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Absurdity in the Early 21 Century

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The author hereby declares that this work has not been previously submitted in whole or part for the award of any degree. The author further declares that this is his own work and that any contributions to and quotations in the dissertation have been cited and referenced.

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Abstract

This essay argues against contemporary theorists who claim that the concept of Absurdity that flourished in Western Europe in the 1940s is now of purely historical interest. It is argued instead that while it is important to locate the concept of Absurdity in an appropriate historical context, people living in the early twenty-first century are, in fact, living within an historical period that makes the experience, and thus the concept, of Absurdity relevant again. While Absurdity in the 1940s involved a loss of certainty due to the role the Second World War played in undermining secular and religious beliefs, Absurdity in the twenty-first century involves a loss of certainty due to intense exposure to alternative points of view. This loss of certainty means that when one's typical point of view is brought into relief by an atypical perspective, one struggles to reaffirm one's typical perspective. This robust clash of perspectives strikes at the heart of the way in which we understand the world and ourselves, forming part of the experience that has come to be known as Absurdity. If the analysis of Absurdity that is offered in this essay is correct, then Absurdity is best understood as a personal epistemological condition, rather than a universal metaphysical condition that affects all people simply in virtue of their being human.

University Of Cape Town

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Declaration

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1. Introduction.

The idea that life is, or can be, “Absurd” is a familiar feature of Western culture, yet it is not easy to determine what this idea denotes and whether or not it is still relevant to people living decades after the term’s original period of popularity.¹

The idea first became prominent in Europe, particularly in France, in the 1940s, and associated themes could be found in theatre, philosophy, and literature. Yet, perhaps because of the fecundity of the cultural engagement with the idea, it later became difficult to determine whether there was any underlying concept or structure that brought together the various themes and ideas that bore the tag of “the Absurd”. Accordingly, some recent commentators have stated that the term is of purely historical interest, that it represented the general feeling of despair felt in Europe after the Second World War rather than a well thought out idea which might still be relevant today. Edward J. Hughes, for example, states that “while the term enjoyed prominence particularly in French intellectual life, the Absurd came to suggest more a widespread feeling of human malaise than of any tightly argued philosophical system” (Hughes 2007, 5). And that “however urgent the term’s application in that particular set of circumstances, the ‘Absurd’ label has come to be no less dated, no less historically specific than the events of the war itself” (*ibid.*). In making these statements, Hughes refers to David Carroll who, in his discussion of Albert Camus’s essay on the Absurd, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), states that “*Le Mythe* may be dated by the concept of the Absurd itself to which Camus’s name is still linked today, even though he admitted as early as 1955 that he had already ‘progressed beyond’ its

¹ The words “absurd” and “absurdity” will be capitalised when I am discussing the philosophical concept of Absurdity so as to differentiate it from the idea of absurdity as silliness. However, this is by no means a rule in the literature and when quoting other writers I stick to whatever form they used originally.

propositions. The post-war generation in general quickly moved beyond the Absurd as well, which is why its interest today could be considered largely historical” (Carroll 2007, 53).

While it is certainly true that it is important to locate the idea of Absurdity in an appropriate historical context, I do not believe that the term is of only historical interest. We are living within an historical period that makes the experience, and thus the concept, of Absurdity relevant to us today.

Absurdity was relevant in Europe in the 1940s primarily due to the horrors of World War Two but it has become relevant again to a more global selection of people for different reasons. I will argue that contemporary feelings of Absurdity are primarily due to the development of technology that allows for intense exposure to alternative points of view. While Absurdity in the 1940s involved a loss of certainty due to the role the war played in undermining secular and religious beliefs, Absurdity in the twenty-first century involves a loss of certainty due to intense exposure to alternative points of view. As these claims might indicate, the account of Absurdity that I present paints it as a personal epistemological condition rather than a universal metaphysical condition that affects all people simply in virtue of their being human.

I will be arguing that while it is true that the concept of Absurdity never was developed into a systematic theory in its glory-days, a systematic account of the concept can be given, and it can be done in a way that shows what the major themes of the original Absurdist movement had in common (beyond them individually capturing the malaise of the period) and why the idea is relevant today.

I will begin (in section 2) by providing a background of the concept of Absurdity. I argue that the concept that was developed in earnest in the 1940s can be seen from a broad historical perspective as a relatively late feature of the Western European response to the failed promises of modernity. From a closer perspective, Absurdity is to be understood as being a response to the destabilising effects of the Second World War. The relationship between these two ideas is explained in footnote 2.

In section 3, I explore in more detail an idea that is introduced in section 2, namely, that Absurdity has to do with a sense of “meaninglessness”. I argue that the idea of meaninglessness and the seemingly related idea of purposelessness are not subtle enough to offer an adequate understanding of Absurdity. A major flaw in such an understanding is that it cannot account for a key theme that Absurdist artists and intellectuals have traditionally associated with Absurdity, namely, alienation.

In order to work towards an account that can incorporate all of the major themes that have traditionally been associated with Absurdity, I turn in section 4 to two influential philosophical accounts of Absurdity, specifically, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) by Albert Camus and “The Absurd” (1971) by Thomas Nagel.

Section 5 identifies relevant strengths and weaknesses in these two accounts, the consideration of which will provide the material for a new account of Absurdity. A great strength of Camus’s account is his insightful enumeration of different situations in which a feeling of Absurdity might arise, but he does not manage to present a general account that can explain all of these moments. One reason why he cannot is because he focuses too heavily on the role of doubt. While doubt does underlie many instances of Absurdity, it cannot account for all of them. Nagel also focuses too heavily on doubt but for different

reasons. A strength of Nagel's account, however, is that he presents a better picture of the moment, crucial to any experience of Absurdity, in which one steps out of the flow of life and engages in reflection, than Camus does.

Section 6 presents a new account of Absurdity that attempts to account both for those moments in which one experiences Absurdity as a result of doubt and those that do not, and in such a way that these different processes can still be seen to be relevantly related to one another. It is in this section that we see what role the undermining of certainty plays in whether or not one experiences Absurdity.

While section 6 is an attempt to delineate the structure of Absurdity that would apply to different historical periods, section 7 is an attempt to show that this thought-process and the related experience is relevant to people living in the early twenty-first century. In section 7, I describe the general undermining of certainty that has resulted from the development and invention of technologies in the twentieth century that expose people to numerous alternative points of view. The mindset that results from this kind of undermining of beliefs is described as "postmodern".

In section 8, I consider some objections that arise from linking postmodern culture and Absurdity in this way, particularly the idea that postmodern people are so comfortable with the idea of points of view being fragile or relative that they would be unaffected by Absurdity. I argue that even someone with a postmodern mindset can be affected and disturbed by Absurdity.

If this account of Absurdity is correct, then Absurdity is not a metaphysical affliction that automatically applies to all people, but, rather, whether or not one

experiences Absurdity (which is all there is to being Absurd) depends crucially on one's own state of mind.

2. The background of the concept of Absurdity.

The twentieth century concept of “the Absurdity of life” can, in sweeping terms, be seen as a relatively late feature of the onset of modernity and the subsequent sense of general dissatisfaction felt by Western Europeans when they came to realise that modernity's promises of utopian living standards and enlightenment had not materialised. The term “modernity” can be used to denote the sense, first recognizable by the mid-seventeenth century, that the present age represented a radical break from previous historical epochs, rather than simply being a continuation or modification of the past. The perceived break with the past was founded on the idea that human reason had reached an unprecedented state of excellence or maturation, which was inevitably and wonderfully going to subordinate irrationality and superstition and allow mankind to plan for and attain progressive improvements in all of its social institutions (Berman 1994). As Robert Pippin states, “above all else, modernity is characterized by the view that human life after the political and intellectual revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is fundamentally better than before, and most likely will, thanks to such revolutions, be better still” (Pippin 1991, 4).

By the latter half of the nineteenth century, however, two key factors were calling this faith in modernity and human reason into question. First, the modern age had been progressing for long enough for people to evaluate whether the intellectual and social

developments that people had associated with the age had in fact been delivered (Berman 1994, 7), and it was clear that, while some improvements had been made, modern life had also turned out to be “sterile, exploitative, commercialized, or simply ugly” (Pippin 1991, 29-30). Modern life was still far removed, in other words, from the social utopia reason was supposed to produce. The dissatisfaction brought about by this kind of “historical observation” was exacerbated by the second key feature of this crisis of faith, namely, the onset of theoretical developments which aided in undermining the previous century’s optimism in our ability, not only to improve the world, but simply to understand it (*ibid.*). The late nineteenth century and early twentieth century saw the publication of works that effectively challenged, without necessarily immediately overthrowing, fundamental beliefs about the nature of the world and human-beings. For example, for most Europeans before the nineteenth century the Christian account of human origins was the most reasonable account that one could accept, and thus it could be held with relative certainty. The publication of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* in 1859, however, made the alternative theory of evolution plausible. The idea of species evolving according to natural selection made the very idea of evolution plausible, and people were now left to grapple with two seemingly plausible theories about something fundamental: the real origins, and thus the real nature, of human beings. Certainty, in other words, had been effectively undermined. Moreover, even if one did accept this new theory outright, one still had to try and reorient oneself in this strange new world. What did this new theory mean for morality, dignity, man’s place in the cosmos, human nature, the existence of God, the word of priests, etc.?

Darwin's work was not the only revolutionary publication that the period produced. The late nineteenth century and early twentieth century also saw the publication of Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* (1848), which augmented the sense of social dissatisfaction and challenged the established economic system, Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), which cast the mind as being importantly influenced by irrational forces, rather than being essentially rational, and Albert Einstein's papers on physics (1905) which postulated, among other things, the relativity of time and space that inaugurated a "paradigm shift" in people's understanding of the physical universe (Childs 2000, 26-71). The faith and optimism of the eighteenth century had been poisoned with the suspicion that the world was disturbingly more complicated, and less susceptible to improvement, than had previously been imagined. Thus, in 1882, Friedrich Nietzsche could confidently announce that "God is dead" (Nietzsche, quoted in Young 2003, 83), referring not only to the Christian god but also to the fundamental beliefs of the secular world.

Yet, however disquieting the theoretical observations of the nineteenth and early twentieth century were, they were soon overshadowed by the more literal horrors of the twentieth century. The First World War (1914-1918) dealt a heavy blow to whatever confidence there was in reason, morality, understanding, and, indeed, Western civilization. And after the Second World War (1938-1945) there was little doubt, at least among certain segments of the European population, that the "certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages [had] been swept away," including those "substitute religions" that the war period had produced, like faith in nationalism (Esslin 1961, 23). It was in this devastated and devastating post-war period that a sense of the "Absurdity" of

life took hold: the sense, speaking generally, that “life had lost all meaning” (*ibid.*). This idea was primarily found in Europe rather than in the United States, however, for, as Kenneth Gergen notes, it was easier to retain faith in the grand-narratives of Western civilization “when world wars [were] fought and “won” on foreign soil than amid recurrent waves of destruction” (Gergen 1991, 30-31).²

Yet why was the term “absurd” considered appropriate to represent or describe this sense that “life had lost all meaning”? Why speak of the absurdity of life rather than the meaninglessness of life? There could, of course, have been a number of reasons why diverse artists and philosophers found the term to be appropriate. The term might simply have had the right connotations rather than their being a more interesting link with the word’s original meanings. The analysis of the concept offered in section 6 of this essay will use the original meanings of the word, however, which will make some sense of why this term was used originally to describe the experiences that the post-war period was producing.

