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# EXISTENTIAL NIHILISM: THE ONLY REALLY SERIOUS PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM

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**Abstract:** Since Friedrich Nietzsche, philosophers have grappled with the question of how to respond to nihilism. Nihilism, often seen as a derogative term for a ‘life-denying’, destructive and perhaps most of all depressive philosophy is what drove existentialists to write about the right response to a meaningless universe devoid of purpose. This latter diagnosis is what I shall refer to as *existential nihilism*, the denial of meaning and purpose, a view that not only existentialists but also a long line of philosophers in the empiricist tradition ascribe to. The absurd stems from the fact that though life is without meaning and the universe devoid of purpose, man still longs for meaning, significance and purpose. Inspired by *Bojack Horseman* and *Rick and Morty*, two modern existentialist masterpieces, this paper explores the various alternatives that have been offered in how to respond to the absurd, or as *Albert Camus* puts it; the only “really serious philosophical problem” and concludes that the problem is compatible with a naturalistic world-view, thereby genuine and transcending existentialism.

## 1. Introduction

This paper explores and analyses the only “really serious philosophical question”, i.e. how to respond to a meaningless life. Albert Camus clarifies the problem in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: “Deciding whether or not life is worth living is to answer the fundamental question in philosophy. All other questions follow from

that".<sup>1</sup> For the time being, but not for long, the question of suicide here coincides for Camus with the question of whether life is meaningful, as this is what suicidal persons share in their contemplation. Camus affirms that life is meaningless, but further declares in the preface "that even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism." The absurd stems from the fact that though life is without meaning and the universe devoid of purpose, man longs for meaning, significance and purpose anyhow. The structure of this paper follows a clear, linear fashion: Firstly, I sketch the starting point for existential thinking in *section 2*, i.e. existential nihilism and the arguments in its favour. In *section 3*, I proceed by analysing how various existential thinkers, most prominently Albert Camus argue for the absurd following the premise of existential nihilism and offer a unifying account of the absurd, incorporating the views of two non-existential philosophers, i.e. Thomas Nagel and Alex Rosenberg representing the a-priori and naturalistic approach to philosophy respectively. In *section 4*, I finally analyse and contrast the various existentialist and non-existentialist proposals to cope with the absurd and conclude that the problem is compatible with a naturalistic world-view, thereby genuine and transcending existentialism.

## 2. Existential Nihilism

Since Friedrich Nietzsche, philosophers have grappled with the question of how to respond to nihilism. Nihilism, often used as a derogative term for a 'life-denying', destructive and perhaps most of all depressive philosophy, is what drove existentialists to write about the right response to a meaningless universe devoid of purpose. This latter diagnosis is what I refer to as existential nihilism, the denial of meaning and purpose, a view that not only existentialists but also a long line of philosophers in the empiricist tradition ascribe too. The absurd stems from the fact that though life is without meaning and the universe devoid of purpose, man still longs for meaning, significance and purpose. For existential thinkers like Kierkegaard,

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<sup>1</sup> Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, J. O'Brian (tr.), London: H. Hamilton, [1942] 1955, p. 3.

Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre and Camus this conflict was central to their philosophy. In the following, I contrast and analyze the various accounts for the origin of the absurd that have been given, or as Albert Camus puts it; the only “really serious philosophical question”<sup>2</sup> – whether life is meaningful. Whether the question of suicide actually coincides with the question of whether life is meaningful, however, will be postponed until *section 4*.

Existential nihilism is by no means restricted to existentialist thinkers and it cannot be – if my argument that *the absurd* is a genuine problem transcending existentialism is supposed to be successful. In his defence of scientism Alex Rosenberg makes the case that many of “life’s persistent questions” can be answered by science – among them; “*Is there a God? No. [...] What is the purpose of the universe? There is none. What is the meaning of life? Ditto. Why am I here? Just dumb luck.*”<sup>3</sup> It is no coincidence that these answers closely mimic the diagnosis provided by (the atheists among) existentialist thinkers. When Nietzsche proclaimed that “God is dead” we are supposed to view science, if not as the murderer than at least, as the tool that was used to kill God. In an article titled: “Darwin’s nihilistic idea: evolution and the meaninglessness of life”, Sommers and Rosenberg argue that “[t]he solvent algorithm [of evolution] deprives nature of purpose, on the global and the local scale”<sup>4</sup>, a point I argue is closely related to Nietzsche. While Nietzsche is often taken as a deterrent as to where Darwinian philosophy leads, I argue that Nietzsche’s Darwinism is better associated with his ideas surrounding the *Death of God* rather than the *Übermensch*. Even though Nietzsche is often given as an example for a nihilist, most of his work is directed against the destructive consequences of nihilism, once God has been replaced by science or more accurately where science left a hole after getting rid of God. This line of argument is common in at least the atheistic tradition of existentialism. As nihilism is commonly used as a derogatory term, even in the works

