most of us beget children and pass on our values, our modest achievements, and fresh opportunities to them. That fact does not impress Taylor, who replies that "Each man's life thus resembles one of Sisyphus's climbs to the summit of his hill and each day of it one of his steps; the difference is that whereas Sisyphus himself returns

11 Taylor, Good and Evil, p. 262.
to push the stone up again, we leave this to our children."\(^{12}\) The enterprise is thus collective, but it still comes to nothing in the end.

What could human existence conceivably be like if it were to escape this absurdity? This is a crucial question that all philosophical pessimists must answer if their sweeping judgments of universal absurdity are to be fully intelligible. For unless we know what contrasting situation is being ruled out we cannot be sure what a given assertion is "including in."\(^{13}\) Unless we know what would count as nonabsurdity, if there were such a thing, we have nothing to contrast absurdity with. If all conceivable universes are equally and necessarily absurd on their face, so that one cannot even describe what nonabsurd existence would be like, it is not very informative, to put it mildly, to affirm that this our actual universe is absurd. It is a test of the intelligibility of a philosophical doctrine that it succeed in ruling out some contrasting state of affairs.

Taylor's doctrine fortunately seems to pass the test, more or less. He has us imagine that Sisyphus is permitted to push an assortment of stones to the top of his hill and combine them there into a beautiful and enduring temple. This would be to escape absurdity, Taylor says at first, for "activity . . . has a meaning if it has some significant culmination, some more or less lasting end that can be considered to have been the direction and purpose of the activity."\(^{14}\) But soon he changes his mind. He does not wish to make meaningfulness a matter of "more or less," for then he would have to admit that some human activities and lives are to some degree, at least, meaningful, and comparisons of the relative meaningfulness of various individual lives would at least make sense. But that would be to vindicate rather than to destroy common sense on this question, and Taylor, his sights set high, quickly withdraws his concession by requiring that the temple must endure—not simply be "more or less lasting"—"adding beauty to the world for the remainder of time."\(^{15}\) When we look at a meaningless life like that of the legendary Sisyphus or that of a drug-addicted teenage suicide, and compare it with one of the relatively meaningful human lives suggested by common sense, say that of Jefferson or Shakespeare, the differences at first are striking. But "if we look at them from a distance" (say from a point in time one hundred million years from now) they "are in outline the same and convey to the mind the same image"—pointless labor and emotion coming to nothing.\(^{16}\) It is the temporal distance that make the difference. The view from remote distances in time reveals things as they truly are, whereas the detailed close-up picture is distorted and illusory.

Taylor makes another hypothetical supposition. Let us suppose that af-

\(^{12}\) Ibid., p. 263.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 260.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., p. 263.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 264.

\(^{16}\) Bernard Williams, "The Makropoulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," in Problems of the Self (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 82–100. Jonathan Glover replies to Williams: "But I am not convinced that someone with a fairly constant character would eventually become intolerably bored, so long as he can watch the world continue to unfold and go on asking new questions and thinking, and so long as there are other people to share their feelings and thoughts with. Given the company of the right people, I would be glad of the chance to sample a few million years and see how it went" (Causing Death and Saving Lives [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977], p. 57).
he wants, and that he, by his very nature, cannot modify or relinquish those wants, hopeless though they be. There is therefore a "divorce" in the nature of things, an ineradicable discrepancy between human nature and the rest of nature, and it is this irreconcilable clash that generates the absurdity of the human condition. He wants a universe that cares about him personally, a world that he can identify with instead of feeling alienated from, a world that can heal the deep sense of loneliness all sentient beings experience when they encounter nature as an "other." Most of all, he cannot help wanting to live forever, although as a rational being he knows that death is inevitable. His unmodifiable yet unsatisfiable desires are more than mere wants; they are natural needs. "The absurd is born of this confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."17

Camus eloquently describes the feeling of absurdity evoked in him by forests and oceans ("At the heart of all natural beauty lies something inhuman"), and by bustling human marketplaces. Always at its core is a vital yearning that he knows has no hope of satisfaction, yet no possibility of being extinguished. "At any street corner the feeling of absurdity can strike any person in the face."18 One reliable evoker of that feeling is what Camus calls the "collapse of the stage setting." Individual lives proceed according to their fixed rhythms, and then suddenly "one day the 'why' arises and...[a] weariness tinged with amazement."19 The feeling to which Camus here refers is one, I dare say, that almost all of us have experienced at one time or another, but for pessimistic philosophers it is more than a feeling, in that it contains the materials for an argument for human absurdity. I first remember experiencing the feeling and toying with the argument while observing crowds of shoppers in a supermarket. (Since then, I have come to call it the "supermarket regress.") Suddenly the stage setting collapsed, and the shoppers' life patterns seemed to make no more sense than the hole-digging in Taylor's example of the prisoners. Why are all those people standing in line before the cash registers? In order to purchase food. Why do they purchase food? In order to stay alive and healthy. Why do they wish to stay alive and healthy? So that they can work at their jobs. Why do they want to work? To earn money. Why do they want to earn money? So that they can purchase food. And so on, around the circle, over and over, with no "significant culmination" in sight. Vindicating purpose and meaning are constantly put off to another stage that never comes, and the whole round of activity looks more like a meaningless ritual-dance than something coherent and self-justifying.

As an argument for inevitable absurdity, the supermarket regress is only

18 Ibid., p. 9.
19 Ibid., p. 10.

as strong as its premises. One presupposition of the argument in particular is weak, namely, the assumption that no human activity is ever valuable in itself; but that vindicating value is always postponed until some future consequence arrives, which in turn can never be valuable in itself but only valuable as a means to something else that cannot be valuable in itself, and so on, forever. This paradox is not an accurate picture of all human activity, striking as it may seem when it naturally suggests itself to an observer of crowds of human animals mechanically pursuing their ritualized goals. In fact, the impossibility of intrinsically valuable activity is itself an illusion produced by what Moritz Schlick in a remarkable essay20 called "the tyranny of purpose."

There is another kind of insight, also natural and common, that can lead one too hastily to interpret human activity as absurd. Altogether unlike Camus, we can think of ourselves as part and parcel of nature, one biological species among many others. Then we can examine the life cycles of the lesser species and come to appreciate their absurd character, here responding not to apparent circularity as in the human case, but to a value regressive proper, in which justifying purposes are put off forever. Various insects,21 amphibians, and fish, for example, seem to have no ultimate purpose of their own but to stay alive long enough to reproduce, so that their progeny can also stay alive long enough to reproduce, and so on forever, as if simply keeping a species in existence were an end in itself with no further purpose needed. This has seemed to many human observers to be the very model of absurdity, an utterly pointless existence.