Absurde and Absurd had originally been used in both the French and English languages respectively in the following two senses: It was relatively rarely used in a

² “God is dead”, a phrase that was coined by Nietzsche in the nineteenth century, was later adopted by those who proclaimed the “Absurdity of life”. Yet, while one can see the general undermining of religious and secular beliefs from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty first century as part of a single historical progression, the reality is more subtle than these broad strokes suggest. The reasons for the felt “death of god” in one generation might be different to the reasons why another generation feels that religious and secular beliefs have been undermined. Thus, even though the phrase “God is dead” was found to be appropriate in the 1880s and then again in the 1940s, the reasons why it was felt to be appropriate are different. In the 1880s, the death of god was the result of theoretical revolutions and social dissatisfaction, whereas in the 1940s the felt death of god was largely the result of the destabilising effects of the Second World War. In the late twentieth century and early twenty first century there is an identifiable death of god consciousness due to the undermining of certainty by intense exposure to alternative points of view. Any period, then, that, for whatever reason, experiences large scale uncertainty can be described as exhibiting a death of god *zeitgeist*. What makes the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century interesting is that there were numerous death of god *zeitgeists* occurring within relative frequency of one another, thus making it possible to present the kind of broad outline that is offered in this section which paints these developments as a single movement. For it is a single development when viewed from a broader historical perspective.

musical context to mean (1) inharmonious, jarring, or out of tune. More commonly it was used in the sense of (2) being “out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical. In modern use, *esp.* plainly opposed to reason and *hence* ridiculous, silly” (OED second edition 1989; see also Esslin 1961, 23-24). It was only in the twentieth century that the term came to have what some critics call a “metaphysical sense”, the sense that “life had lost all meaning”. It was used in this sense as early as 1917, and this new usage rose in frequency around the time of the Second World War (Cruickshank 1959, 48-49).

Absurdity in this sense, through the work of various artists and intellectuals, came to be associated with a number of diverse feelings and ideas, including alienation, the destructive effects of time, death, society and its ridiculous conventions, and the inadequacies of language. One can understand, then, why the phrase might appear simply to have been loosely associated with various sources of angst. I think that it is possible to formulate a more precise analysis of the concept, however; one that will also show why the term is relevant today.

3. Why an analysis of Absurdity in terms of meaning and purpose is unsatisfactory.

The phrase “life had lost all meaning” does succeed in capturing many of the different aspects of the post-war feeling of Absurdity, but the reason for this success is the term’s vagueness. It is difficult to understand what exactly “meaninglessness” means or, indeed, how the concept of *meaning* can be applied to *life* at all. In this section, I will first examine one plausible candidate for the idea of meaninglessness, namely, that meaning in

life has to do with purpose. I will examine this specific candidate for what meaning in life involves because purposelessness has also been offered as an analysis of the concept of Absurdity. If these two analyses were both correct, then they might together have offered a powerful analysis of the concept of Absurdity (if Absurdity was essentially about a lack of purpose, and meaninglessness in life was also about a lack of purpose, then it would indeed be appropriate to describe Absurdity as involving a sense of meaninglessness. Indeed, Absurdity and meaninglessness might then be taken as synonymous terms for purposelessness). I will argue that an analysis of Absurdity in terms of purposelessness is unsatisfactory, however. It is unsatisfactory because it limits the term in such a way that it excludes one of the key feelings that Absurdist art and philosophy associates with Absurdity, namely, alienation.

The vagueness of phrases like “the meaning of life” and “life had lost all meaning”, as well as the difficulty of understanding how the concept of meaning can be applied to life, are two major reasons why the majority of contemporary Anglo-American philosophers have avoided discussing “the meaning of life”. Attempts have been made, however, to give more specific content to the notion of life having a meaning.

Susan Wolf explains that the idea of “meaning” in other contexts does not offer ready analogies for understanding the phrase “the meaning of life”. For example, when we ask the meaning of a word, we want to know what it stands for or represents. But *life* is not part of a language or of any other sort of symbolic system, so we cannot be asking what life represents in the same way that we ask what a word or symbol represents (Wolf 2003, 1). Moreover, when one uses “meaning” in a non-linguistic context, as in “those footprints mean that someone was here”, one typically means something like “evidence”

(*ibid.*). In other words, the phrase “those footprints mean X” is understood as “those footprints provide evidence for X”. These more typical uses of the word make it difficult to understand what one is asking when asking whether life has a “meaning” or what one means when one makes a statement like “life had lost all meaning”. Nevertheless, Wolf thinks, and rightly so, that questions about the meaning of life do nevertheless have content, that they do express a concern with which most of us are familiar. Her answer is that “though there may well be many things going on when people ask, “What is the meaning of life?”, the most central among them seems to be a search to find a purpose or a point to human existence” (2). Thus, if Wolf’s analysis is correct, to say that one’s life had lost its meaning would loosely be equivalent to saying that one no longer had a purpose.

One might object that “purpose” is also unacceptably vague, but there are two points that can be raised against this concern. The first is that by accepting the analysis of meaning in terms of purpose one would at least understand how this can be a concern about one’s *life*. While it was difficult to see how “meaning” could be related to life, without translating the term, it is much easier to see how the concept of “purpose” can be applied to life, or how a life could have a purpose. The second point is that while purpose might initially appear vague, one can fill in the specifics quite easily, depending on how one understands one’s life. One would have a purpose if God had created one for a reason, for example. Or one would have a purpose if one was satisfied that one had correctly inferred the appropriate ends that one should pursue (Metz 2001, 140-142).

So, it would appear that the meaning of life could be understood in terms of having a purpose or not,³ and this analysis might appear to harmonise with some attempts to explain Absurdity. It would harmonise in the sense that Absurdity and meaninglessness could both be understood as terms that capture the idea of purposelessness. Martin Esslin, for example, the influential critic who coined the term “Theatre of the Absurd”, states that “in common usage, ‘absurd’ may simply mean ‘ridiculous’, but this is not the sense in which Camus uses the word, and in which it is used when we speak of the Theatre of the Absurd. In an essay on Kafka, Ionesco defined his understanding of the term as follows: ‘Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose....Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless’. This sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition is, broadly speaking, the theme of the plays of Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco, Genet” (Esslin 1961, 23-24). While it must be stressed that Esslin is here only trying to give an introductory sense of the meaning of Absurd and is stressing, more than anything else, the idea that it has to do with something more

³ While it is useful to grant here, for the sake of argument, that the concept of a meaningful life can plausibly be understood in terms of having or not having a purpose, Thaddeus Metz (2001) has shown that one cannot confidently proclaim that the idea of having or not having a purpose underlies the *concept* of a meaningful life. A major problem with explaining the concept of a meaningful life in terms of purpose is that one then unjustifiably denies that some popular substantive accounts of life’s meaning are really about the meaning of life at all. For example, if one attempts to explain the *concept* of a meaningful life as essentially being about fulfilling God’s purpose, then one unjustifiably excludes naturalistic accounts of life’s meaning from being about the meaning of life at all (which is different from proclaiming them to be substantively false). If the very concept of a meaningful life (as opposed to a substantive account of life’s meaning) just is the concept of God having a purpose for us, then accounts of meaning that attempt to explain how a non-spiritual life could be meaningful are not really about the meaning of life at all. This is also true if one understands the idea of purpose as pursuing the right kinds of ends, rather than fulfilling God’s purpose for us. This version would exclude accounts of life’s meaning that maintain that meaning can be conferred on one by factors outside of one’s control, such as by being one of God’s chosen people, for example. An analysis of the concept of a meaningful life must accommodate logically all of the major substantive accounts of life’s meaning and show what it is that makes all of these accounts accounts of the meaning of life, as opposed to being accounts about the best life or the happiest life or the moral life, for example. Metz goes on to argue that there appear to be no necessary and sufficient conditions underlying the concept of a meaningful life, and that different substantive accounts that appear to be about the meaning of life must therefore be joined together by family resemblances.

profound than mere silliness, he does tacitly condone Eugene Ionesco's definition of Absurdity as "that which is devoid of purpose". As I have mentioned, this might suggest that Absurdity could accurately, if somewhat circularly, be described as being about meaninglessness, because both Absurdity and meaninglessness are essentially about purposelessness.

Explaining Absurdity in terms of purposelessness encounters the following obstacle, however: it limits the term in such a way that it excludes a key feeling which should be associated with the concept of Absurdity, namely, alienation. Alienation is a feeling that does not obviously have anything to do with having or not having a purpose.

This objection can be defended by first presenting an overview of some of the major themes of Absurdist works.

An interesting feature of the Absurdist "movement" is that it was not a movement at all, if one understands a movement to be a group of artists and thinkers who worked together or in conscious parallel, following a clearly formulated manifesto. In his discussion of theatre works that were classified under the heading of the Absurd, Esslin explains that in the case of Absurdity there was no self-proclaimed or self-conscious school or movement (Esslin 1961, 22). What can now be seen as a movement of sorts was rather the result of numerous individuals whose works were individually reflecting the intellectual preoccupations and emotional anxieties of their contemporaries (artists, intellectuals and ordinary citizens alike).

The fact that there was no conscious proclamation of artistic or intellectual intent is remarkable if one notes the similarity of thematic content among Absurdist works (and in theatre the similarity extended to form as well (Esslin 1961, 24-25)). The following

recur as points of interest: alienation, the destructive effects of time, death, society and its ridiculous conventions, and the inadequacies of language. A discussion of three of these themes, specifically, time, death, and alienation, will allow us to see why one might be tempted to explain Absurdity in terms of purposelessness, as well as why one cannot entirely explain Absurdity in terms of purposelessness. While concerns about time and death appear amenable to being explained in terms of purposelessness, alienation does not.

Time: In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus's philosophical account of Absurdity, Camus at one stage engages in what he calls "an enumeration of the feelings that may admit of the absurd" (Camus 1942a, note, p.20). Essentially, Camus is here discussing general ways or situations in which a feeling of Absurdity might arise (Cruickshank 1959, 54). An acute sense of time passing is listed as one of those situations. He states that we

live on the future: 'tomorrow, 'later on', 'when you have made your way', 'you will understand when you are old enough'. [...] Yet a time comes when a man notices or says that he is thirty. Thus he asserts his youth. But simultaneously he situates himself in relation to time. He takes his place in it. He admits that he stands at a certain point on a curve that he acknowledges having to travel to its end. He belongs to time and, by the horror that seizes him, he recognizes his worst enemy. Tomorrow, he was longing for tomorrow, whereas everything in him ought to reject it (Camus 1942a, 19-20).

Camus is referring here to “a sense of time as the destructive element”, which can also be connected to a worry about death (Cruickshank 1959, 54), although death does receive separate treatment as well.