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p. 3

<sup>3</sup> Rosenberg, Alexander. *The Atheist’s Guide to Reality*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Sommers, Tamler & Rosenberg, Alexander. “Darwin’s nihilistic idea: evolution and the meaninglessness of life”. *Biology & Philosophy*, 2003: 18, p. 653.

of Friedrich Nietzsche, it will prove helpful for the purpose of this paper to take a 'value-neutral' view on nihilism and achieve conceptual clarity of the term nihilism, beyond some sort of 'life-denying' philosophy.

I define nihilism narrowly as the negative and eliminativist thesis of denying objective values. Moral nihilism, therefore, refers to the meta-ethical thesis that there is no objective morality, no inherent goodness or wrongness, a view that many existentialists agree with. The concern in a paper on the absurd, however, is existential nihilism, which can be defined as the denial of life being meaningful and the universe having a purpose. Whether moral and existential nihilism entail each other is beyond the scope of this paper, but they at least stand in a close relation.<sup>5</sup> Existentialists are by definition, therefore, all existential nihilists, though not necessarily moral nihilists or atheists. As is commonly joked about existentialist thinkers, with the exception of Sartre, they do not appreciate being labelled as existentialists. Just like moral nihilism is often negatively associated and equated with immoralism, existential nihilism is often associated with destructive behaviour and suicide.<sup>6</sup> These positions, however, should not be confused or seen as standing in a necessary causal relationship. Existential nihilism despite its negative connotations should therefore not be seen as a label, but rather as something that is taken as a fact or at least wide-spread view in the modern world<sup>7</sup>, from which existential philosophy takes off. The popularity and critical acclaim of contemporary works such as *Bojack Horseman*, *True Detective* & *Rick and Morty* exploring existential nihilism makes it one of the most popular philosophical views in folk philosophy. Now let me turn to the arguments for said position.

The strongest argument for existential nihilism has been provided by the naturalist philosopher Daniel Dennett in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*. Evolution as a

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<sup>5</sup> See the works of Camus and Sartre. Sommers and Rosenberg (2003) explicitly endorse this connection.

<sup>6</sup> More on the relation between different forms of nihilism can be found in Joyce, Richard "Nihilism" In Hugh LaFollette (ed.) *International Encyclopedia of Ethics*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> See *Bojack Horseman*, *True Detective* & *Rick and Morty* for recent existentialist works in contemporary culture.

random and blind mechanism involving nothing beyond reproduction, variation and differential reproductive success is the fundamental law of biology. Natural selection explains the origin of life and man, without any reference to purpose. When asked in school as to what the meaning of life could possibly be, I and my friends answered 'reproduction' - seeing this as the natural conclusion to the truth of evolution. As faulty as this view of me and my friends was, it was based on the view that the evolutionary 'purpose' of life is essentially reproduction. This, however, is usually not what is asked, when faced with the question of what the meaning of life is or rather what makes life meaningful. The answer we gave back then was just stating an essential or the most fundamental feature of life, at least insofar as contemporary debates in biology and philosophy go as to what *life* means. What is asked for, though, is some kind of higher, eternal purpose for humans. However and here existentialists get their name from, evolution denies these kinds of essences that have 'plagued' philosophy for since Plato. Everything is in constant change under the blind and random mechanism of evolution. There is no essence like rationality or moral sense that we could attribute to human nature. When Sartre<sup>8</sup> famously remarked that "existence precedes essence" he meant that it is left for humans themselves to decide who they are. That it is neither nature nor culture that is responsible for choices. To believe so would be *bad faith*, denying our *radical freedom* to choose. This notion in existentialism is clearly incompatible with a scientific view of humans as a product of genes and environment. Though there is no such a thing as human nature, we cannot deny the influence of our biology and environment on our choices. But the degree of compatibility must for now be postponed until *section 4*.