The absurdity is accentuated in the case of species like the salmon, whose members struggle and strive heroically, swimming against the currents, battered against rocks, plundered by predators, until the survivors reach the headwaters of their native streams, tattered, torn, and dying. Even then the ordeal is not over, for the males at least must fight off their own intraspecies competitors for an opportunity to entice females to lay eggs, to fertilize them, and only then to die. What is the point of all this effort? Simply to produce another generation of tiny salmon to start all over again, feeding and growing as they head down river toward the ocean, then after a time in salt water, heading back upstream amid the many dangers and against all odds, to reproduce and die. The whole process has no apparent point except its own further continuance. To some human observers that natural cycle is a kind of collective effort to discharge a task that makes no more sense than that assigned as punishment to the solitary Sisyphus. The human life style is perhaps less fixed and rigid, and surely more varied, but

insofar as it resembles that of the insects, toads, and fish, it is equally self-contained and pointless.

The best response to this argument is that it projects human needs and sensibilities into other species. The human observer simply does not have the salmon's point of view. A well-bred salmon will love the life of a salmon, which after all, is the only life it can know. The life cycle for it may seem to be its own point, with no further purpose, no further achievement external to it, needed to establish its rational credentials. To insist that without permanently preserved achievements and lasting monuments, the life of a salmon is absurd, is a piece of parochial prejudice on the part of human beings.

Both the supermarket circle and the biological regress purport to show that human life is pointless because justification for any of its parts or phases is indefinitely postponed, never coming to a final resting place. We choose to do A only because it will lead to B, which we desire only because of its conducibility to C, which we value only as a means to D, and so on. In the biological regress argument the chain of justification proceeds in a straight line, so to speak, never coming to an end. It therefore fails to show how any component human activity can truly have a point beyond itself. The supermarket version of the argument the chain does not proceed endlessly and infinitely only because it closes a circle at some point going round and round indefinitely, starting over again at regular intervals without ever having justified anything. Nagel thinks of these arguments as "standard" attempts to demonstrate absurdity, and although he is sympathetic to their motives and conclusions, he regards them as failures. Part of his ground for rejecting the arguments from circular and linear regress is factual. Some individual acts within life, he says, have a point even if the general statement of (say) the supermarket regression is correct. "Chains of justification come repeatedly to an end within life, and whether the process as a whole can be justified has no bearing on the finality of the end points. No further justification is needed to make it reasonable to take aspirin for a headache, attend an exhibit of the work of a painter one admires, or stop a child from putting his hand on a hot stove. No larger context or further purpose is needed to prevent these acts from being pointless."

Nagel's three examples of actions with a genuine point beyond themselves make a heterogeneous lot, but the aspirin and hot stove examples, at least, convincing as they are, do not substantially weaken the force of the supermarket circular regress. One can think of human life as an endlessly circular quest for a vindicating point that is never to be found, even though some individual acts in the generally pointless pursuit do have their points. It is possible after all to hold both that there is a point in taking aspirin and

in keeping infantile hands off hot stoves and that in the main course of human life the activities that preoccupy us are inevitably absurd, forming an inescapable circle of activities each of which lacks a justifying point. It is not that aspirins are absurd, only that their use is not part of the central pattern that is absurd.

It is difficult to offer a sympathetic ear to Camus' other complaints, although one must acknowledge that he does know how to capture a mood that circumstances can induce in any of us, and that circumstances might understandably produce regularly in some of us. What Camus refers to as "needs," for example, that one live forever, or that we can have a full and perspicacious understanding of all the phenomena of nature that science struggles with piecemeal, are for others—indeed for most others—quite dispensable wants that can be relinquished or modified as the evidence suggests, without cost to one's integrity.

What sort of response does Camus recommend to what he takes to be the absurdity of human life? Suicide, he says, would be a pointless gesture. Self-deception is the common way out. But embracing consoling myths is inconsistent with one's integrity. There is in fact no way of reconciling the cravings inherent in our nature, as he sees it, with the uncompromising denials of the alien cosmos. The existentialist hero acknowledges his inherent absurdity without wincing; he cherishes his consciousness of it, keeping it forever alive as the evidence of his integrity. He has no hope that things could be different, but lives to the hilt and dies well, like a blind person who cannot relinquish his desire to see though he knows the desire is hopeless. In his defense of what is necessary, he claims to achieve his integrity, and in his revolt his happiness. If Camus were a Columbia River salmon, he would lead the way over the rocks and up the rapids and be the first to fertilize new eggs, but he would never for a moment abandon his conviction that the whole enterprise is absurd, and his stubborn scorn would enable him to feel quite good about himself. If only a fish could be like a man!

Before leaving Camus, it is interesting to note his suggestion of how absurdity might relate to self-fulfillment. If it is in my nature as a human being—inescapably—to crave unity, intelligibility, and immortality, then according to Camus my absurdity consists in the "divorce" between my nature and the large world of which it is a part, which defeats rather than fulfills it. It is in my nature then, quite absurdly, to be out of harmony with the universe. Camus' prescription that I defiantly embrace this absurdity and live to the hilt amounts to a recommendation that I attempt to fulfill that nature, absurd as it is, and be defiant of the uncooperative universe. One can interpret Camus as recommending as a means to full self-fulfillment

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23 Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 91.
that I be intensely and continuously conscious of my absurdity, that is, of the clash between larger nature and my nature. The beginnings of a paradox can be found in this conception: Can it be “fulfilling” to fulfill a nature in conflict with itself? Can one find one’s fulfillment in frustration, one’s triumph in defeat?

The absurdity of the human condition, according to the third theory, that of Nagel, derives from the clash of perspectives from which we can view ourselves: that of purposeful actors living out our lives and that of disinterested spectators of the very lives we earnestly live. Only human beings are capable of viewing themselves from a detached and impersonal perspective and making judgments from that viewpoint of their own insignificance. When we do view ourselves in that detached way, then the ordinary way of regarding our lives, which we cannot help but adopt if we are to pursue our lives at all, seems absurd to us. A mouse also regards his own life in the same serious everyday way that humans do, but since “he lacks the capacities for self-consciousness and self-transcendence that would enable him to see that he is only a mouse,”24 he is not absurd. Human beings can diminish (but probably not eliminate) the absurdity of their own lives by allowing their individual animal natures to drift and respond to impulse, in short by becoming as much like mice as possible, but this would involve “considerable dissociative cost.”25

Nagel is confusing when he talks as if he is making judgments about the absurdity of others’ lives when he is only explaining the way in which those lives might come to seem absurd, either to those persons themselves or to a sensitive observer. Thus when he talks about possible “escapes” from absurdity and admits that a mindless life spent drifting with impulse is less absurd than more characteristically human lives despite its dissociative cost, he is using “absurd” to mean “seems absurd,” much as psychoanalysts often equate “guilt” and “feelings of guilt.” The life of a mouse is absurd when we look at it from an imaginatively extended perspective that the mouse itself cannot achieve. When Nagel denies the mouse’s absurdity on the ground that it has no transcendental consciousness, he explains why the mouse’s life cannot seem absurd to it. But the mouse’s life can still seem absurd to us, and really be absurd nonetheless. Nagel, in short, at least in much of his discussion, takes the essential discrepancy in an absurd life to be a relation between two components of the being whose life it is—his natural and inevitable seriousness, and his awareness from a higher perspective of his own insignificance. But one could lack that kind of discrepancy, as mice do, and enjoy a more unified consciousness that in turn is discrepant with an external reality, the unaccommodating and alien uni-

verse. Nagel employs the latter conception of absurdity too when he speaks of the clash between subjective pretension and objective reality, and that is the notion that is used by Taylor and Camus when they make judgments of real, not merely apparent, absurdity.