A feeling of Absurdity felt in response to an unnerving sense of time passing features centrally in important Absurdist art, especially theatre. Time is a central theme in *Waiting for Godot*, for example, Samuel Beckett’s Absurdist landmark (Esslin 1961, 49-52). Esslin explains that the main characters, Estragon and Vladimir, are, in some sense, superior to the other two central characters, Pozzo and Lucky, because they are less naïve. They are aware that “all we do in this life is as nothing when seen against the senseless action of time” (57-58).

A sense of the futility of our actions in the face of time was one of the considerations that affected the form of Absurdist theatre in general, for, it was assumed, “plot can exist only on the assumption that events in time are significant” (Esslin 1961, 75), hence the subversion, and abandonment, of plot in Absurdist works.

Death: Contemplating death is another situation that Camus identifies as potentially eliciting a feeling of Absurdity:

I come at last to death and to the attitude we have towards it. [...] This elementary and definitive aspect of the adventure constitutes the absurd feeling. Under the fatal lighting of that destiny, its uselessness becomes evident. No code of ethics and no effort are justifiable *a priori* in the face of the cruel mathematics that command our condition (Camus 1942a, 21).

Death is a prominent theme in Absurdist theatre and literature as well. For example, in Arthur Adamov’s play, *Le Ping-Pong*, the Absurdity of all human endeavour

in the face of death remains a lingering concern (Esslin 1961, 118-119). In *Ping-Pong* the characters senselessly devote themselves to the service of pinball machines and the company that manufactures them, and the suggestion is made that all human life might be similarly senseless. The seeming futility of their behaviour is presented forcefully by the final image of two old men playing a pinball machine, a depiction of the “senile whiling away of the remaining time before death reduces everything to final absurdity” (112). Esslin notes that the seeming Absurdity of all human behaviour in the face of death is a common theme in all of the important dramatists in the Absurdist tradition (118-119).

Death also features centrally in Albert Camus’s Absurdist novel, *The Outsider* (1942). In an important scene at the end of the novel, when the protagonist Meursault has been condemned to death and is resisting the efforts of the chaplain to turn him to God, Meursault reveals that the fact that we all die, that we would all eventually be condemned to death, is one of the major reasons why he experiences Absurdity:

Nothing, nothing mattered and I know very well why. He too knew why. From the depths of my future, throughout the whole of this absurd life I’d been leading, I’d felt a vague breath drifting towards me across all the years that were still to come, and on its way this breath had evened out everything that was then being proposed to me in the equally unreal years I was living through. What did other people’s deaths or a mother’s love matter to me, what did his God or the lives people chose or the destinies they selected matter to me, when one and the same destiny was to select me and thousands of millions of other privileged people who, like him,

called themselves my brothers [...] The others would be condemned one day. He too would be condemned (Camus 1942b, 115-116).

Alienation: Alienation is a feeling that can take hold in a number of different ways, and this diversity is represented in Absurdist works. It is, once again, a feeling identified by Camus in his enumeration of situations that can elicit a feeling of Absurdity. He describes how one can sometimes feel alienated from objects and the natural world: how usually understood and labelled, familiar objects can suddenly appear strange and, sometimes, disturbing: “perceiving that the world is ‘dense’, sensing to what degree a stone is foreign and irreducible to us, with what intensity nature or a landscape can negate us [...] The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us” (Camus 1942a, 20). Alienation can also come from one’s encounters with other people, and even from encounters with oneself:

Men, too, secrete the inhuman. At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures, their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them. A man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him but you see his incomprehensible dumb-show: you wonder why he is alive [...] Likewise the stranger who at certain seconds comes to meet us in a mirror, the familiar and yet alarming brother we encounter in our own photographs is also the absurd (21).

In his description, Camus refers to Jean-Paul Sartre’s novel, *Nausea* (1938), which also describes the feeling of alienation that objects and images of oneself can

elicit.⁴ In *Nausea*, the protagonist, Roquentin, who is writing a history on Monsieur de Rollebon, a roguish member of Queen Marie Antoinette's court, progressively feels himself losing his grip on his traditional awareness of himself and other objects:

Monsieur de Rollebon bores me to tears. I get up. I move about in this pale light; I see it change on my hands and on the sleeves of my jacket: I cannot say how much it disgusts me. I yawn [...] On the wall there is a white hole, the mirror. It is a trap. I know that I am going to let myself be caught in it. I have. The grey thing has just appeared in the mirror. I go over and look at it, I can no longer move away. It is the reflection of my face. Often, during these wasted days, I stay here contemplating it. I can understand nothing about this face (Sartre 1938, 30).

....

I was in the municipal park just now. The root of the chestnut tree plunged into the ground just underneath my bench. I no longer remembered that it was a root. Words had disappeared, and with them the meaning of things, the methods of using them, the feeble landmarks which men have traced on their surface. I was sitting, slightly bent, my head bowed, alone in front of that black, knotty mass, which was utterly crude and frightened me [...] That root – there was nothing in relation to which it was not absurd. Oh,

⁴ Sartre protested against this reference, however, claiming that his use of the word “absurd” differed from Camus’s (See Cruickshank (1959), p.45). Yet one should take Sartre’s protestations with a pinch of salt, for, despite the obvious parallels to be seen in their treatment of a feeling of Absurdity arising through alienation, Sartre did not use the term “absurd” as consistently as he would have liked. See Young (2003), pp.125-159, for inconsistencies in Sartre’s account of our Absurdity in his later work, *Being and Nothingness*, which was published after *Nausea* and his disclaimer against similarities between him and Camus.

how can I put that in words? Absurd: irreducible; nothing – not even a profound, secret aberration of Nature – could explain that (182-185).

In Absurdist theatre, the theme of alienation is explored with reference to feelings of loneliness and a perhaps irrevocable separation from others. A major theme in the work of Eugene Ionesco, for example, is the loneliness and isolation of the individual, and the difficulty of communicating with others (Esslin 1961, 192).

This overview has made us familiar enough with three major Absurdist themes so as to be able to begin to evaluate whether the notion of purposelessness explains the idea of Absurdity. It might appear, at first, to do quite well. Why does a sense of the passage of time disturb us other than in light of the fact that it will eventually consume our achievements and render them purposeless? Why does the fact of death disturb us other than that it appears to render all of our behaviour purposeless? Yet when one turns to alienation, a significant Absurdist theme, it turns out that a concern about purpose is not centrally involved, if it is involved at all. This might not be obvious, however; indeed, purpose might appear to underlie some of these moments of alienation as well. For example, Camus's sense of alienation from the person performing the dumb show in the telephone booth could be understood in terms of the apparent purposelessness of the person's existence: "you wonder why he is alive". We might also be alienated from the person in the mirror because, in that moment, we realise our own purposelessness. Furthermore, in the extract from *Nausea*, Roquentin's problems with the root appears importantly linked to the fact that "words had disappeared", and without words, how could one formulate a purpose for anything? Yet, while such arguments could be made, I think that this kind of description mischaracterises the nature of the experience by placing

undue emphasis on the idea of “purpose”. In *Nausea*, for example, great emphasis is placed throughout the novel on Roquentin’s sensory perception of objects. His concern appears importantly linked to the way objects *seem*, rather than with the idea of whether or not a purpose can be formulated for the objects. This is also apparent in the alienation he feels from images of himself in the mirror. The experience appears to be importantly visual.⁵

I can see some slight tremors, I can see an insipid flesh blossoming and palpitating with abandon. The eyes in particular, seen at such close quarters, are horrible. They are glassy, soft, blind, and red-rimmed; anyone would think they were fish-scales. I lean my whole weight on the porcelain edge, I push my face forward until it touches the mirror. The eyes, the nose, the mouth disappear: nothing human is left. Brown wrinkles on each side of the feverish swelling of the lips, crevices, mole-hills. A silky white down runs along the wide slopes of the cheeks, two hairs protrude from the nostrils: it’s a geological relief map. And, in spite of everything, this lunar world is familiar to me. I can’t say that I recognize the details. But the whole thing gives me an impression of something seen before which numbs me: I slip gently into sleep (Sartre 1938, 31).

⁵ To say that the experience is importantly visual and has to do with the way things seem is not therefore to deny that concepts are also involved in the experience or process. This point will become significant in section 6 when I draw a link between conceptual devastation and perceiving a different aspect of an object. Aspect perception is often importantly visual while also potentially involving a change in the concepts associated with the object being perceived. My point here, then, is not that the concept of “purpose” could never be involved in these moments of visual alienation, but rather that there does not seem to be a reason to limit the concept that could be involved to the concept of purpose, or to see this moment as primarily being a concern *about* purpose. I do not go into any detail, in this essay, on the nature of vision or the exact nature of the relationship between visual impressions and concepts.

Camus's response to the man's performance in the telephone booth also appears to involve an atypical mode of perception, rather than, essentially, a concern about purpose. He presents the dumb show scenario as an example of how people sometimes appear to "secrete the inhuman". This does not have to do with purpose *per se*, but rather the way the person looks. Their gestures appear different, "mechanical". Seeing their gestures in this light makes them appear inhuman, or just different to the way in which human beings are typically perceived, namely, as creatures driven by mental states, rather than mindless mechanics. The sense of Absurdity felt in situations like this, in other words, seems to have more to do with seeing something differently, rather than a concern about whether a purpose can be attributed to the person or object.

Alienation that is felt in response to a sense of separation from other human beings is not visually oriented in the way that the other kinds of alienation appear to be, however. While this kind of alienation could probably be felt without necessarily experiencing Absurdity (one might simply feel depressed), in the instances in which a feeling of Absurdity is elicited it is not obvious that it has anything to do with purpose. While the idea that one is separated from other human beings might be disturbing because of the consequences this might have for the ways in which one could have a social purpose, it must be possible to feel Absurd in response to social alienation even though one does not care whether one has a social purpose or not. There does not seem to be any evidence to justify restricting Absurdity felt in response to social alienation to those who care about whether or not they have a social purpose. The feeling must, then, have more to do simply with a change in the status of relationships, that is, it must just be

about the extent to which one is removed from or close to people, in order for it to be applicable to those who do not care about whether or not they have a social purpose.

This is significant because we had attempted to understand Absurdity and meaninglessness in terms of purposelessness. Recognising the fact that the notion of “purpose” fails to underlie a significant feeling (alienation) that various philosophers and artists associated with Absurdity leaves us once again without a precise term, and lends support to those who would claim that the term is irredeemably vague.

All that this means, however, is that meaninglessness and purposelessness, while deserving to be associated with a general understanding of Absurdity, are not precise enough to make the underlying structure of Absurd moments evident. In order to see the underlying structure we need to turn to two seminal philosophical accounts of Absurdity. The successes and shortcomings of these accounts will provide us with the material to develop a more satisfactory account.

4. Philosophical accounts of Absurdity: Albert Camus (1942) and Thomas Nagel (1971).

In this section, I will outline interpretations of two influential philosophical accounts of Absurdity before turning to relevant strengths and weaknesses in the next section.