To sum up: Evolution destroys all notions of teleology in the biological realm. Sommers and Rosenberg, in their review paper of Dennett with the fitting title "Darwin's nihilistic idea: evolution and the meaninglessness of life" phrase the conclusions of the Darwinian argument for existential nihilism in the following way: "Darwinism thus puts the capstone on a process which since Newton's time has

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<sup>8</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism and Humanism*. London: Eyre Methuen, [1945] 1973.

driven teleology to the explanatory side-lines. In short, it has made Darwinians into metaphysical Nihilists denying that there is any meaning or purpose to the universe, its contents and its cosmic history"<sup>9</sup>. This is where I identify Nietzsche's philosophy as a Darwinian philosophy. The theory of evolution dissolves all purposes in as Dennett puts it "Darwin's universal acid"<sup>10</sup> – science, therefore, renders God oblivious and takes away the illusion of purpose from our lives. Dennett even goes so far to attribute the origin of existentialism to Darwin: "Friedrich Nietzsche saw – through the mists of his contempt for all things English – an even more cosmic message in Darwin: God is dead. If Nietzsche is the father of existentialism, then perhaps Darwin deserves the title of grandfather."<sup>11</sup> This in itself should already make us open to the possibility that naturalism and the problem of the absurd are compatible after all. William Irwin trying to reconcile existentialism with libertarianism and evolutionary theory, makes a fitting remark:

Evolutionary theory does not necessarily imply existentialism, but the two are compatible once existentialism softens its stance on human nature. And there are some perhaps-surprising points of coincidence, for example, the absurdity and pointlessness of life. Evolution is not teleological.<sup>12</sup>

As existentialists usually start from existential nihilism as a fact, not much of an argument for the metaphysical claim itself is offered. Especially after the horrors of WW2, it is only reasonable to ask how anyone could continue to believe that there is a God or purpose to our lives. To quote Camus': "One kills oneself because life is not worth living, that is certainly a truth yet an unfruitful one because it is a truism."<sup>13</sup> Much of existential thinking boils down to the fact,

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<sup>9</sup> Sommers, Tamler & Rosenberg, Alexander. "Darwin's nihilistic idea: evolution and the meaninglessness of life", p. 653.

<sup>10</sup> Dennett, Daniel C. *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*. Simon and Schuster, New York, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p. 62

<sup>12</sup> Irwin, William. *The free market existentialist*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015, p. 90.

<sup>13</sup> Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 7.

that there is no God and hence, no one to give the universe purpose and meaning to our lives. But in the face of evil and chaos, it is questionable whether, even with the existence of a supposed deity our lives are bestowed with any meaning. Theistic existentialists like Kierkegaard, Shestov and Jaspers would deny such. Thomas Nagel offers a thought experiment, of humanity realizing that the human race and our whole planet were created for by some creatures to farm and eat human flesh.<sup>14</sup> Clearly, he argues, this doesn't give us the purpose we ask for when asking for the meaning of life. Would the analogy change if it was God who created us for some purpose rather than a powerful alien race? Camus suggests that this may not work either: "I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms."<sup>15</sup> Even if God exists and has some purpose for us in mind, we cannot grasp it. As my aim in this paper is to salvage as much as possible of Camus' notion of the absurd by making it compatible with a naturalistic and scientific world-view, the preceding arguments prove sufficient for my purpose. With the metaphysical conclusion of existential nihilism reached, one may drop the case as closed. However for the existentialists more has to be said, in fact, their whole philosophy is based on the realization that life has no inherent meaning or purpose. In the following section, I sketch the problem of the absurd, that is the conflict of man with existential nihilism, and contrast various existential thinkers and non-existential thinkers arguing for the thesis that the absurd condition is genuine.

### 3. The Absurd

"MOST people feel on occasion that life is absurd, and some feel it vividly and continually" is how Thomas Nagel opens his paper 'The Absurd', yet "they could not really explain why life is absurd."<sup>16</sup> Why then do they provide a natural expression for the sense that it is?"

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<sup>14</sup> Nagel, Thomas. *Mind and Cosmos*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 721.

<sup>15</sup> Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 34.

<sup>16</sup> Nagel, Thomas. *Mind and Cosmos*, p. 716.



This explanation will be the target of the following section. I provide a unified account of the absurd following Camus, Nagel and Rosenberg and contrast how their explanations and accounts of *the absurd* differentiate.

What then is the absurd? As Albert Camus is most often associated with the term *the absurd*, I will begin with his account. He begins by illustrating the common uses of the word absurd and gives the example of a virtuous man, who we accuse of desiring his sister. Naturally, he would respond in shock: "That is absurd!" Thereby appealing to the "contradictory" and "impossible" notion of the accusation, like a man attacking a group of gunmen with a sword.<sup>17</sup> The intention of the action clashes with the harsh reality, thereby rendering the whole endeavour absurd. For Camus, the "absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need [for meaning and reason] and the unreasonable silence of the world."<sup>18</sup> The feeling of the absurd therefore stems from two realizations taken together, first, man's realization that life is meaningless and the universe purposeless and secondly, man's desire for meaning and purpose. The absurd, however, transcends the feeling of absurdity for man need not know that life is meaningless. For those having become aware of the absurdity of human existence will see the futile struggle for purpose of those trying to escape the problem as the prime illustration of the absurd. The absurd only requires man to search for meaning in a meaningless world. This is how Karen Carr sees the term nihilism used in Nietzsche's work; a "condition of tension, as a disproportion between what we want to value (or need) and how the world appears to operate."<sup>19</sup> The absurd is the futile search for meaning. It is neither existential nihilism that is absurd, nor the human search for meaning, but the comparison, the conflict, that arises between them. Following this interpretation, I now reinforce Camus' notion of the absurd with two non-existential philosophers who provided further arguments for the absurd, i.e. Thomas Nagel and Alex Rosenberg.