The distinction between really being and only seeming absurd quickly suggests another, that between absurdity as a property of one’s situation, and absurdity as a flaw in one’s outlook or self-assessment—put tersely, between absurd predicaents and absurd persons. It does not follow, of course, from the fact that a person is in an absurd predicament that she is an absurd person, for she may have redeeming insights into, and attitudes toward her situation that put her beyond criticism or mockery. The human predicament that we all share is absurd according to Taylor because achievements do not last and there is thus a necessary and objective discrepancy between effort and outcome. It is absurd according to Camus because the universe is resistant to our inherent craving for order and intelligibility, and there is thus an ineradicable disharmony between our needs and the world’s indifference. The human predicament is absurd according to Nagel because of the irresolvable clash between the importance we attach to our lives and the essential dubitability of all schemes of justification for that importance. All three writers agree that the absurdity of our human predicament is not a matter of “more or less” and not a matter that could be different from what it is. It is otherwise with the absurdity of persons. Some people are obviously more absurd than others in that there is a greater clash between their beliefs and their evidence, their mean and their ends, or their pretensions and their real characters and situations.

A person is also absurd—and this is the interesting point—when there is a radical discrepancy between her assessment of her situation and the actual nature of that situation. If one is really in an absurd predicament, if, for example, all of one’s labors are bound to come to nothing in the end whatever one chooses to do about it, and one stubbornly denies that absurdity, adopting inappropriate attitudes and embracing vain hopes, then one becomes more than a little absurd oneself. Thus Sisyphus escapes personal absurdity by correctly appraising the absurdity of his predicament, realistically abandoning hope, and coolly proceeding with his labors in an existentialist spirit of “Let’s get on with it,”26 thus maintaining a kind of dignity and self-respect. But Sisyphus would surely be absurd if, like Don Quixote, he talked himself into believing that his labors had an intrinsic worth and importance and were essential to the maintenance of the world order. Indeed we could imagine a number of possible Sisyphuses varying in their degree of personal absurdity or unabsurdity as their beliefs, assess-

25 Ibid., p. 726.

26 This is the final line of Jean-Paul Sartre’s play, Ne Exite (Haut Ciel), translated by Stewart Gilbert (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946).
ments, attitudes, and pretensions vary in their degrees of fittingness to their predicament. The situation of all these hypothetical Sisyphuses, however, is the same and as thoroughly absurd as a situation can be, for whatever any Sisyphus chooses to do about it, he must engage in endless repetitive cycles of pointless and unproductive labor.

How can a person be unabsurd if his life as a whole is unavoidably absurd? Some self-attitudes do not further anyone’s escape from absurdity, and in the case of the person whose situation itself is absurd and whose projects and enterprises are pointless, they positively accentuate the personal absurdity of their possessor. Vanity, excessive pride or shame, pompous self-importance, even well-grounded self-esteem if taken too seriously, are absurd in a person whose situation guarantees the pointlessness or futility of his activities. Think of Shelley’s Ozymandias, for example, who built a monument for posterity directing his descendants to “Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!” A tick of cosmic time later only “Two vast and trunkless legs of stone / stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand / Half sunk, a shatter’d visage lie.”37 How absurd was Old Ozymandias, self-declared “King of kings”? Almost equally absurd would be the towering self-regard of an eminent physicist for having won (and deserved) the Nobel Prize. Think of his proud medal found on some desert of the next millennium by beings whose school-children have a far more advanced understanding of physics than he did. A little bit of genuine humility, perhaps, is a virtue of anyone in any situation, but for a person in an absurd situation it is essential if the absurdity of his predicament is not to rub off on his character.

We can now venture some tentative conclusions. We can conclude first of all that there are elements properly characterized as absurd in every life. Moreover, some whole lives are predominately absurd, those, for example, spent largely in sheer drudgery to no further point, or those whose overriding pursuits were rendered futile by uncooperative circumstances or self-defeating strategies. Further arguments, however, to the conclusion that human life as such—and therefore each and every human life necessarily—is absurd are not convincing. Taylor and probably Camus (though he is less clear) are impressed by what they take to be the pointlessness (meaninglessness) of the human condition, a conclusion supported also by the arguments from the supermarket circle and the biological regress, but these arguments, because of confusions about the concept of pointlessness, are at best inconclusive. When we are speaking of activities within human life we characterize them as pointless when they are, first of all, apparently without worth for their own sakes, when, for example, they appear to be sheer drudgery, like pushing rocks and digging holes. If a given instance

37 Percy Bysshe Shelley, Ozymandias, lines 2-4, 11, 12.

of sheer drudgery then appears to have no further point beyond itself that would confer instrumental value and intelligibility upon it, then and only then do we call it pointless. For an activity to be utterly without point or meaning then is first of all for it to have no value in its own right, and only then, for it to have no further purpose the achievement of which explains and justifies it. The supermarket circle and biological regress concentrate on showing that vindicating purposes never get wholly realized, but this would establish pointlessness only if all activities, human or animal, were sheer drudgery, without value in themselves. Some activities carry their own point within themselves, and for that reason, whatever their envisioned or actual consequences they are not “pointless.” An adult salmon who has grown to maximum size and strength in the ocean, and is ready to begin his dangerous dash upstream to mating waters, is about to saoril salmon existence in its purity, the salmon equivalent of “living to the hilt.” “This is what being a salmon is all about,” he might declare joyously. He will get battered about in the process, but if he could reason he might well conclude that the risk of injuries is justified by the inherent rewards, and like an adolescent football player preparing for his first game, he would be alive with anticipatory excitement.