Albert Camus’s essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), is regarded by some commentators as the “fullest investigation” into Absurdity (e.g., Cruickshank 1959, 49), but, at the very least, it is a seminal Absurdist text. It is controversial, however, whether this text can properly be called philosophical or not, and this is partly due to the nature of

the text itself and partly due to comments made by Camus. In a prefatory note entitled “An Absurd Reasoning”, Camus states that “the pages that follow deal with an absurd sensitivity that can be found widespread in the age – and not with an absurd philosophy which our time, properly speaking, has not known [...] There will be found here merely the description, in the pure state, of an intellectual malady. No metaphysic, no belief is involved in it for a moment” (Camus 1942a, 10). This statement, along with the sometimes impassioned language and opaque writing, has led some commentators to suggest that “we should not mark Camus as if he were sitting a metaphysical exam, but judge his essay as a work of art” (Wood 2000, viii-ix; see also Solomon 2006).

The distinction between philosophy and art upon which this sentiment rests is tenuous, however. For example, it would be strange to regard Sartre’s *Nausea* and Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as art and not philosophy, for they deal with content that is directly relevant to the respective philosophers’ other writings. Yet these works both take the form of a fictional novel. Likewise, the dialogues of Plato and Berkeley are rightly treated as philosophical, even though they feature fictitious characters engaged in fabricated discussions. *The Myth of Sisyphus* is simply one in a long history of works that blur whatever boundaries there might be between philosophy and art, and these considerations should make one less confident that it can comfortably be classified as one but not the other. Moreover, whatever authority Camus’s prefatory comments have in deciding the work’s classification is negated when one takes into account that the author also describes the work as dealing with the “one truly serious philosophical problem”, namely, suicide (Camus 1942a, 11). One is justified, then, in treating *The Myth* as philosophy and critically evaluating the statements that its author makes, bearing in mind

that artistic methods might make it difficult to discern exactly what the correct interpretation of those statements might be.

The Myth is essentially an essay on whether suicide is justified or perhaps even demanded in light of the apparent “Absurdity of life”. Camus calls this the “one truly serious philosophical problem” because he thinks that while he has “never seen anyone die for the ontological argument”, he has seen “many people die because they judge that life is not worth living” (*ibid.*). The relationship between Absurdity and a life that is or is not worth living that Camus goes on to describe is complex. As we will see, he ultimately thinks that life is at once wretched and fulfilling, in the quite unique sense that that which makes us wretched (our Absurdity) is also the source of profound fulfilment, specifically, that it furnishes us with some undeniable truths. Moreover, contemplating one’s Absurdity not only provides fulfilment through the furnishing of undeniable truths, but affirming these painful truths also lends a certain nobility or majesty to one’s life. Rather than being a reason to commit suicide, then, Absurdity is actually that which allows for profound fulfilment and majesty.

Camus is interested in suicide because he thinks that all those who have experienced a feeling of Absurdity have then at least contemplated whether or not they should commit suicide:

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world.

But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land.

This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is

properly the feeling of absurdity. All healthy men having thought of their own suicide, it can be seen, without further explanation, that there is a direct connection between this feeling and the longing for death. The subject of this essay is precisely this relationship between the absurd and suicide, the exact degree to which suicide is a solution for the absurd (13-14).

It is not clear that all of the examples that Camus gives of situations that can generate a feeling of Absurdity should elicit suicidal thoughts, however. As was mentioned above, at one stage in *The Myth* Camus engages in a “rapid classification” (21) of “feelings that may admit of the absurd” (note, 20), and Cruickshank explains that Camus is here discussing general ways or situations in which a feeling of Absurdity might arise (Cruickshank 1959, 54). We have already encountered some of these situations in the discussion of prominent themes in Absurdist works, one of which involves a feeling of Absurdity that was closely associated with a moment of alienation. While alienation can take many forms, we saw that Camus identifies at least two particular kinds of alienation: alienation from objects and alienation from images of oneself. While these are explicitly noted as ways in which one might experience a feeling of Absurdity, it is less obvious that suicidal feelings will be a necessary consequence. To be alienated from objects might simply involve a sudden recognition that the object is not as one typically holds it to be, which might elicit a shudder of amazement, rather than a desire to kill oneself.

So, while a concern about suicide is central to *The Myth*, one need not necessarily be concerned with suicide given an interest in Absurdity. *The Myth* does, however, offer

genuine insight into the nature of Absurdity and thus it is still worthwhile to spell out the rest of the argument even if one does not agree that there is a necessary connection between Absurdity and suicide.

After carrying out his rapid classification of moments that elicit a feeling of Absurdity, Camus seems then to attempt a general analysis of Absurdity: an analysis that shows what all of those moments that elicit Absurdity have in common, and which will provide the material for an answer to his suicide problem. He begins this next section with a discussion of how people living in the twentieth century can no longer be sure about anything, that scholarly and scientific pursuits of truth and certainty have been found wanting:

We must despair of ever reconstructing the familiar, calm surface which would give us peace of heart. After so many centuries of inquiries, so many abdications among thinkers, we are well aware that this is true for all knowledge. With the exception of professional rationalists, today people despair of true knowledge. If the only significant history of human thought were to be written, it would have to be the history of its successive regrets and its impotences (Camus 1942a, 24).

And this is seen as a source of unhappiness: “On this plane, at least, there is no happiness if I cannot know” (26).

This is the context in which he gives what seems like his most formal account of Absurdity:

I said that the world is absurd but I was too hasty. This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the

confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world (26).

....

The world itself, whose single meaning I do not understand, is but a vast irrational. If one could only say just once: 'this is clear', all would be saved (31).

....

The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world (31-32).

Let us try to establish what Camus is saying here. For example, would he be happy if he came across a single truth, or many truths, or does he need something more, like a set of beliefs that could be applied to life as a whole (as offered by religion, for example)? I would argue that Camus is after the middle option (many truths), although interpretation on this matter differs, perhaps because the text leaves itself open to different interpretations.

Julian Young, for example, thinks that Camus is after something quite specific, something that would fall into the last category (a set of beliefs that could be applied to life as a whole). Young states that "the fundamental desire in question which reality fails to satisfy" is, according to Camus, "a desire for there to be 'a meaning of life', 'some great idea that transcends [life]...and gives it meaning'. It is, in other words, the desire, or rather 'need', for an account of the meaning of life of the traditional true-world form. It is the need for, as I have called it, grand-narrative meaning" (Young 2003, 162). By

“grand-narrative” Young does not mean just any explanatory principle that could be applied to make sense of one’s life, but rather an explanation of existence that “give[s] meaning to life by representing it as a journey; a journey towards ‘redemption’ [such as “eternal bliss, a heaven, paradise or utopia”], towards an arrival which will more than make up for the stress and discomfort of the travelling” (1).

Now, while there is some textual support for the idea that Camus is after what might loosely be called a grand-narrative, that is, an explanatory principle that makes sense of one’s life as a whole,⁶ there is no reason to think that he is after a grand-narrative in the specific sense that Young gives it.

Cruickshank appears to have a better interpretation of what Camus is after when he states that “the sensibility examined here by Camus is one that can make no contact with absolute truths and values” (Cruickshank 1959, 43). As we will see, the text offers stronger evidence for the idea that Camus is generally lamenting the loss of truths that were beyond doubt, rather than a set of beliefs that could make sense of one’s life as a whole.

Prior to the above interpretation, however, Cruickshank has stated that “by the absurd Camus generally means the absence of correspondence or congruity between the mind’s need for coherence and the incoherence of the world which the mind experiences” (41), and the notion of “coherence” might give the impression that Cruickshank is here giving an analysis similar to Young’s that interprets Camus as yearning for a single explanatory principle or narrative. But we will shortly see evidence from the text that shows that Camus’s use of words like “coherence” should not be interpreted so literally.

⁶ He speaks, for example, of “the world itself, whose single meaning I do not understand” (Camus 1942a, 31), and the phrase “single meaning” could be taken to imply a single grand-narrative.

The same consideration applies to Arnold P. Hinchliffe's interpretation that might also be seen as supporting the grand-narrative camp: "The Absurd, for Camus, is an absence of correspondence between the mind's need for unity and the chaos of the world the mind experiences" (Hinchliffe 1969, 36). While the notion of unity might imply a single explanatory principle or narrative, we will see that Camus uses these words in the general sense of being able to establish truths about the world. So, while I admit that the text lends support for both interpretations (see footnote 6), I think that one has good reason to see Camus as really describing the need for truths *simpliciter*, rather than specifically a set of truths that come together to form a single narrative about one's existence. The importance he places on truth can be seen in his solution to the problem of Absurdity and suicide.

Camus argues that there is one thing of which he can actually be sure, namely, his need for many truths and his inability to establish them. Yet this yields the unexpected benefit of actually presenting a cluster of truths: he is sure of the truth of that painful condition (his need for many doubt-free truths and the impossibility of establishing them), which makes him sure of the truth of his "absurdity" (this clash between his desire for truth and his inability to establish them), and of the nobility of affirming these few hard-won truths instead of committing suicide.

What I know, what is certain, what I cannot deny, what I cannot reject – this is what counts. I can negate everything of that part of me that lives on vague nostalgias, except this desire for unity, this longing to solve, this need for clarity and cohesion [...] I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning

and that it is impossible for me just now to know it [...] (Camus 1942a, 51).

What I believe to be true I must therefore preserve. What seems to me so obvious, even against me, I must support. And what constitutes the basis of that conflict, of that break between the world and my mind, but the awareness of it? If therefore, I want to preserve it, I can, through a constant awareness, ever revived, ever alert. This is what, for the moment, I must remember. At this moment the absurd, so obvious and yet so hard to win, returns to a man's life and finds its home there [...] (51-52).

That revolt [i.e., affirming these difficult truths] gives life its value. Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty to that life. To a man devoid of blinkers, there is no finer sight than that of the intelligence at grips with a reality that transcends it (54).

Suicide is not justified, then, because rather than being a reason to commit suicide, Absurdity is the only feature of one's life that allows for dignity or "majesty", in that it gives one the opportunity to affirm painful truths. There is "no finer sight than that of the intelligence at grips with a reality that transcends it", and an intelligence that is aware of its Absurdity is at grips with reality to the extent that it knows that it will never possess sufficient doubt-free truths, that reality, in other words, "transcends" it.

The value that Camus gives to these handful of ostensibly certain truths presents a strong case that he is not looking for anything as specific as a grand-narrative, but rather enough doubt-free beliefs about the world and his existence (of which he has just established a handful) to satisfy his craving for doubt-free truth.

Thus, according to Camus's general account of Absurdity, feelings of Absurdity are to be explained by the fact that we crave doubt-free truths and yet are incapable of attaining a sufficient number of them to satisfy our craving. We attain dignity, however, by affirming what few truths we possess rather than evading them because they are painful.