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<sup>17</sup> Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, p. 20

<sup>19</sup> Carr, Karen L. *The Banalisation of Nihilism*, State University of New York Press 1992, p. 25.

In the analytic tradition, many have disputed that the world is unreasonable, and that logic and science can indeed satisfy our “desire for unity, this longing to solve, this need for clarity and cohesion”<sup>20</sup>, though Camus denied science being able to do so. Let us now take a look at an analytical philosopher, i.e. Thomas Nagel and his paper “The Absurd”. Nagel, too, starts from the notion of the absurd in ordinary life, giving a similar analysis to Camus’, stating that it “includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality”<sup>21</sup>, like someone giving a complex speech on a vote that has already been cast. This is akin to the analysis Camus gives for the common use of the word ‘absurd’. Nagel continues analysing the call for action that springs out of the absurd: “When a person finds himself in an absurd situation, he will usually attempt to change it, by modifying his aspirations, or by trying to bring reality into better accord with them, or by removing himself from the situation entirely”<sup>22</sup>, the latter being a euphemism to refer to suicide. Almost everyone, so Nagel regularly encounters situations where one feels the notion of absurdity. A philosophical notion of absurdity, in contrast to the feeling of absurdity, however, must according to Nagel lie in “something universal-some respect in which pretension and reality inevitably clash for us all” and that is a “collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt.”<sup>23</sup> While his account differs slightly from the account Camus’ defends, one could complain that Nagel doesn’t give sufficient credit to Camus, in a sense plagiarized him. Searching for meaning in one’s life is certainly a way of taking it seriously while believing in existential nihilism might undermine the arbitrary notion of our seriousness. But Nagel’s account is weaker in that doubt, i.e. some kind of scepticism rather than outright denial of purpose would be sufficient for the absurd to arise. The conditions for the absurd Nagel gives seem therefore to be easier satisfied. However and here Nagel finally mentions Camus, criticizes his

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<sup>20</sup> Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 51.

<sup>21</sup> Nagel, Thomas. *Mind and Cosmos*, p. 718.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, p. 718

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, p. 718

notion of the absurd for implying that our search for meaning could be satisfied if only the world was different. He invites us to consider the complaint that we are insignificant specks of dust in the universe and everything we do will make no difference in a million years. Would a smaller universe or larger bodies equip our lives with meaning? Nagel denies this and here I agree with him, the mere scope of reality does not necessarily make our lives meaningless. The fact that ants and other animals under our observation seem to live their lives devoid of any of meaning or purpose illustrates this. We see ourselves as taking part in some grander scheme imbued with importance requiring us to take our lives seriously. We have goals and search for justifications for our actions, such intentions seemingly lacking in other creatures. Nagel then considers whether somethings not mattering in a million years renders our actions in the present meaningless. He accuses this claim of question-begging as we cannot know whether our actions will matter in a million years or not. Here I must side with the naturalist position Rosenberg illustrates. Given the second law of thermodynamics, the heat death of the universe is inevitable. If someone complains, that nothing he does will matter in a million years, he complains about the fact that none of his actions truly change anything in the grand scheme of things. Rather than question-begging, this is a fact of science. I agree, however, with Nagel when he argues that immortality wouldn't make our lives more meaningful either. Nagel goes on to offer an alternative explanation that stands in close relation to the common complains of our insignificance in space and time. Nagel notices that when we ask for meaning and purpose, what we ask for is some kind of final justification after which no further reason is required. But if we deny the existence of such a final reason, then this in effect leaves all our justification chains as being either circular or ungrounded. This, however, doesn't explain the absurd, given that in our lives we often do not require a further reason, and here Nagel offers examples like taking "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"<sup>24</sup>, though moral nihilists would deny the latter. For existentialists like Kierkegaard reason cannot help us here, for there