Taylor asserts that human lives are absurd in the sense of having no point, but restricts the notion of a “point” to a state of affairs subsequent in time whose achievement confers instrumental value back on the life that created it, or at least is intended to do so whether successful or not. But there might be no such “point” outside of or after a person’s life, yet nevertheless his life might have its own point—indeed it might be its own point. A fulfilled life may be absurd (pointless in Taylor’s sense), yet not truly pointless because fulfillment is its point. This second kind of “point” looks backward in time, and exists because it fits some anticipatory condition, like an antecedent disposition. Actions producing the first kind of “point,” in contrast, look forward to a time beyond their own termination, and to the production of lasting achievement. There is little point in that sense to the salmon’s heroics, but they might yet escape absurdity if they discharge a fundamental native disposition of salmon nature—as they clearly do.

THE CONCEPT OF SELF-FULFILLMENT

There are various technical concepts of self-fulfillment associated with the writings of such philosophers as Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, and Hegel, whose histories go back to the earliest beginnings of Western philosophy and are equally venerable in Eastern thought. There also seem to be one or more notions of self-fulfillment, perhaps less clearly conceived and articulate, that are part of ordinary thought, as, for example, when people say
that one kind of life, or one kind of marriage, hobby, or career, is preferred because it is more fulfilling.

In applying the ordinary concept of self-fulfillment, people seem, on different occasions, to use as many as four different models for their understanding. On the first model, fulfillment is simply the answering to any anticipatory condition, whether one's own or another's—promises, hopes, expectations, desires, requirements, or whatever. The second is "filling up, being made full." The third is the opposite of the second, namely, emptying, unwinding, discharging, untying—draining one's cup of life to the dregs. Each of these familiar models comes with its own metaphors to guide (or obscure) the understanding. It is the fourth model, however, that of "doing what comes naturally," that purports to be more "philosophical," and is the more important one for our present purposes. This model restricts itself to the basic dispositions of one's "nature," and where these differ or conflict, to the "higher" or "better" ones. Moreover, fulfillment on this model is not merely a discharging, but also a maturing and perfecting of our basic dispositions. Finally, fulfillment so interpreted is often said to be a "realizing of one's potential," where the word "potential" refers not only to one's basic natural proclivities to engage in activities of certain kinds, but also to one's natural capacities to acquire skills and talents, to exercise those abilities effectively, and thus to produce achievements. Insofar as one fails to "realize one's potential," one's life is thought, on this as well as the third model, to be "wasted."

This understanding of self-fulfillment is much too abstract to be useful, and the main challenge to the philosophers, from Aristotle on, who have tried to incorporate it, has been to give it specificity. Almost anything one does can be said to fulfill a prior disposition to act in precisely that way in circumstances of that kind, or to implant or strengthen the habit of acting that way in the future. Thus almost any action can be said to discharge a natural tendency, to be a doing of what it is in one's nature to do. Philosophers who have fashioned a technical concept of self-fulfillment from the vaguer everyday notion have for the most part assigned it a crucial role in the definition of "the good for man." For that reason, most of them have begun the task of specification by ruling out as self-fulfilling, actions that violate objective standards of morality or that are radically defective in other ways. If a man has the bad habit, acquired and reinforced over a lifetime, of stealing purses, then a given act of stealing a purse, even though it fulfills one of the basic dispositions of his (evil) character, cannot be allowed to count as self-fulfilling. The same kind of fiat has excluded evil actions that discharge native propensities, for example, the angry tirades or physical assaults of a person who is irascible, hotheaded, or aggressive "by nature." Such arbitrary exclusions do not shock common sense, but there does seem to be at least as much warrant in ordinary conceptions for saying that it may be a bad thing that certain kinds of self be fulfilled, but that the discharging of basic "evil" dispositions remains fulfillment, and properly so called, anyway.

Some philosophers in the grand tradition have also excluded from their conception of self-fulfillment, activities that fulfill dispositions peculiar to individual persons, so as to give special importance to activities that fulfill those dispositions that define our common human nature. The phrase "a person's nature" is of course ambiguous. It may refer to the nature he shares with all and only human beings, his "generic nature" as it were, the nature that makes him classifiable as the kind of being he is, or it may refer to the nature that belongs uniquely to him, his "individual nature," the character that distinguishes him from all other individuals of his kind. My generic nature includes my disposition to walk upright and to speak a language, among other things. It is part of my individual nature, on the other hand, to be interested in philosophy, to be punctual at meetings, to be slow at mathematics, and to be irritable when very tired or hungry. Some of the traits that characterize me but not everybody else are not thought to be part of my individual nature because they are weak and tentative habits rather than governing propensities, or because they are trivial (like my habit of scratching my head when deliberating). My individual nature is partly acquired; my generic nature is derived entirely from heredity. I come into existence with it already "loaded and cocked."

Those philosophers of fulfillment who attach special significance to our generic natures tend to draw heavily on biological as well as mechanical metaphors. In a fulfilled life our preprogrammed potentialities "unfold" like the petals of a rose, each in its time, until the plant is fully flowered and "flourishing." Then there follows an equally natural, gradual withering and expiring, and the life of one plant, at least, has been fulfilled. Another plant, much like the first, is caught in a frost and nipped in the bud, never to achieve its "own good" as determined by its natural latencies—the very paradigm of a tragic waste. John Stuart Mill refers to qualities that are "the distinctive endowment" not of the individual in question but of a human being as such: "the human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, even moral preference," these understood as

34 There have been feral children who have permanently lost their ability to learn a language and children born without legs who never acquire the ability to walk. But insofar as these persons are human beings, they are born with the innate capacity to acquire the dispositions and skills involved in walking and talking even though circumstances prevent that capacity from being realized. The capacities in question are often conditional ones: all human children have the capacity to learn a language, which is activated between the ages of two and twelve only, and only if they are made part of a language-speaking community during those years. That conditional capacity to acquire the dispositions and skills involved in language use is common to all human beings.

standing to human nature in the same relation as that in which unfolding
and flourishing stand to the nature of a rose.