Thomas Nagel's essay, "The Absurd" (1971), is another influential philosophical account of Absurdity that will eventually prove useful in forming a new account.⁷

Published in 1971, Nagel's account of Absurdity is free of most of the themes and connotations that surrounded the use of the word in the 1940s. In fact, he begins his essay by dismissing some of the ideas that were traditionally associated with Absurdity as being bad arguments, and he then attempts to establish an account of Absurdity that is relatively free from the gloom that was traditionally associated with the idea. For Nagel, Absurdity is to be explained by "the collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt" (Nagel 1971, 718). While this may appear similar to Camus's account (Camus also thought that the fact that we could not establish doubt-free truths was central to our Absurdity), Nagel rightly points out that his account is importantly different. In what follows, I will outline Nagel's account before turning, in the next section, to its merits and drawbacks. We will see that Camus and Nagel make a similar mistake by focussing too heavily on doubt, but that they also individually offer different insights that are essential to a satisfactory understanding of Absurdity.

⁷ "The Absurd" (1971) was later reprinted in *Mortal Questions* (1979) but I will refer throughout to the original journal article.

Nagel begins his essay by briefly discussing what he describes as three traditional “reasons” or “arguments” that are often presented as explanations of Absurdity, and he tries to show that they are inadequate. The three ideas that Nagel discusses are, 1) “that nothing we do now will matter in a million years”, 2) our insignificance in the face of space and time: “we are tiny specks in the infinite vastness of the universe; our lives are mere instants even on a geological time scale, let alone a cosmic one; we will be dead any minute”, and 3) death in general: “because we are going to die, all chains of justification must leave off in mid air: one studies and works to earn money to pay for clothing, housing, entertainment, food, to sustain oneself from year to year, perhaps to support a family and pursue a career - but to what final end? All of it is an elaborate journey leading nowhere” (716-717). Nagel gives reasons, which we need not spell out, for why these sentiments, as they stand, “fail as arguments”, but he also thinks that they do nevertheless attempt to express something that is “difficult to state” but “fundamentally correct” (718).

Nagel is correct in thinking that, when presented as arguments, the ideas that he discusses are inadequate. But that does not mean that those ideas are not examples of thoughts the having of which can elicit a feeling of Absurdity. Presenting them as *arguments*, in other words, only sets them up to fail and makes more plausible the notion that they have nothing to do with Absurdity. In the next section we will see why concerns about death and our finiteness in space and time are correctly associated with a feeling of Absurdity, even if they are not successful as individual arguments.

After dismissing those ideas, Nagel attempts to set out a satisfactory argument for why people are Absurd, for, as we saw, he thinks that these failed attempts are trying to capture something real.

In ordinary life, Nagel argues, a situation is called absurd “when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality: 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 being knighted, your pants fall down” (718). Normally, when such an absurdity is perceived, we attempt to change the situation or to extricate ourselves from it. Yet no such escape is possible in the analogous case of perceiving life as a whole to be “absurd”: “the sense that life as a whole is absurd arises when we perceive, perhaps dimly, an inflated pretension or aspiration which is inseparable from the continuation of human life and which makes its absurdity inescapable, short of escape from life itself” (718). The discrepancy between aspiration and reality from which we cannot escape is “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” (718). Nagel elaborates on this “collision” or “discrepancy” between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the possibility of doubting that which we take so seriously:

We cannot live human lives without energy and attention, nor without making choices which show that we take some things more seriously than others. Yet we have always available a point of view outside the particular form of our lives, from which the seriousness appears gratuitous. These

two inescapable viewpoints collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd. It is absurd because we ignore the doubts that we know cannot be settled, continuing to live with nearly undiminished seriousness in spite of them. [...] Without developing the illusion that they are able to escape from their highly specific and idiosyncratic position, they can view it *sub specie aeternitatis* [i.e., from the perspective of the universe] – and the view is at once sobering and comical [...] When we take this view and recognize what we do as arbitrary, it does not disengage us from life, and there lies our absurdity: not in the fact that such an external view can be taken of us, but in the fact that we ourselves can take it, without ceasing to be the persons whose ultimate concerns are so coolly regarded (719-720).

What Nagel means by this is controversial. Some commentators would give the following interpretation: According to Nagel, perceiving any kind of situation as “absurd” requires perceiving a discrepancy between the aspirations or pretensions of the person or people involved and the reality of the situation. Sometimes one perceives such a discrepancy in one’s life as a whole, when one realises that the seriousness with which one takes one’s life conflicts with reality, specifically, the reality that that which one takes seriously is in fact arbitrary in the sense of being unjustifiable. And so we constantly flit between a life that we take seriously and knowledge that all that we take seriously is in fact unjustifiable. Quentin Smith, for example, favours this interpretation when he states that “the real problem with Nagel’s argument” is that it “assumes without argument an ethical subjectivism and relativism, that our basic value-presuppositions are ‘arbitrary’ and reflect ‘all the contingency and specificity of our [individual] aims and

pursuits.’ [...] Why should we accept this assumption?” (Smith 1991, 121; see also Gordon 1984).

It is a mistake, however, to interpret Nagel as saying that our beliefs and values are in fact unjustifiable. Although Nagel does lend credence to Smith’s interpretation when he speaks of our beliefs as “arbitrary”, one must take note of the fact that he uses the word “arbitrary” as a synonym for “open to doubt”: he speaks of “the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt” (Nagel 1971, 718). (More evidence that he means “open to doubt” will be offered shortly.) Claiming that our beliefs are open to doubt is not the same thing, however, as asserting that they are in fact unjustifiable or irredeemably subjective. The former involves merely the possibility that one’s beliefs are unjustified, whereas the latter entails that the matter is over, that it has been shown or believed to be the case that one’s beliefs are unjustified.

This can be seen in the case of philosophical scepticism. When one starts the process of scepticism, one does not concede, for example, that one’s belief that one is awake is unjustifiable (although one might, if one *eventually* comes to that *conclusion*). Rather, one realises that firmly held beliefs have been challenged, prompting one to try and find or make explicit the justification that one thinks must be there. Nagel explicitly makes this connection between Absurdity and “epistemological skepticism” (722, 724), which provides further support for the doubt interpretation.

We should interpret Nagel’s account of Absurdity in the following way, then: Perceiving any kind of situation as “absurd” requires perceiving a discrepancy between the aspirations or pretensions of the person or people involved and the reality of the

situation. Sometimes one perceives such a discrepancy in one's life as a whole, when one realises that the seriousness with which one conducts one's life conflicts with what Nagel calls "reality", specifically, the reality that that which one takes seriously is in fact perpetually open to doubt, calling this seriousness into question. This perceived discrepancy results in a judgement of "absurdity", but, according to Nagel, at least, only when it is the same person who entertains both the doubts and the fervent belief or seriousness.

The following come together on this account to result in Absurdity: the seriousness with which we take our lives during everyday life, and the "backward step" that we take when we metaphorically remove ourselves from that life and reflect on it, during which we see that that which we take seriously is susceptible to doubt. This backward step is explicitly noted by Nagel as one of the core features of Absurdity. Without it, we would not be Absurd. He states, for example, that a mouse is not Absurd, simply because the mouse is incapable of self-reflection; the mouse is incapable, in other words, of taking that backward step (725).⁸

While this backward step or capacity for reflection on our lives is a central feature of our Absurdity, it is also, Nagel thinks, something that we cherish. Absurdity is only possible because "we possess a certain kind of insight – the capacity to transcend ourselves in thought" (727) and this is something, he presumes, that we would not be willing to forgo. For this reason (the value that we place on our capacity for self-

⁸ This might strike one as strange. One might agree with Jeffrey Gordon (1984), for example, that "the man or woman who failed to see the arbitrariness [of their actions] would exacerbate absurdity by virtue of this blindness, not elude the condition altogether" (19). This kind of intuition relies, however, on thinking of Absurdity as some kind of metaphysical condition that affects people regardless of, say, their own state of mind. As I go on to argue, whether or not one experiences Absurdity (which is all there really is to being Absurd) crucially depends on one's own epistemological state.

reflection), we should not see Absurdity and that which allows for it as a bad thing. Moreover, if we have accepted that all that we take seriously is in fact open to doubt, then even the seriousness with which we might take our Absurdity can be blunted by this doubt, and we should thus respond to our Absurdity with irony rather than despair (727).

What distinguishes Nagel's account from Camus's, then? Camus also realises that Absurdity stems from a backward step or engaging in self-reflection:

It happens that the stage-sets collapse. Rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, according to the same rhythm – this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. 'Begins' – this is important. Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakens consciousness and provokes what follows. What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening. At the end of the awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery (Camus 1942a, 19).

As in Nagel's account, this backwards step appears to be a moment in which some aspect of our life is brought into doubt: "the 'why' arises".

One of the important differences between them, however, lies in that with which they think the doubt collides. For Camus, our inability to establish any absolute truths, our perpetual doubt (if we manage to hang on to it and not slip back into routine), clashes with our craving for absolute truth. For Nagel, on the other hand, the seriousness with

which we view our beliefs and actions clashes with our capacity to also bring those beliefs and actions into doubt.

Nagel expresses his difference with Camus in another way, however:

Camus maintains in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that the absurd arises because the world fails to meet our demands for meaning. This suggests that the world might satisfy those demands if it were different. But now we can see that this is not the case. There does not appear to be any conceivable world (containing us) about which unshakable doubts could not arise. Consequently the absurdity of our situation derives not from a collision between our expectations and the world, but from a collision within ourselves (Nagel 1971, 721-722).

The interpretation Nagel is offering here, while being relatively standard (e.g., Hall 1960; Gordon 1984; Plant 2009), relies too literally on Camus's language, however. While Camus does say things like "What is absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world" (Camus 1942a, 26), and "The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (31-32), what Camus is doing here is stressing that Absurdity involves two terms of comparison: "absurdity springs from a comparison [...] It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation" (33). Still, one might think, Camus is offering the world as one of the terms of the comparison, whereas Nagel is offering two perspectives that we take of our own lives. And thus Nagel is correct in asserting that his clash occurs "within ourselves", and that for Camus it is between the world and our

perception of it. But one must not interpret Camus's statements about the world too literally: we have to ask ourselves what he could mean by the world being irrational or presenting us with a deafening silence. Camus cannot really be expecting the world to furnish us with anything. What he really means by the unreasonable silence of the world is *our* inability to understand the world. He frames this problem, after all, as we saw, within a context of failed human scholarship and science and the twentieth century tendency to doubt any claims to truth. Thus, it is really a misinterpretation of Camus to characterise the clash as between the world and ourselves, for what he is really speaking about is our craving for truth and our inability to produce it. Which seems, after all, like a clash within ourselves, if one wants to speak about it in that way.

Thus, before getting into some further details in the next section, the similarities and differences that we have established between Camus and Nagel are as follows: Both of them credit a backward step, a moment of self-reflection in which we doubt some aspect of our lives, as being a feature of Absurdity, but they disagree about that with which the doubt collides. For Camus, this doubt that we feel is largely an historical event, the result of centuries of ultimately failed attempts at gaining absolute truth, and this clashes with our craving for absolute truth. For Nagel, on the other hand, our quite natural, more or less historically independent capacity for self-reflection and doubt (Nagel 1971, 718) clashes with the seriousness with which we take our beliefs and our actions.