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, p. 717

cannot be an ultimate reason without committing to a leap of faith. As an analytic philosopher, that is not an option Nagel can take seriously. The seriousness, by which Nagel means time and effort, with which we live our lives, however, imbues at least some of the choices we make in life with some kind of assumptions of higher purpose and meaning. As one might argue goes, “why struggle, if the struggle doesn’t amount to anything?” This question is unique for humans, in that only they have the ability to take a step back and look at themselves from a grander point of view, which is seemingly impossible for animals. From this perspective, our lives must appear “sobering and comical.”<sup>25</sup> As Nagel says:

We step back to find that the whole system of justification and criticism, which controls our choices and supports our claims to rationality, rests on responses and habits that we never question, that we should not know how to defend without circularity, and to which we shall continue to adhere even after they are called into question.<sup>26</sup>

Our aims and goals must from this perspective appear arbitrary. They are in the end, so small and insignificant, that one can only wonder why we put so much energy into achieving our life goals. This is the absurd condition we cannot escape. Asking for a higher purpose must then seem as a potential escape to the absurd. We must, therefore, acknowledge that the “absurdity of our situation derives not from a collision between our expectations and the world, but from a collision within ourselves.”<sup>27</sup> I don’t agree with Nagel, in his claim to provide a superior account to that of Camus. If anything, Nagel reinforces Camus’ argument. For Camus as for Nagel, the search for final justifications in God, religion, power, family or the state is just as futile, for their purposes must appear just as absurd if we take a step back. They are no more than an escape from the absurd, not a solution. Their legitimacy will be evaluated in *section 4*. For now, it seems, as if Camus notion of the absurd is compatible

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, p. 720

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, p. 720

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, p. 722

with contemporary analytical philosophy after all. What, however, becomes of the absurd, when we accept the conclusions of science?

Following Rosenberg, I argue that the absurd remains steadfast even in the face of science, more so gains an unexpected ally. As argued in *section 2*, it was science in the first place that undermined God and thereby gave rise to the absurd. Absurdism in the face of scientism is in fact, the whole premise of the critically acclaimed, popular, adult animated series *Rick and Morty* about the scientist Rick Sanchez and his grandson Morty. Rick, who is the smartest person in the entire universe, is aware of the fact that there is no meaning or purpose to life and makes this clear to his grandson Morty and the rest of his family on ample occasions. Rather than escaping the absurd by creating his own meaning, Rick embodies Camus' struggle with the absurd and the contemplation of suicide. Many of the series' jokes are directly based on the absurd struggle to find meaning in a meaningless world. Would Camus live today, he would grant the main character Rick Sanchez the title of an *absurd hero*, embracing the meaninglessness of it all but revolting and enjoying life anyway akin to Don Juan and Sisyphus. To quote the Wisecrack breakdown of *Rick and Morty*: "It's not just that *Rick and Morty* evade meaning, the writers seem to get a perverse joy in playing with our desire to search for hope and meaning. As if Camus was making his point in the style of an internet troll."<sup>28</sup> Another animated series, *Bojack Horseman* explores dark themes relating to the search of meaning in our lives. The title character is rich and famous but attempts to fill a hole in his life that cannot be fixed. A show entirely based on the only really serious problem in philosophy, i.e. how to respond to existential nihilism. Both shows illustrate that nothing matters and that failure to find happiness lies merely in our inability to recognize that whatever goal or desire we are attempting to satisfy it will not provide our lives with meaning. The existentialists may have been right in their view, novels are the best way to convey philosophical ideas after all. Nowadays, this may even extend to animated series' for adults. But that of course, doesn't relieve the philosopher from the task to provide his ideas and arguments in the clearest form possible, in the first place.

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<sup>28</sup> "Rick and Morty: The Philosophy of Szechuan Sauce - Wisecrack Edition"

Alex Rosenberg, a proponent of ‘scientism’, argues that science is the only reliable guide to reality, and many philosophical questions should be answered by looking at the sciences. He provides a scientific account of what Camus labels the absurd: “Introspection can’t provide a good reason to go on living because there isn’t any. This is the one thing that at least some of the existentialists [e.g. Camus, Sartre] got right. But introspection keeps hoping, looking, trying to find a reason to go on. Since there really isn’t one, those who look hard eventually become troubled.”<sup>29</sup> Camus agrees in that “[b]egging to think is beginning to be undermined”<sup>30</sup> analysing how people reach the conclusion to commit suicide. Indeed, when discussing the meaning of life, many people state that there has to be a reason, a purpose or a deeper meaning, ‘otherwise – What’s the point? & Why not commit suicide?’ Whether these are valid options when facing the absurd will be analysed in *section 4*. Rosenberg, who follows the Humean tradition, however, illustrates that the absurd remains a philosophical problem even with the expiration of existentialism, having become a historical rather than a contemporary movement in philosophy. Can science also provide an explanation as to why we search for meaning and purpose in our lives? Rosenberg argues, it can and continues providing an evolutionary account for the illusion of ‘purpose’. As the fundamental ‘design problem’ our ancestors faced was to predict the behaviour of our fellows, i.e. to think about their intentions and purposes of their action, “the human brain has been shaped by millions of years of natural and cultural selection to be addicted to stories.” In fact, “[t]hey are almost the only things that give most of us relief from the feeling of curiosity.”<sup>31</sup> Man’s desire for meaning, purpose and significance is nothing more than an evolutionary by-product of the beneficial adaption to explain and predict. This suggests that our human desire for narrative and understanding makes the absurdist condition, in fact, inescapable and a genuine feature of ‘human nature’. Evolution has shaped humans into