I believe it is a mistake, however (and not one committed in common
thought), to exclude individual natures from one’s conception of self-ful-
fillment. If we are told by philosophical sages to act always so as to unfold
our generic human natures, we have not been given very clear directions at
all. Any number of alternative lives might equally well fulfill one’s generic
nature, yet some might seem much more “fulfilling,” in a perfectly ordinary
and intelligible sense, than others. William James makes the point well:

I am often confronted by the necessity of standing by one of my empirical
selves and relinquishing the rest. Not that I would not, if I could, be both
handsome and fat and well dressed, and a great athlete, and make a million a
year, be a wit, a bon vivant, and a lady-killer, as well as philosopher, a philan-
thropist, statesman, warrior, and African explorer, as well as a “tone-poet”
and saint. But the thing is simply impossible. The millionaire’s work would run
counter to the saint’s; the bon vivant and the philanthropist would trip each
other up; the philosopher and the lady-killer could not well keep house in the
same tenement of clay. Such different characters may conceivably at the outset
of life be alike possible to a man. But to make any one of them actual, the rest
must more or less be suppressed.30

All James’ possible careers might equally well fulfill his human nature,
just as all the variously colored unfoldings of roses might equally well fulfill
a rose’s generic nature, but a rose cannot pick its own individual character,
whereas a man has some choice. Since some of James’ lives (presumably
the philosophical one, to begin with) would be more fulfilling than others,
it must be his individual nature qua William James that makes that so. The
point would be even clearer if James had listed among the possibilities,
“anchorite monk,” “operatic basso profundo,” “brain surgeon,” and “drill
sergeant.” Some of these careers obviously accord more closely than others
with anyone’s native aptitudes, inherited temperament, and natural inclina-
tions. How does one choose among them if one is seeking fulfillment? By
“knowing oneself,” of course, but not simply by knowing well the de-
fining traits of any human being. To be sure, making the choice itself is a
characteristically human act and calls into play all of the generic human
traits of Mill’s list—perception, discrimination, insight, and the like—but
to exercise those traits effectively and well, and thus unfold one’s generic
human nature, one must first know one’s individual character as so far
formed, and make the decision that best fits it. Mill’s final and favorite
metaphor, indeed, is that of a life fitting an individual nature in the way a

30 William James, *Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1893), 1:309; as quoted in Lucius

shoe fits a foot: “A man cannot get a coat or a pair of boots to fit him unless
they are either made to his measure or he has a whole warehouseful to
choose from; and is easier to fit him with a life than with a coat.”31

Some of a person’s individual nature is native, for example, much of
what we call aptitudes, temperamental dispositions, and physical strength.
A fulfilling life therefore is one that “fits” these native endowments. But
we make our own natures as we grow older, building on the native base.
We begin, partly because of our inherited proclivities and talents, to de-
velop tastes, habits, interests, and values. We cultivate those skills that grow
naturally out of our aptitudes, and as we get better at them we enjoy them
more and exercise them further so that they get better still; while we are
inclined to neglect the tasks for which our skills are inadequate, and those
abilities wither and decay on the vine.32 The careers we then select as work-
ers, players, and lovers, should be those that fit our well-formed individual
natures, at least insofar as each stage in the emergence of the self grew
naturally out of its predecessor in the direction of our native bent.

Emphasis should be given to the further point that fulfillment of one’s
generic and individual natures are interconnected and interdependent. The
passages in *On Liberty* in which Mill urges fulfillment of the “distinctive
endowment” of generic humanity occur, ironically, in a chapter entitled
“Individuality as One of the Elements of Well-Being,” and nowhere in that
chapter can Mill discuss individuality for long without bringing in human
nature and vice versa. His view clearly is that it is essential to the generic
nature of human beings that each think and decide for himself rather than
blindly follow all the rest, so that in cultivating the capacities that human
beings share in common, each individual will at the same time be promot-
ing his own distinctive individuality. If I pick a career that fits my individu-
al nature instead of blindly drifting with custom or passively acceding to
the choices of another, then I have exercised my generic nature as a thinker
and chooser, at the same time that I have promoted the fulfillment of my
individual nature as a person with a unique profile of interests and apti-
dudes.

Useful as it may be for some purposes the distinction between generic
and individual natures is vague and ragged about the edges, a point we can

32 John Rawls calls the statement of this psychological tendency “the Aristotelian Principle”
and states it as follows: “Other things being equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their
realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more
the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity. The intuitive idea here is that human
beings take more pleasure in doing something as they become more proficient at it, and of
two activities they do equally well, they prefer the one calling for a larger repertoire of more
intricate and subtle discriminations.” Rawls cites the preference among good players for chess
over checkers and among good mathematicians for algebra over arithmetic (*A Theory of Justice*
appreciate by returning to the plight of Taylor's Sisyphus. Depending on the extent to which the gods had him tamper with him, he has either had a new individual nature grafted on to his basic human nature, or else a new (hence nonhuman) generic nature installed in him. If we say the former, then we must think of his infinite rock-pushing proclivities as merely personal eccentricities, only contingently unshared by other persons who share his human nature. If we say the latter, then the individual nature of Sisyphus and his generic nature coincide, since he is now one of a kind, the sole member of his new species. A rock-pushing instinct that is so specific would be such a departure from what we normally think of as human nature, so totally unshared by any other humans that perhaps there would be a point in saying that Sisyphus has a new generic nature, humanoid but not human, and that he is now the only member of the biological species *Homo sapiens geopedris*—sapient rock-pusher. Still more plausible, perhaps, we might think of the new Sisyphus as a borderline case for our old classifications. Unless we hold to the discredited doctrine of fixed species, we can simply declare that there is no uniquely correct answer to the question of whether Sisyphus' generic nature has been changed, and that considerations of convenience and tidiness are as relevant to its resolution as are any questions of fact.

Moreover, when we consider thoughtfully the whole range of hypothetical Sisyphuses from which we might draw in order to flesh out Taylor's example, we are struck with how vague the notion of a "nature" is, whether generic or individual. What is in Sisyphus's nature (or the nature of anyone else) is very much like what is in his (cluttered) closet or in his grab bag, including everything from aptitudes and interests to addictive compulsions. Think of all the variations on Taylor's theme: the gods might have implanted in Sisyphus an *appetite* for stone-pushing that makes regular and frequent demands on him, like hunger or the "sex urge" in others, and corresponding in its cycles to the time it takes to push a rock of standard size up Sisyphus' assigned mountain and then return again to the bottom of the hill. "Ye gods!" he might exclaim after each round of labors, "how I hunger for a nice big rock to push," and the accommodating deities always have one ready for him, like the next ball up in a pinball machine. Or the gods might have designed for him a peculiar talent for rock-pushing much like others' talents for piano-playing, tennis, or chess. The new Sisyphus starts all over as a perpetual youth, and from the start he is a veritable prodigy at rock-pushing. He comes to enjoy exercising his skills, and makes ever-new challenges for himself. He pushes the rock right-handed, then left-handed, then no-handed, then blindfolded, then does two at a time, then juggles three in the air all the way to the summit, eager to return for another rock so that he can break his record, or equal it next time while dancing a Grecian jig. Or the gods do their job by implanting an instinct for rock-pushing so that Sisyphus goes about his chores without giving them so much as a thought (except in rare reflective moments and then only to shrug his shoulders and get on with it). His work is as natural and unremarkable to him as having a language or standing upright is to us, or building a dam to a beaver, or peeling a banana to a chimpanzee. Or (perhaps more plausibly) the gods implant a drive or more general proclivity of which stone-pushing is only one of numerous possible fulfillments. If there were only opportunity to do so, Sisyphus would find it equally in his nature to push wooden logs, or plastic bags, or iron bars, or to pull lift, carry, and throw objects, or to push them while swimming against a current, or to pile, hook, or nail them on to one another as in construction work, and the like. But pushing rocks up a mountain will do as well as any of the other activities as fulfillments of his drive to move and manipulate physical objects and he can be grateful to the gods for that. Or, the gods can use Taylor's own suggested method, and give Sisyphus 'say' a shot in the arm after each trip so that he will feel a "compulsive impulse" to push the rock up once more in order to get relief in the form of another addicting shot. This technique would keep the gods busier than the others, but they could let some internal gland, timed to secrete the essential substance into Sisyphus's bloodstream at appropriate intervals, do the work for them. There is something especially ingenious in this last scheme, for the "shot" given at the base of the hill creates the impulse to push the rock up the hill and also the addictive need, when its first effect wears off, to be renewed by another shot, and so on, ad infinitum.