How are we to understand the notion of Absurdity, then, and do these philosophical accounts relate in any way to the major themes of Absurdist works and the examples of Absurd moments that Camus enumerates? If they do not, then it would

appear that the concept of Absurdity is indeed being used in a number of different ways, and that an analysis that attempted to draw these seemingly disparate ideas and accounts together would be impossible. In the next section, we will see to what degree Camus's and Nagel's accounts can be applied to common themes and examples of Absurdity. We will see that as they stand they are unsatisfactory, but that they do provide material which we can use to construct a new account.

5. The strengths and weaknesses of Camus and Nagel.

In order to see the need for a modified account let us spell out the strengths and weaknesses of Camus's and Nagel's accounts.

One of the great merits of Camus's account is his "rapid classification" of "feelings that may admit of the absurd", in which he discusses general ways or situations in which a feeling of Absurdity might arise. (For a useful summary of these situations see Cruickshank 1959, 54-55). Many of these examples of Absurdity can also be found in diverse Absurdist works, some of which we saw in our discussion of some of the different themes found in Absurdist literature and theatre. Thus, Camus does well in his task of describing "an intellectual malady" that "can be found widespread in the age" (Camus 1942a, 10) by successfully identifying and describing moments in which it is elicited. But it is in his analysis of the condition, in his attempt at explaining what underlies all of those moments of Absurdity, that his account falters. Camus's general account of Absurdity relies too heavily on the notion of doubt: according to Camus, it is our historically aggravated doubt that clashes with our desire for absolute truth and which

then results in the feeling of Absurdity. But doubt, while being crucial to Absurdity, as we will see, does not account for *all* instances of Absurdity. And this can be seen by trying to apply his analysis to the examples that he offers. Consider some of the instances of alienation that he identifies: how can the feeling of Absurdity that arises from a clash between doubt and a craving for truth underlie or be accountable for the strange feeling one sometimes gets from seeing oneself in the mirror? Or seeing objects in a new or atypical light?

That is not to say that doubt never underlies a feeling of Absurdity. It is present when one questions the value or purpose of something, as in the case of those people who one day find themselves “question[ing] the value and purpose of their existence”. It can also account for at least some of the instances in which a feeling of Absurdity is generated by a sense of time passing: the realisation that the sculpture one is carefully creating will eventually be turned into dust may lead one to doubt the value of the sculpture or the enterprise, resulting in a feeling of Absurdity.

So, while doubt might indeed be crucial for understanding some instances of Absurdity, it cannot explain them all.

It is a bit harder to see that that this is also a problem for Nagel’s account, however, even though he also posits doubt as being central to Absurdity. The reason that it is harder to make this objection stick to Nagel is because he is not automatically affiliated with the examples of Absurdity that Camus enumerates and which feature in many Absurdist works. Nagel, one will recall, distances himself from these other sentiments at the start of his paper by dismissing them as inadequate arguments. It was noted, however, that it was not necessary to characterise those other sentiments as

arguments. It is, in fact, more appropriate to see them as examples of situations in which a feeling of Absurdity might arise, rather than as explanations of those moments. Nevertheless, Nagel has distanced himself from those ideas, so it might appear that one cannot criticise his position for not being able to account for them.

We need to ask, however, if Nagel is justified in distancing himself from those other ideas and giving an account which cannot explain them.

Nagel thinks that there is some connection between his account of Absurdity and those other ideas. He thinks that what they are really trying to capture or describe is the backward step, the moment of self-reflection, which his account succeeds in articulating: “reference to our small size and short lifespan and to the fact that all of mankind will eventually vanish without a trace are metaphors for the backward step which permits us to regard ourselves from without and to find the particular form of our lives curious and slightly surprising” (Nagel 1971, 725). However, I do not think that Nagel can explain these other ideas away as simply being metaphors or figurative ways of *speaking about* our capacity for doubt infused reflection. Surely someone who has experienced a feeling of Absurdity in the face of death would respond to Nagel by saying, “No, I wasn’t thinking about my capacity for reflection. I was thinking about death! It was by thinking about death that I felt Absurd. I was not thinking metaphorically.”

Nagel could respond by saying that the person was just mistaken, then, and insist that death is not an argument for Absurdity. But I think that it would be extreme philosophical hubris to simply dismiss the fact that thoughts *about* death, and thoughts *about* time and space have been so closely associated with Absurdity, and in the sense of being more than just figurative ways of speaking about something else. It is by thinking

about death itself that a feeling of Absurdity is elicited, rather than this just being a way of speaking about our capacity for reflection.

So, if one should try and accommodate the sentiments that have traditionally been associated with Absurdity (like death and time and alienation), then Nagel's account of Absurdity would also fall short. It would fall short not simply because he sees such thoughts as metaphors for something else, but because he too places doubt at the centre of his account, and we saw above that placing so much emphasis on doubt fails to account for certain key moments in which one may feel Absurd, such as particular moments of alienation.

A merit of Nagel's account, however, is that he gives a better account of how the backward step features in our life and in Absurdity than Camus does. For Camus, that moment of self-reflection is something that we should, ideally, only do once. It is an awakening of "consciousness" and "what follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening" (Camus 1942a, 19). It is a moment in which we wake up and realise our Absurdity, potentially leading to a noble revolt in which we constantly keep Absurdity before our eyes (53), rather than committing suicide or slipping back into the "poisoned peace" of everyday existence (25). On a proper account of Absurdity, I will argue, we need to see the backward step in the same way that Nagel does, that is, as something that we do from time to time while constantly returning to everyday life.⁹

⁹ This notion of taking a backward step out of the flow of life and somehow viewing one's own life more objectively is an idea that Nagel went on to explore in more detail in *The View From Nowhere* (1986). While one can go into great detail attempting to understand the nature of this moment, or, indeed, in attempting to understand the idea of a 'point of view' in general (e.g, Moline 1968; Moore 1987; Eilan 1995), I am leaving the idea at a relatively commonsensical level in this essay. I think that one can quite readily understand the idea that Nagel is conveying in his original essay, "The Absurd", at least to the extent of utilising it in this essay without further explanation. For a critical review of Nagel's treatment of the idea in *The View from Nowhere* see Muscari (1987).

A great strength of Camus's account of Absurdity, then, is his insightful enumeration of different situations in which feelings of Absurdity might arise, but he does not manage to present a general account that can explain all of these moments. One reason why he cannot is because he focuses too heavily on the role of doubt. Nagel also focuses too heavily on doubt, but partly because he incorrectly sees these examples as arguments for why we are Absurd, rather than as examples of moments in which a feeling of Absurdity arises that need to be explained. A merit of his account, however, is that he presents a better picture of the backward step that will prove important to understanding Absurdity. Although Camus also recognises the importance of stepping out of the flow of daily life, he does not recognise that we must in fact frequently return to our everyday lives in order to feel Absurd.

What we need, then, is an account of Absurdity that manages to explain all of the moments of Absurdity that Camus identifies and which feature in Absurdist art. While it was acknowledged that doubt does underlie some of these moments, others need to be explained in a different way. Moreover, this needs to be done in a way that shows why those moments that are explained in a different way are sufficiently similar to the others for them all to be seen as the same kind of thought process.

6. A new account of Absurdity: doubt, aspects, and conceptual devastation.

What all of those moments identified by Camus have in common is that they are all moments in which we step outside of the normal flow of life and comprehend things in a different way to how we typically comprehend them. While the notion of

“comprehending the world in an atypical way” is vague, it happens in Absurd moments in particular ways which allows us to give this notion specific content. In these moments, comprehending the world differently occurs in two ways, two ways which have a sufficiently similar structure to be considered instances of a single type of thought process. The first is when we step out of the flow of life and doubt an ordinarily firmly held belief. The second is when we step out of the flow of life and perceive a different aspect of something, an aspect of which we are normally not aware.¹⁰ While these two events are not necessarily disturbing in themselves, when they are felt in conjunction with the following they become disturbing or more disturbing: (1) a death of god *zeitgeist*.¹¹ (2) The fact that we move between our ordinary ways of comprehending things and the atypical ways of comprehending things. These two features can make one feel “absurd” in the following two senses of the word: it creates a feeling of disharmony (or discomfort) and it creates a feeling of being ridiculous. I will go on to argue that the feeling of disharmony that is generated in moments of Absurdity can ultimately be explained as disturbing because it strikes at the heart of the way in which we understand the world and ourselves.

Let us begin by taking these two ways of comprehending the world differently (doubting and aspect-seeing) in turn, applying them to the examples of Absurd moments, and seeing how they are aggravated by points (1) and (2).

¹⁰ One might think that any theory that deals with seeing different “aspects” of something needs also to orientate itself in relation to Wittgenstein’s famous treatment of the matter. While “noticing an aspect is a common phenomenon” (Fogelin 1976, 201), commentators hold that “of all the topics which seem to have dominated Wittgenstein’s thought and writings, his treatment of aspect perception is one of the least explored and understood” (Mulhall 1990, 1). Significantly, any attempt to understand it also needs to take into account his philosophy of psychology and language, for it was in relation to these other matters that Wittgenstein thought aspect perception to be of interest. I can see no need to delve into these deep waters in order to make my current point, however.

¹¹ See footnote 2, p.8.

Doubt: Nagel and Camus are right that our capacity for doubt is importantly linked to many instances of Absurdity. Consider the moment of Absurdity that is associated with an acute sense of time passing: time as the destructive element. Imagine a sculptor working on a wood carving. Typically, this sculptor sees his work as something valuable. Yet, suddenly disengaging from his work or his appreciation of it, he recalls that time will eventually reduce this sculpture to dust. This consideration leads him to doubt the value of his work. He asks himself why he should toil for hours working at something that is eventually going to be destroyed. His comprehension of his work and this particular piece is thus altered as a result of his consideration of time and the subsequent doubt it raised in his mind.

The new way of comprehending the sculpture is disturbing in and of itself. It is not pleasant for the sculptor to dwell on the destruction of his work or the consequences this has for the value of his craft. Quite simply, they are unpleasant thoughts. But this new way of comprehending the sculpture is disturbing in another, more profound, way as well: it is disturbing in the sense that it clashes with the sculptor's typical way of comprehending his craft and artworks. This clash between his typical comprehension of his work and his new or atypical comprehension, and the resulting feeling of disharmony between these two perspectives might appropriately be called a feeling of "absurdity", given that "disharmony" is one of the original meanings of the word "absurd". But I think that one only comes to feel Absurd, or recognise oneself as Absurd, if this feeling of disharmony is relatively robust, that is, if one cannot find a way to quell these doubts or reconcile the two conflicting perspectives. (Just why this clash of perspectives might be profoundly disturbing is explained in more detail later in this section.)

For people living in Europe in the 1940s, an inability to quell doubts of this nature was the result of the way in which the Second World War undermined religious and secular beliefs that might otherwise have enabled people to quieten or overthrow the doubt. Let us see how the undermining of religious and secular beliefs might prolong the sense of disharmony that the sculptor is feeling, resulting in him perceiving the disharmony for long enough to feel Absurd (rather than managing to quieten the doubts and dispel the disharmony and thus the feeling of Absurdity).