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<sup>29</sup> Rosenberg, Alexander. *The Atheist’s Guide to Reality*, p. 280.

<sup>30</sup> Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Rosenberg, Alexander. *The Atheist’s Guide to Reality*, p. 310.

“conspiracy theorists”, thereby creating a desire for purpose and religion. To summarize the absurd in Camus’ own words:

[T]hese two certainties—my appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle—I also know that I cannot reconcile them. What other truth can I admit without lying, without bringing in a hope I lack and which means nothing within the limits of my condition?<sup>32</sup>

Camus was right then, the human desire for ‘unity’ and meaning is deeply entrenched in human existence. The only really serious philosophical problem remains steadfast even in the face of science, more so gaining an ally in the naturalistic scientific world-view. An ally Camus would not have anticipated to be coming to his aid. The answers, the sciences provide will never be fully satisfactory given our evolutionary history and addiction to stories. Science cannot give purpose to our lives, because there is none. Let me therefore now finally turn to the solution of how to face the absurd.

#### 4. Responding to Existential Nihilism

In *section 2* I proposed a definition for existential nihilism that I will continue to use here: Life being meaningless and the universe being devoid of purpose. In now asking how to respond to this metaphysical position one may ask, what then the purpose of *section 3* on the absurd is. This is precisely the question Camus raised when arguing for the claim that the problem of suicide coincides with the question of whether life is meaningful. It is the question of whether this existential claim has any bearing on the lives we are living. For the existentialist tradition, this question was answered in the affirmative and as I argued in *section 3*, the absurd, is a genuine problem transcending existential philosophy. The question I want to answer now is how to respond to the absurd.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus argues that suicide is no solution to the absurd as it doesn’t solve the problem, it just gets rid of one of

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<sup>32</sup> Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 34.

two premises from which the conclusion, the absurd follows. Rather than escape the absurd, one must revolt in the face of meaninglessness. He criticizes other existentialists like Kierkegaard and Sartre, but also novelists like Kafka and Dostoevsky for deifying “what crushes them and find[ing] reason to hope in what impoverishes them”<sup>33</sup>, which is why he doesn’t want to be labelled as an existentialist. In contrast to *physical suicide* as a response to the absurd, Camus refers to the existential escape from the absurd as *philosophical suicide*. Though he claims that this isn’t a judgement, it must appear as a slight to other existentialist thinkers. Camus thinks it an appropriate term for “the movement by which a thought negates itself and tends to transcend itself in its very negation”<sup>34</sup>, thereby enabling a leap of faith and escaping the absurd. This leap of faith is not restricted to Kierkegaard and other theistic existentialists, but Camus intends it to apply to all existentialists including Sartre calling the negation of reason their ‘God’, even when they see themselves as atheists. Though Camus doesn’t see himself as a philosopher and rejects philosophical systems, he does not reject logic and refutes existentialism precisely on grounds of that. Those who “hope of another life one must [‘]deserve[‘] or trickery of those who live not for life itself but for some great idea that will transcend it, refine it, give it a meaning and betray it, [i.e. life itself].”<sup>35</sup> Aronson sees the origin of Camus’ idea in Nietzsche, who argued that hope lets people devalue their lives in the expectation of a life beyond. There is no great purpose by which we could transcend our insignificance. It is only once we accept that there is nothing beyond this life that we can “fully experience—feel, taste, touch, see, and smell—the joys of our bodies and the physical world.”<sup>36</sup> To hope, therefore, is to commit *philosophical suicide*. There is nothing beyond the life and the reality we got, reason and science make that abundantly clear. It turns out that in failing to provide a better

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<sup>33</sup> Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 22.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*, p. 28

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*, p. 8

<sup>36</sup> Aronson, Ronald. "Albert Camus", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/camus/>. Web. 18 March 2018.



account of the absurd, Nagel at least accomplished a better counter-argument to the escapism through hope that is undertaken by a leap of faith:

What makes doubt inescapable with regard to the limited aims of individual life also makes it inescapable with regard to any larger purpose that encourages the sense that life is meaningful. Once the fundamental doubt has begun, it cannot be laid to rest.<sup>37</sup>

This argument provided by Nagel makes it much clearer and in fact justified for Camus to refer to such irrational options as *philosophical suicide*. For Camus and in fact Nagel, the right response to the absurd must, therefore, lie somewhere else. In arguing for an alternative, Camus' solution begins with a criticism of Sartre's notion of *radical freedom*. Where scientism and existentialism most obviously clash, is the denial of free will and commitment to determinism on the one hand and denial of determinism and freedom of choice on the other. Holding on to the former with respect to our own choices is what Sartre calls "bad faith", to live authentically requires us to recognize our radical freedom. For a compatibilist account of radical freedom and Darwinism, one should take a look at William Irwin's work (2015). Contra Sartre, Camus argues that the notion of radical freedom is mistaken, for "[h]owever far one may remain from any presumption, moral or social, one is partly influenced by them and even [...] adapts one's life to them. Thus the absurd man realizes that he was not really free."<sup>38</sup> The authentic man in Sartre's view becomes according to Camus, a slave to his belief in freedom. Denying Sartre outright, Camus offers an alternative to radical freedom, i.e. *absurd freedom*:

[D]eath and the absurd are here the principles of the only reasonable freedom: that which a human heart can experience and live. This is a second consequence. The absurd man thus catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is

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<sup>37</sup> Nagel, Thomas. *Mind and Cosmos*, p. 721.

<sup>38</sup> Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 39.

possible but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness. He can then decide to accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation.<sup>39</sup>

According to Thomas Nagel, this explanation for how one should cope with the absurd seems rather “romantic and slightly self-pitying.”<sup>40</sup> Camus draws three consequences from the absurd which illustrate his solution to the only really important problem in philosophy, i.e. “my revolt, my freedom, and my passion. By the mere activity of consciousness, I transform into a rule of life what was an invitation to death—and I refuse suicide.”<sup>41</sup> To make the reader understand what he means, Camus elaborates on the absurd hero Don Juan, who conquers the heart of women but leaves for the next upon their profession of love for him, in fact, Camus calls this calls his ‘revolt’, i.e. Don Juanism. For some people love is the solution to the absurd. For Camus, this cannot be true and he refers to Don Juan as a case study as an absurd hero. Akin to Sisyphus who is condemned by the Gods to push a boulder up a mountain only to watch it roll down again once he reaches the peak and being forced to repeat this act in all eternity. Just like Sisyphus, Aronson argues, “humans cannot help but continue to ask after the meaning of life, only to see our answers tumble back down”<sup>42</sup> thereby illustrating the absurd. Why should we imagine Sisyphus happy according to Camus? Because he is constantly aware and conscious of the meaninglessness of his task, and he carries it out regardless. When a girl professes her love for him, Don Juan can only laugh in the face of the absurd. Rather than despair or hope for more in life, he revolts against the rules of the society and the absurd, accepts his meaningless fate and lives out his passions. Camus’ rather lyrical writings and references to the heroes in other stories have a deeper purpose. According to Aronson, they aim “to demonstrate what life means and feels like once we give up hope of an afterlife so that in

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid*, p. 40

<sup>40</sup> Nagel, Thomas. *Mind and Cosmos*, p. 726.

<sup>41</sup> Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 42.

<sup>42</sup> Aronson, Ronald. "Albert Camus", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

reading we will be led to [']see['] his point."<sup>43</sup> These are the conclusions Camus has drawn as the solution to the question of suicide. One has to accept that life is meaningless and death inevitable, but the consciousness of this, only makes life worth living to begin with.

As Camus limits himself to analysing other existentialist philosophers, I will now introduce the solutions to the absurd, which Thomas Nagel and Alex Rosenberg provide. For both Rosenberg and Nagel, man's search for meaning and purpose doesn't stop when accepting reason and science as a guiding principle. Still the reader may question whether existentialism and a naturalistic world-view are in any way compatible. Rosenberg doubts that, stating that:

Martin Heidegger built a whole metaphysics out of the conviction that physics and the rest of science can't ever explain the subjectivity of experience. He argued that subjectivity is the most important fact about us, that science can't explain it, and that we, therefore, have to reject science as the correct description of reality. We need to build our picture of reality up from the nature of subjective experience. Heidegger is scientism turned upside down.<sup>44</sup>