If the gods' gift to Sisyphus is merely an appetite to push rocks he may yet fail to find self-fulfillment on balance in an indefinitely extended lifetime of rock-pushing, just as one of us might fail to be fulfilled in a life that gives us all the food we need, but nothing else. Sisyphus will have the periodic satisfactions of regular appetite satiation, and that is certainly some benefit to him, but the deepest yearnings of his nature will nevertheless be forever denied. Much the same can be said of his condition if the gods simply addict him chemically to a substance that creates a rock-pushing itch, or if they implant in him an extrahuman instinct to push rocks that fails to dovetail or integrate with the human instincts he must continue to maintain if he is to preserve his identity with his earlier self. The model that makes talk of Sisyphean self-fulfillment most plausible is probably that: in which the gods impart to him talents for rock-moving that he can forever after exercise and glory in. So endowed, he can find self-fulfillment through his developed virtuosity, in the same way others find fulfillment in lives of skilled cello-playing or cabinet-making.

No conception of self-fulfillment will make much sense unless it allows that fulfillment is a matter of degree. We begin life with a large number of potential careers some of which fit our native bent more closely than others
but any of which, if pursued through a lifetime, would lead to substantial fulfillment, so that the pursuit of no one of them is indispensable to a fulfilled life. Imagine a warm and loving woman who is superbly equipped by her nature to be a parent, and has thought of herself throughout her girlhood as a potential mother. She marries and then discovers that she is barren. Had she not been infertile she would have achieved fulfillment in a long lifetime of nearly full-time motherhood. Is it now impossible for her to be fulfilled in a life without children? Clearly not, for the very traits that make her "superbly equipped" to be a mother will make her more than a little qualified for dozens of other roles, and a fulfilled life could stem from any one of these, from social work to school-teaching. 33 or even from a career based on independent specific aptitudes like poetry or basket-weaving. She may be disappointed that her chief ambition is squelched and her regrets may last a lifetime, but disappointment and fulfillment can coexist with little friction, as they do to some degree in most human lives. Thus, we each have within us a number of distinct individual possibilities, several (at least) of which would be sufficient for (a degree of) fulfillment, but no one of which is necessary. But the most fulfilling ones are those that best fit one's latent talents, interests, and initial bent and with one's evolving self-ideal (as opposed simply to one's conscious desires or formulated ambitions).

Some fulfilled human lives are relatively monochromatic, having a single dominant theme; others are diversely colored, having a harmonious orchestration of themes with equal voices. All of them approach fulfillment insofar as they fill their natural allotment of years with vigorous activity. They need not be "successful," or "triumphant," or even contented on balance in order to be fulfilled, provided they are long lifetimes full of struggles and strivings, achievements and noble failures, contentments and frustrations, friendships and enmities, exertions and relaxations, seriousness and playfulness through all the programmed stages of growth and decay. Most important of all, a fulfilled human life will be a life of planning, designing, making order out of confusion and system out of randomness, a life of building, repairing, rebuilding, creating, pursuing goals, and solving problems. It is in the generic nature of the human animal to address the future, change its course, make the best of the situation. If one's house falls down, if one's cities are in rubble, if disaster comes and goes, the human inclination is to start all over again, rebuilding from scratch. There is no "fulfillment" in resignation and despair.

Sisyphus does seem very human after all, then, when he reshoulders his burden and starts back up his hill. But insofar as his situation is rigidly fixed by the gods, allowing him no discretion to select means, design strategies, and solve problems on his own, his life does not fulfill the governing human propensities. If he can fulfill his nature without these discretionary activities, then he has really assumed the nature of a different species.

In all the variations on the Sisyphus myth that we have spun thus far, the gods have assigned a very specific job to Sisyphus that requires no particular judgment or ingenuity on his part to be performed well. They have imposed a duty on him rather than assigning a responsibility. 34 He has a rote job to perform over and over, a menial task for a menial fellow, and his is not to reason why or how, but only to get on with it. Suppose, however, that the gods assign to Sisyphus an endless series of rather complex engineering problems and leave it up to him to solve them. Somehow rocks must be moved to mountain tops and there can be no excuses for failure. "Get it up there somehow," they say. "The methods are up to you. Feel free to experiment and invent. Keep a record of your intermediate successes and failures and be prepared to give us an accounting of the costs. You may hire your own assistants and within certain well-defined limits you have authority to give them commands, so long as you are prepared to answer for the consequences of their work. Now good luck to you." If Sisyphus's subsequent labors are fulfilling, they will be so in a characteristically human way. His individual nature will be fulfilled by a life (endless and pointless though it may be) that fits his native bent and employs his inherent talents and dispositions to the fullest, as well as fitting his more specific individual tendencies, for example, a special fascination (perhaps also a gift of the gods) with rocks.

Why Does Self-Fulfillment Matter?

Why should it "matter" that a person is unfulfilled if, despite his stunted and dwarfed self, the product perhaps of alienating work and other "unfit-

33 Aptitudes and basic dispositions differ in an important way from ordinary desires, plans, and ambitions. The latter characteristically tend to be more precise and determinate than the former, and therefore less flexible and easy to "fulfill." Many ambitions are for some relatively specific object and when that object does not come into existence the ambition is denied. General interests, talents, and drives, however, can typically find substitute objects that do equally well. If one has a highly developed mechanical aptitude, for example, one can employ it equally well as an airplane or an automobile mechanic, as well as a carpenter or a plumber, or in a hundred other callings. One's ambition to be an automobile mechanic, on the other hand, is squelched once and for all, by the denial of opportunity to enter that particular field. For this reason, fulfillment is, on the whole, less difficult to achieve than successful ambition or "satisfaction."