A death of god *zeitgeist* could affect the sculptor in a number of ways, depending on which “god” he is missing. If it is his faith in the Christian god that he has lost, then he will not be able to quieten his doubts by saying that actually his work has value because its beauty is being perceived by God (as, for example, some sixteenth century composers, like Thomas Tallis, believed), or that it has a purpose because it is part of God’s plan for him. He has, in other words, been denied potentially reassuring beliefs, beliefs that might have made him more confident that his typical way of seeing things is actually correct (that his work does indeed have purpose or value, for example). It is not only the Christian god that might be missing, however, but secular beliefs as well. Instead of the loss of the Christian god prolonging his disharmony it might rather be the loss of the early modernist faith in the significance of art-making (see Pippin 1991, 40). Thus, while sculptors who are not living through a death of god *zeitgeist* might raise doubts about the value or purpose of their work, resulting in a temporary disturbance, they would, in most cases, have some unshakable explanatory principle to fall back on and confirm their ordinary beliefs. This sculptor, however, living as he is during a death of god *zeitgeist*,

has this same capacity to doubt, but lacks the beliefs and narratives that might have allowed him to reaffirm his standard beliefs.

So, a feeling of Absurdity might already have been elicited in the artist at this stage. His acute sense of time passing caused him to doubt the value of his work and, because this doubt has not been quietened by a reassuring belief or narrative, two kinds of discomfort remain. The first is that the lingering atypical perspective is disturbing in and of itself, and this no doubt plays some role in making the entire experience an unpleasant one. The second kind of discomfort is due to the fact that his typical perspective or mode of comprehension is left to clash with his atypical comprehension, thus creating a feeling of disharmony. This experience can appropriately be called a feeling of Absurdity. While it might be clear that a robust clash of perspectives can be a source of discomfort, I believe that there is more to be said about the extent to which this kind of clash can be profoundly disturbing, which will be explained shortly.

The above is not the only sense in which the sculptor might be feeling Absurd, however. He also, most likely, would not find himself abandoning his typical beliefs. He would not, after having felt these doubts, simply agree that his work is of no value and stop sculpting. Soon those doubts would have vanished and he would be carefully toiling away at his craft. However, it is likely that he will, at some stage, take that backward step again, resulting once again in doubt, and in so doing he would recognise the way in which he moves between these two perspectives, and he might feel ridiculous for not being able to make a decision about the value of his work, or in his realisation that he so quickly forgets these serious doubts about that which he holds so dear. Here his sense of Absurdity would arise not from the collision between his ordinary beliefs and his atypical

beliefs, but rather from considering the fact that he so capriciously moves between them. It makes him feel Absurd in the sense of feeling ridiculous.

These two experiences, which I have individually labelled a feeling of Absurdity (namely, the discomfort of a robust clash of perspectives and feeling ridiculous for capriciously moving between the different perspectives) come together to form the overall experience that we call Absurdity. However, we will see that it is the former component of the overall experience of Absurdity (that is, the disharmony that is felt as a result of a clash of perspectives) that is the more profoundly disturbing component of the whole experience.¹²

Aspect-seeing: While stepping out of the flow of life and engaging in doubt can result in feelings of Absurdity, there is another way in which these feelings can be generated which also involves comprehending the world in an atypical way and this being intensified by points (1) and (2). In these cases, instead of being led to doubt something when taking that backward step, one simply perceives a new aspect of something that seems to clash with how one normally perceives it. It is this kind of explanation that falls behind certain instances of visually oriented alienation, particularly alienation from objects and from images of oneself.

Consider a person who has a favourite tree in her garden which she enjoys reading under. Sometimes, when taking a break from her reading, she gazes at the tree and perceives it as a thing of beauty and majesty. She appreciates the way the sun plays off its

¹² One might be wondering why I have chosen to call the two components of the overall experience of Absurdity a feeling of “Absurdity” in their own right. I have done this for two reasons. The first is to emphasise the connection between these feelings that make up the experience of Absurdity and the two original meanings of the word “absurd” (namely, disharmony and being ridiculous). The second is that while these two feelings (disharmony and ridiculousness) are, strictly speaking, distinct from one another, I believe that they nevertheless both combine to form the overall experience of Absurdity. It is likely that these two feelings, each of which correspond to the original meanings of the word “absurd” are felt more or less simultaneously when one is experiencing Absurdity in its entirety.

leaves and wonders at the fact that the tree was there years before she was born and will remain years after she is dead. One day, however, this person looks at the tree and does not see the tree's beauty or old age. The tree is divested of these familiar associations and is instead seen as a rather ruthless organism, inexorably leeching nutrients from the soil below and preventing the sun's rays from reaching the plants around it. The person shudders and cannot bring herself to lie under the tree that day. She feels, as Camus puts it, "the primitive hostility of the world" rising up to face her.

The way in which this typically unrecognised aspect of the tree clashes with her ordinary way of seeing the tree is disturbing for the person. A feeling of disharmony is generated as result of this clash of perspectives. But, because she is living through a death of god *zeitgeist*, this person is without some important means of reconciling these perspectives or giving the one priority over the other. She cannot, for example, confidently remind herself that the tree is really God's creation, thus reassuring herself that she is in fact correct in seeing it as a thing of beauty and majesty.¹³

While this sense of disquiet or disharmony created by the collision between perspectives is probably the most commonly felt sense of Absurdity that relates to this way of seeing the world differently, she might, when she once again finds herself appreciating the tree or another object in an atypical way, find it ridiculous that she manages to blinker herself off from this other way of seeing things. She might feel Absurd, in other words, not only because of the feeling of disharmony that is created by the clash of perspectives, but also because she so capriciously moves from one view to the other.

¹³ This experience might strike one as being more conceptual than visual, but, as was suggested in footnote 5, if one considers the nature of visual experiences it is difficult to draw the line between perception *simpliciter* and perception laced with concepts.

The link, then, between all of these moments that elicit a feeling of Absurdity is this: In every instance one takes a backward step or removes oneself from the flow of ordinary life. In taking this backward step, one comprehends the world in a way that is different to how one typically comprehends it. This different way of seeing the world can either be the result of doubt or the result of recognising an aspect of something that one does not normally appreciate. While these two ways of seeing the world differently need not always elicit a feeling of Absurdity, they do under the following conditions: 1) a profound sense of disharmony is caused by the clash of perspectives, which is prolonged by a death of god *zeitgeist* and one's consequent inability to reassert the validity of one's typical way of seeing things by reference to some unshakable belief or narrative. 2) the fact that one so capriciously moves between the one perspective and the other, which makes one feel ridiculous.

This schema not only underlies the various moments that Camus identifies, but also the major themes of other Absurdist works. The major themes that I identified were alienation, the destructive effects of time, death, society and its ridiculous conventions, and the inadequacies of language. We have seen that concerns about time as a destructive element can be explained with the doubt schema. Death works in a similar fashion. By considering one's death one might come to doubt certain aspects of one's life, and due to a death of god *zeitgeist* one might not be able to reaffirm one's ordinary comprehension of one's life. For example, one might not be able to confirm that, despite the fact that one is going to die, one's life has value because God created one. Alienation often has to do with aspect-seeing, but other forms of alienation are to be explained by the doubt schema. A sense of Absurdity felt in response to a feeling of irrevocable alienation from other

people can be seen as one doubting a belief that is otherwise typically held in everyday life, namely, that one is not irrevocably alienated from people. Absurdity would be felt in response to perceiving society's conventions as ridiculous because one is doubting the typically held belief that society's conventions serve some purpose, which cannot then be reaffirmed. Societal conventions would not exist in the first place if people constantly thought that they served no useful purpose. A feeling of Absurdity felt in response to perceiving language as inadequate would operate in a similar way. Ordinarily, language serves our purposes well and communication occurs relatively effortlessly. To come to doubt the adequacy of language and be unable to reaffirm one's typical belief in its adequacy would result in a feeling of Absurdity.

It was useful to evaluate Camus's account because by contrasting his examples with his general account of Absurdity, one could see that doubt was necessary but not sufficient to explain Absurdity. It was useful to evaluate Nagel's account because even though Camus posits a backward step in Absurd moments, Camus implausibly credits this as a once-off event, the definitive awakening, rather than realising the importance of our capacity to move between everyday life and detachment in the creation of feelings of Absurdity, something that Nagel does recognise.

Considering the merits and drawbacks of those accounts has allowed us to create a new account that is capable of showing that there is a structure behind the diverse moments Camus identifies as eliciting a feeling of Absurdity, as well as behind the major themes or concerns of Absurdist theatre and literature.

One might be wondering, however, whether this account is in fact capable of explaining the deep disturbance felt by Absurdist artists and philosophers. More needs to

be said, one might feel, in order to explain the profundity of the feeling that resulted in the proliferation of some of the twentieth century's most interesting and original works. In other words, in order for an account of Absurdity to be plausible it needs to explain how it was possible for the identified thought process to be powerful enough to individually inspire the diverse people who were moved to engage with this phenomenon.

Consider the sense of Absurdity that comes not from feeling ridiculous but from feeling a sense of disharmony or disturbance from the clash of perspectives or ways of comprehending something. While it might be clear that a robust clash of perspectives can be disturbing, more can be said about the way in which it is disturbing, and I think that in instances of Absurdity it is disturbing because it strikes at the heart of the way in which we understand the world and ourselves.

In *The Really Hard Problem* (2007), Owen Flanagan argues that people live among “spaces of meaning” and that it is through our interaction with these spaces that we form our view of the world and of ourselves. The six spaces of meaning that he identifies as being most relevant to most people living today are art, science, technology, ethics, politics and spirituality. It is by negotiating these spaces of meaning, that is, by taking on, and expressing opinions about, these six areas of human life, that people come to understand themselves, the world, and their actions. He explains that “although most of us live our lives with our feet firmly planted on the ground worried primarily about friends, family, work, making ends meet and so on, how we live in ordinary life and how we experience ordinary life are affected by the multifarious ways we interact with these six spaces [...]. That is, we experience the world in and through these spaces” (9-10). It is by “living in these spaces that we make sense of things, orient our lives, find our way,

and live meaningfully” (12). As these comments suggest, negotiating spaces of meaning not only allow for us to make sense of our actions but also ourselves. As Flanagan puts it, “each space contains information about possibilities for self-description as well as norms for self-direction” (11). One understands oneself by describing oneself as someone who, for example, believes in the value of art, who is a democrat, who is against the increasing role of technology in our lives, and who is an atheist.

Absurdity, however, involves the inability to reaffirm one’s typical mode of comprehension. In other words, the values that one normally ascribes to the six spaces of meaning, which affect how one understands the world and oneself, cannot be reaffirmed. This is essentially a moment in which one’s understanding of the world and one’s understanding of one’s self is undermined.