Though scientism and existentialism seem fundamentally opposed, the absurd still arises in both of them. Rosenberg's solution to this existential problem, for those accepting existential nihilism, is simple: "Take two of whatever neuropharmacology prescribes."<sup>45</sup> An option that to be fair was not available when Camus wrote *The Myth of Sisyphus* and hence, doesn't necessarily invalidate his arguments. However, there is no necessary connection between depression and the absurd. It is an open question, whether anti-depressants dissolve the feeling of absurdity. Existential despair might nevertheless disappear. With prescription rates of such drugs reaching new heights Camus, however, may have been right to suggest that it is the only really serious philosophical problem. Thomas Nagel explaining why he is an atheist claims that he "lack[s] the *sensus divinitatis* that

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<sup>43</sup> *ibid*

<sup>44</sup> Rosenberg, Alexander. *The Atheist's Guide to Reality*, p. 231.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid*, p. 282.

enables—indeed compels—so many people to see in the world the expression of divine purpose as naturally as they see in a smiling face the expression of human feeling."<sup>46</sup> One might argue that the absurd condition indeed only arises for a subset of the population, or is absent in those accepting the scientific world-view, i.e. devoid of purposes. If so, then there could be an easy solution, however, I argue that the problem is genuine. Science neither claims to give life meaning or purpose, such questions have either nothing to do with science or are negated by the metaphysical commitments of the scientific practice. Both approaches, however, do not qualify as *philosophical suicide*, for they leave the absurd conflict intact. So even if Rosenberg is right and we accept the claims of scientism, the absurd condition of human existence, Camus and others diagnosed may remain steadfast. For even if science discovers general laws of nature, they have nothing to do with reason and might on the most fundamental level, i.e. quantum physics, be entirely random. In an indifferent universe where our existence is merely an accident, existential nihilism cannot be denied (neither by committing *physical* or *philosophical suicide*). When Camus proclaims: "One does not discover the absurd without being tempted to write a manual of happiness"<sup>47</sup>, Rosenberg's answer in the light of existential dread makes more sense. How can one be happy while being dissatisfied with what the world has to offer while being world-weary? Anti-depressants might truly be at least part of the solution. Unfortunately, we will never know how Camus would have responded to the arrival of such medication. The illusion that there is more to life and the universe than what the sciences tell us doesn't cease, even when we accept the claims of science. But that is just what evolutionary theory would predict, given our addiction to narrative. Our introspection, however, is faulty and as the title of the tenth chapter of Rosenberg's book is profoundly termed: "YOU'VE GOT TO STOP TAKING YOURSELF SO SERIOUSLY". Considering Nagel's argument for the absurd, this is perhaps the first step to avoid the fall into existential despair.

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<sup>46</sup> Nagel, Thomas. *Mind and Cosmos*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 12.

<sup>47</sup> Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 77.

Reconciling Camus with the analytic tradition and science seems to eliminate much of existential thinking, but it is here that Camus returns to the existential tradition: The “absurd man feels released from everything outside that passionate attention crystallizing in him. He enjoys a freedom with regard to common rules. It can be seen at this point that the initial themes of existential philosophy keep their entire value.”<sup>48</sup> To conclude, the absurd stems from the fact that though life is without meaning and the universe devoid of purpose, man still searches for meaning, significance and purpose. In short, the truth of existential nihilism and man’s desire for more than existential nihilism has to offer. In the end, it remains an open and empirical question whether one’s revolt in the face of the absurd can be successful. As Camus stated in the preface of *The Myth of Sisyphus*: “[E]ven within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism.” That it is possible is, of course, no guarantee, that one will be able to do so, as Camus’ rather tragic novels illustrate. If Rosenberg is right and men’s desire for meaning, purpose and significance is a by-product of the human desire for narrative and understanding then the absurdist condition is in fact inescapable. Even the most advanced scientific explanations, i.e. rational explanations of the universe won’t be able to satisfy our desire for more. In the end, nothing we do will amount to anything. There is but one thing that is certain, and that is the heat death of the universe. Nothing matters. But on the bright side, the question of suicide can be detached from the question of how one should live in the face of existential nihilism. Rosenberg offers conciliation with the fact that we also evolved to get out of bed. If we do not manage to do so, Prozac might, in fact, be the best solution. The philosophical way to face the absurd then might be a combination of irony and “your favourite serotonin reuptake inhibitor”<sup>49</sup>, revolting and thereby fully enjoying life, not despite, but because of it being meaningless! In short: Don Juanism, laughing at and thoroughly enjoying one’s brief and meaningless existence. The only really serious philosophical problem is therefore genuine. In this realization, Camus’ work truly transcends existentialism.

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<sup>48</sup> *ibid*, p. 39.

<sup>49</sup> Rosenberg, Alexander. *The Atheist’s Guide to Reality*, p. 315.

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