34 The distinction between duty and responsibility is well made by J. Roland Pennock in 'The Problem of Responsibility," Nomos III: Responsibility, ed. C. J. Friedesch (New York: Atherton, 1960), p. 13: "We normally reserve [the word "responsibility"] for cases where the performance of duty requires discernment and choice. We might well say to a child, 'It is your responsibility to take care of your room', but we would not be likely to say, 'It is your responsibility to do as you are told.'"
ting” circumstances, he finds a steady diet of satisfactions in delusory occupations, escapist literature, drugs, drink, and television? Why should it “matter,” to turn the question around, that a person finds fulfillment when his life looks as absurd from a longer perspective as the life of a shellfish appears to us?

Think first of what a substantially unfulfilled life involves. A person comes into existence with a set of governing dispositions that sets him off with others as being of a certain kind. For twenty years he grows and matures, enlarging and perfecting his inherited propensities so that he becomes utterly unique, with a profile of talents and individual traits that, as a group, distinguish him from every other being who has ever existed, and constitute his individual nature. Perhaps he is capable of seeing, from time to time, that this “nature” of his is more than a little absurd. What he does best and most, let us imagine, is play chess and ping-pong and socialize with others who share those interests. He takes those pursuits more seriously than anything else in his life. But he knows that they are, after all, only games, of no cosmic significance whatever, and certainly of no interest to the indifferent universe, to posterity, to history, or to any of the other abstract tribunals by which humans in their more magniloquent moods are wont to measure significance. And yet, absurd as it is, it is his nature, and the only one he has, so somehow he must make the best of it and seek his own good in pursuit of its dominant talents. Whose nature could he try to fulfill, after all, but his own? Where else can his own good conceivably be found? It was not up to him to choose his own nature, for that would presuppose that the choosing self already had a nature of its own determining its choice. But given the nature with which he finds himself indissolubly identified for better or worse, he must follow the path discovered in it and identify his good with the goals toward which his nature is already inclined.

Now suppose that he makes a mess of it through imprudence, frivolity, or recklessness; or imagine that the world withdraws its opportunities; or that lightning strikes and leaves him critically incapacitated for the realization of his potential. That leaves him still the pleasure of his diminished consciousness, his soma pills and television programs, his comic books and crossword puzzles, but his deepest nature will forever remain unfulfilled. Now we think of that nature, with all of its elaborate neurochemical equipment underlying its distinctive drives and talents and forming its uniquely complex character, as largely unused, wasted, all for naught. All wound up, it can never discharge or wind down again. In contrast, the life of fulfillment strikes us as one that comes into being prone and equipped to do its thing, and then uses itself up doing that thing, without waste, blockage, or friction.

When any nature is left unfulfilled it is likely to strike us as a bad thing, an objectively regrettable fact. Perhaps we would withdraw or modify that judgment when we come to appreciate how absurd that nature’s preoccupations really were. But from the point of view of the self whose nature it is, nonfulfillment is more than a bad or regrettable thing to be graded down in some negative but modifiable “value judgment.” It may or may not be all those things in some final balancing-up, all things considered. But from the point of view of the individual involved, nonfulfillment marks the collapse of his whole universe, the denial once and for all of his own good. There is a world of difference in the use of the word “good” as a predicate of evaluation, and its use in the venerable phrase of the philosophers—“one’s own good.” My good is something peculiarly mine, as determined by my nature alone, and particularly by its most powerful trends and currents. Anything else that is good for me (or in my interest) is good because it contributes to my good, the fulfillment of my strongest stable tendencies. One can judge or evaluate that good from some other standpoint, employing some other standard, and the resultant judgment may use the words “good,” “bad,” or “indifferent.” It may not be a good thing that my good be achieved or that it be achieved in a given way, or at a given cost. But it is logically irrelevant to the question of what my good is whether my good is itself “good” when judged from an external position. My nonfulfillment may not be a “bad thing on balance” in another’s judgment or even in my own. My nonfulfillment may not be “objectively regrettable” or tragic. But my nonfulfillment cannot be my good even if it is from all other measuring points, a good thing.

It is perhaps not quite self-evident that my good consists in fulfillment. A hedonist might hold out for the position that my good consists in a balance of pleasant over unpleasant experiences while denying that the basic disposition of my nature is to seek pleasure, thus denying that pleasant experiences as such are fulfilling. I cannot refute such a heroic (and lonely) philosopher. But I would like to urge against the philosopher who is overly impressed with the fact of human absurdity, that if my good is fulfillment, it must be fulfillment of my nature and not of something else. That my nature is eccentric, absurd, laughable, trivial, cosmically insignificant, is neither here nor there. Such as it is, it is my nature for better or worse. The self whose good is at issue is the self I am and not some other self that I might have been. If I had had any choice in the matter I might have preferred to come into existence with the nature (that is the potential) of William James, John F. Kennedy, or Michael Jordan, but I cannot spend all my days lamenting that the only nature whose fulfillment constitutes my good is my own!

The prerequisite to self-fulfillment is a certain amount of clear-eyed, nondeluded self-love. A moment ago I spoke of one’s own nature “such as it is,” “for better or worse.” These phrases recall the wedding ceremony
and its conception of marital love as loyalty and devotion without condition or reservation. Totally unconditional devotion may be too much to ask from any lover, but within wide limits, various kinds of human love of others have a largely unconditional character. Gregory Vlastos describes parental love, for example, in a way that makes it quite familiar: "Constancy of affection in the face of variations of merit is one of the surest tests of whether a parent does love a child."98 Judgments of merit have nothing to do with love so construed. A child's failures, even moral failures, may disappoint his parents' hopes without weakening their loyalty or affection in the slightest. A parent may admire one child more than another, or like (in the sense of "enjoy") one more than another, as well as judge one higher than the other, but it is a necessary condition of parental love that, short of limiting extremes, it not fluctuate with these responses to merit.

The love that any stable person has toward himself will be similarly constant and independent of perceived merits and demerits. I may (realistically) assign myself very low grades for physique, intellect, talent, even character—indeed I may ascribe deficiencies even to my individual nature itself—while still remaining steadfastly loyal and affectionate to myself. Aristotle was right on target when he said that a wise man ought to have exactly that degree of self-esteem that is dictated by the facts, neither more nor less. But self-esteem is not self-love. I have self-love for myself when I accept my nature as given, without apology or regret, even as I work, within the limits it imposes, for self-improvement. We have been through a lot together, my self and I, sharing everything alike, and as long as I have supported him, he has never let me down. I have scolded him, but never cursed his nature. He is flawed all right, and deeply so, but when we warts show, I smile, fondly and indulgently. His blunders are just what one would expect from anyone with his nature. One cannot come to hate a being with whom one has been so very intimate. Indeed, I would not know how to begin to cope with another self after all my years of dependency, "for better or worse," on this one. In this way self-identity can be conceived as a kind of arranged marriage (I did not select the self that was to be me) that in a stable person ripens into true love, but in an unstable one sours into rancor and self-destruction. And the true expression of one's self-love is devotion toward one's own good, which is the fulfillment of one's own (who else's?) nature—absurd as that may be.

The Critique of Cosmic Attitudes

Some lives are manifestly and incontrovertibly absurd. Lives spent moving metaphoric rocks back and forth to no further end and lives spent twisting with metaphoric windmills are cases in point. Other lives are full of achievement and design. In these lives, intermediate goals lend meaning to the pursuits that are instrumental to their achievement, and they in turn are given a point by the more ultimate goals they subserve. No goal is the ultimate one, however, for the most general ends are themselves means to a greater variety of other ends, all tied together in an intricate and harmonious web of purpose. There may be no purpose to the whole web except its service to its own component parts, but each constituent has a place and a vindicating significance to the person whose life it is. Such a life is, relatively speaking, not absurd. There is no doubt an important practical point in distinguishing human lives in terms of their degree of absurdity, even in highlighting and emphasizing the distinctions. (Marx's doctrine of alienation is an example of the social utility of making such distinctions.) As we have seen, however, philosophers have found reason to claim that there is a kind of cosmic absurdity inherent in the human condition as such. As we stand back and look at ourselves from an extended temporal position, the distinction between absurd and nonabsurd lives begins to fade into insignificance, and finally vanishes altogether.

We also make useful distinctions between relatively fulfilled and unfulfilled selves, or fulfilling and unfulfilling lives. However we interpret "fulfillment"—as the development of one's chief aptitudes into genuine talents in a life that gives them scope, or an unfolding of all basic tendencies and inclinations, or an active realization of the universally human propensities to plan, design, make order—there are wide differences among persons in the degree of fulfillment they achieve. Some lives are waxed; some are partially wasted and partially fulfilled; others are nearly totally fulfilled. Unlike the contrast between absurd and nonabsurd lives, these distinctions seem to be time-resistant. If Hubert Humphrey's life was fulfilling to him, that is a fact like any other, and it never ceases to be true that it was a fact. From any temporal distance from which it can be observed at all it will continue to appear to be a fact (though a diminishingly interesting or important one).

Consider a human life that is near-totally fulfilled, yet from a quite accessible imaginary vantage point is apparently absurd. Insofar as the person in question is fulfilled, he ought to "feel good" about his life, and rejoice that he has achieved his good. Suppose that he realizes then how futile it all was, "coming to nothing in the end." What would be the appropriate attitude in that event to hold toward his life? Unchanged pride and satisfaction? Bitterness and despair? Haughty existential scorn? We can call such responsive attitudes taken toward one's whole life and by implication toward the whole human condition, "cosmic attitudes." One of the traditional tasks of philosophy (and what philosophy is entirely about in the minds of innocent persons unacquainted with the academic discipline of that name) is to perform a kind of literary criticism of cosmic attitudes. It

used to be the custom for philosophers not only to describe the universe in its more general aspects but to recommend cosmic attitudes toward the world as so described.

I welcome the suggestion of Nagel that the appropriate responsive attitude toward human lives that are both absurd and fulfilled is irony, and I shall conclude by elaborating that suggestion somewhat beyond the bare recommendation that Nagel offers.

None of the familiar senses of irony in language or in objective occurrences seem to make any sense out of the advice that we respond to absurdity with irony. What Nagel has in mind clearly is another sense in which irony is a kind of outlook on events, namely, "an attitude of detached awareness of incongruity." This is a state of mind halfway between seriousness and playfulness. It may even seem to the person involved that he is both very serious and playful at the same time. The tension between these opposed elements pulling in their opposite ways creates at least temporarily a kind of mental equilibrium not unlike that of the boy in Lincoln’s story who was "too scared to laugh and too big to cry," except that the boy squirms with discomfort whereas irony is on balance an appreciative attitude. One appreciates the perceived incongruity much as one does in humor, where the sudden unexpected perception of incongruity produces laughter. Here the appreciation is more deliberate and intellectual. The situation is too unpleasant in some way—sad, threatening, disappointing—to permit the relaxed playfulness of spirit prerequisite to the comic response. There is a kind of bittersweet pleasure in it, but not the pleasure of amusement. The situation is surely not seen as funny, although perhaps it would be if only one could achieve a still more detached outlook on it. One contemplates a situation with irony when one looks the facts in the eye and responds in an appreciative way to their incongruous aspects as such. Irony is quite different from despair-cum-tears, scornful defiance-cum-anger, and amusement-cum-laughter. It is pleasant enough to be expressed characteristically in a smile, but a somewhat tired smile, with a

36 Nagel, “Absurd,” p. 707: "If sub specie aeternitatis there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that doesn’t matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair."

37 Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary (1976), based on Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language. Of the five English dictionaries I consulted, only this newest one contained any definition of irony as an attitude. Is that because this sense is relatively new or because dictionary-makers have heretofore overlooked it?

38 "The President takes the result of the New York election [a defeat for his party] philosophically, and will doubtless profit by the lesson. When Colonel Renny inquired of him how he felt, he replied: 'Somewhat like the boy in Kentucky who stubbed his toe while running to see his sweetheart. The boy said he was too big to cry, and far too badly hurt to laugh." (Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Weekly, November 22, 1862.)
that fulfillment requires luck, and luck is not always good in a world that contains violent passions, accidents, disease, and war.

In this chapter, however, I have tried not only to sketch a conception of the good life and the bad but also to recommend an appropriate attitude toward the human condition generally. Imagine a person who both through his own virtues and good luck has led a maximally fulfilling life into his final declining years. He has realized his highest individual potential in a career that perfectly fit his inherited temperamental proclivities. His talents and virtues have unfolded steadily in a life that gave them limitless opportunity for exercise, and he has similarly perfected his generic human powers of discrimination, sympathy, and judgment in a life full of intermeshing purposes and goals. All of this is a source of rich satisfaction to him, until in the philosophical autumn of his days, he chances upon the legend of Sisyphus, the commentary of Camus, and the essays of Taylor and Nagel. In a flash he sees the vanity of all his pursuits, the total permeability of his achievements by time, the lack of any long-term rationale for his purposes, in a word the absurdity of his (otherwise good) life. At first he will feel a keen twinge. But unless he be misled by the sophistries of the philosophical pessimists who confuse the empty ideal of long-term coherence with the Good for Man, he will soon recover. And then will come a dawning bittersweet appreciation of the cosmic incongruities first called to his attention by the philosophers. The thought that there should be a modest kind of joke at the heart of human existence begins to please (if not quite tickle) him. Now he can die not with a whine or a snarl, but with an ironic smile.