7. Why Absurdity is relevant in the early 21 Century: a postmodern sensibility.

Even if one agrees that feelings of Absurdity felt in the 1940s can be systematised with an analysis like the above, one might still be tempted to concur with Hughes (2007) and Carroll (2007) that Absurdity is nevertheless a relic of the past. Camus himself claimed that he had moved beyond the propositions of *The Myth of Sisyphus* as early as the 1950s, so what reason does one have to think that Absurdity is relevant today? In this section, I will argue that the thought process that results in feelings of Absurdity is still relevant to many people living today, people who have what can be called a postmodern sensibility. While the term “postmodern” has had a rich history, being applied to numerous and somewhat disparate artistic developments and academic theories, some of which are now

considered old-fashioned, there is an important sense in which the term can still be used to describe a specific popular mindset which is still very much alive today. This mindset, moreover, is similar to previous death of god *zeitgeists* in that it involves an undermining of certainty regarding one's chosen religious and secular beliefs.

As with any general term that is used to describe various theoretical, historical, and artistic developments, any attempt to describe its history or the key moments in its development will be controversial. For example, attempts to describe the beginning of the "modern" era range from situating its origins with the scientific and cultural revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (e.g., Berman 1994 and Pippin 1991), to those who think that there is reason to situate it at the start of the twentieth century (e.g., Solomon 1988), depending on the factors which one finds salient. Similar controversy surrounds attempts to delineate the ancestry and birth of postmodernism, and, indeed, whether it represents a break with modernity or merely its continuation.

There is some agreement among critics that the term "postmodern" was first used by Frederico de Onis in the 1930s, in an aesthetic context, to indicate a "minor reaction to modernism" (Featherstone 1988, 202-203). The term gained some popularity in New York in the 1960s with young artists, writers and critics, but many agree that the term really only gained momentum at the start of the 1970s (e.g., Connor 2004, Gitlin 1989, Featherstone 1988). Steven Connor notes that during this early period, the 1970s through to the early 1980s, the idea of postmodernism was under development in different disciplines with different areas of interest (Connor 2004, 1-2). The term was being used to describe perceived changes that were taking place in the West in the spheres of economic organization, and art and culture, changes that were seen as, in some sense,

distinguishing this new era from the modern era. One of the changes identified in the economic sphere was the change from an industrial society to a high-tech consumer society. In the artistic sphere, on the other hand, critics were identifying a reaction against the artistic styles and sentiments of the modernists. The fact that arguments relating to these different areas of interest were both using the term “postmodern” made it difficult, originally, to establish the correct use of the term (*ibid.*). By the mid-1980s the term became associated not only with arguments about economic and cultural development, however, but with a particular style of writing, and by the 1990s it had come to signify a “dangerously loose” relativism, as well as being associated with identity politics and issues of multiculturalism (Connor 2004, 4-5).

By the 1990s, it was also possible, however, to speak of postmodernism as a “sensibility or state of mind”, rather than a perspective that was the result of “rigorous philosophical or cultural-political deliberation” (Connor 2004, 10). In other words, it was now possible to describe oneself as a postmodern person, or call someone else postmodern, even if the person concerned had never engaged with academic papers that were part of the postmodern movement.

One reason why it was possible to do this in the 1990s, and why it is still possible to do it today, is because the term, and some of the ideas associated with it, had by now moved from the academy into popular discourses. As Arthur Berger states, “we now see the term being used in newspapers and popular magazines with increasing regularity” (Berger 1998, 9). It is not only the term that has become familiar, however, but the ideas associated with it as well (see Kvale 1990). Even those who are against some of the ideas espoused by postmodern theorists agree that it has had a great impact on popular culture.

For example, while Gary Potter and José López think that their favoured intellectual perspective, critical realism, “offers a more reasonable and useful framework from within which to engage the philosophical, scientific and social scientific challenges of this new century”, they nevertheless state that “for all its contradictions, postmodernism served to capture the spirit of the contemporary age. At any rate, postmodernism managed to escape the confines of the academic world and terms such as ‘postmodernity’ and ‘deconstruction’ have passed into journalism and popular discourse” (Potter and López 2001, 3-4).

Thus, there is a sense in which one can talk about postmodernism as a popular mindset due to the ideas associated with it being a part of popular culture. People could now call themselves postmodern and express some of the ideas that had been associated with the term. But I am not so much interested in people calling themselves postmodern, however, as describing a popular mindset that we, as theorists rather than the people themselves, could sensibly call postmodern (even though it might be true that, due to popular discussions of the term, people could apply that label themselves). The postmodern sensibility that I have in mind is the popular contemporary feeling that it is, in some sense, no longer possible to affirm one’s own viewpoint or perspective. One could quite loosely call this a sense of the “relativism” of beliefs, a sense that all beliefs or points of view are equally valid.

This validating of all perspectives, or, at least, the invalidating of any one narrative or perspective that makes claims to truth or superiority, is an idea that, in various forms, has long been associated with postmodernism. As Steiner Kvale states, “postmodern thought is characterized by a loss of belief in an objective world and an

incredulity towards meta-narratives of legitimation. With a deligitimation of global systems of thought, there is no foundation to secure a universal and objective *reality*. There is today a growing public acknowledgement that “Reality isn’t what it used to be” (Kvale 1990, 19). This connection between postmodernism and the deligitimation of any one system of thought, narrative, or point of view was forged as early as 1979 with Jean-Francois Lyotard’s seminal text, *La Condition Postmoderne*, which, when it was translated into English in 1984, played a significant role in spreading postmodern thought in the English-speaking world (Featherstone 1988, 208). In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard “attacks the grand-narratives, or legitimating myths of the modern age [...] Postmodern theory became identified with the critique of universal knowledge” (Featherstone 1988, 208-209).

Yet, while postmodernism and various attacks against single points of view have long been associated with each other, it is another question as to how the idea became popular with people who, for example, had never heard of Lyotard or other postmodern theorists. One answer has already been suggested above, namely, that the ideas associated with postmodernism have had remarkable success in becoming a part of popular discourses, thus giving people access to ideas that might otherwise have remained inside the academy. There is another way in which this particular idea (the hazards of affirming any one perspective) has become popular, however, which has to do with the role that relatively recent advances in technology have played in giving people access to alternative points of view.

Technology and postmodernism have a rich history of association with one another. As we saw, one of the earliest debates that laid claim to the term “postmodern”

was about the way in which changing technologies are moving us from an industrial society into a high-tech post-industrial society, but these debates were not only about economic organisation, they were also about the role that these new technologies were playing in changing people's sensibilities. As Steven Best and Douglas Kellner explain, Jean Baudrillard argued that we are now "in a new era of simulation in which computerization, information processing, media, cybernetic control systems, and the organization of society according to simulation codes and models replace production as the organizing principle of society. If modernity is the era of production controlled by the industrial bourgeoisie, the postmodern era of simulations by contrast is an era of information and signs governed by models, codes, and cybernetics [...] In a society of simulations, the models or codes structure experience and erode distinctions between the model and the real" (Best and Kellner 1991, 294-295). As this quote makes clear, strong claims are made in the name of postmodernism about the role that technology is playing in our lives, such as that our sense of reality is being eroded in quite an extreme sense. Consider, in conjunction with the above, Steiner Kvale's description of this postmodern theme: "In society the development of technology, in particular the electronic media, opens up an increased exposure to a multiplicity of perspectives, undermining any belief in one objective reality. In a world of media, the contrast between reality and fantasy breaks down and is replaced by hyperreality, a world of self-referential signs. What remains is signs referring to other signs, texts referring to other texts" (Kvale 1990, 19).

While I think that technology has played an important role in generating the postmodern sensibility that it is difficult or impossible to affirm any one viewpoint, I do not take myself to be committed to some of the more extreme claims that I have just

outlined. Our exposure to alternative viewpoints through technology has affected our lives in a profound sense, but I do not think that our sense of reality has been entirely eroded, for example, or that we cannot tell the difference between the world seen through a window and the world seen through a television. I will not argue for these claims here but instead simply present what I take to be a more conservative and more plausible account of the role that technology has played in changing the way that we think about different points of view.

In *The Saturated Self* (1991), Kenneth Gergen argues that “what is generally characterized as the postmodern condition within the culture is largely a by-product of the century’s technologies of social saturation” (xi). Gergen’s fundamental motive is to argue that advances in technology in the twentieth century have allowed for an increase in the number and duration of relationships that we have with other people. He thinks that this increase in relationships with people with different points of view and norms is inexorably leading to a change in the way in which Westerners conceive of the self. He states that “critical to [his] argument is the proposal that social saturation brings with it a general loss in our assumption of true and knowable selves [...] We come to be aware that each truth about ourselves is a construction of the moment, true only for a given time within certain relationships” (16); “in this era the self is redefined as no longer an essence in itself, but relational. In the postmodern world, selves may become the manifestations of relationships, thus placing relationships in the central position occupied by the individual self for the last several hundred years of Western history” (146-147). Gergen thinks that this change in the way people self-conceive has affected a relatively small segment of the population, “often the more urban, mobile, professional, affluent, and

aspiring”, but that “there is good reason to believe that what is taking place within these groups can be taken as a weathervane of future cultural life in general” (199-200).

While I am sceptical about Gergen’s claims about a change from a conception of the self as individual to a conception of the self as relational, even among the limited population groups he specifies, I think that he does successfully describe the way in which technological developments expose us to a multiplicity of perspectives and that he provides some insight into the effect that this has on our ability to affirm our own point of view.

Gergen distinguishes between low-tech and high-tech means of exposure to alternative points of view (50-61). While some of the low-tech developments, like public postal services, were developed as early as the eighteenth century, many of them were revolutionised in the twentieth century. Some of the high-tech developments, on the other hand, were invented only in the latter half of the twentieth century. It is worthwhile to provide a summary of these developments for it is easy to forget that much of the technology that we take for granted, and that for which it allows, is relatively new and revolutionary.

The seven low-tech developments Gergen identifies are the railroad, public postal services, the automobile, the telephone, radio broadcasting, motion pictures, and large-scale publishing. Although rail travel was firmly in place in the 1800s, the number of people using it, and thus being exposed to other people and points of view, rose dramatically in the twentieth century. The volume of people travelling by rail in 1988, for example, was double that of people travelling by rail in 1970. Public postal services were also in operation as early as the eighteenth century but they did not truly flourish until

they made use of railroads in the nineteenth century and airlines in the twentieth. At the beginning of the twentieth century the automobile was virtually unknown; less than 100 had been made in the entire world. By 1980 the annual production figure was nearly 40 million vehicles. The telephone entered daily life at the beginning of the twentieth century. International calls being made in the United States increased from approximately 3 million in 1960 to 430 million by 1984. Radio broadcasting began in the United States and Great Britain in 1919. By the mid-1980s there were approximately 2 billion radios in the world. Motion pictures were a novelty at the beginning of the twentieth century but are now a common feature of everyday life. And although the printed book was spreading ideas and values for centuries, the emergence of mass printing technologies in the twentieth century and the development of the paperback have resulted in books being owned and read by people who otherwise would not have been able to afford them. Thus, the twentieth century saw the rapid development and improvement of various means of exposure to different people and places, and the values, ideas, and norms that they embodied or expressed (50-53).

Yet, as significant as these technologies are, the latter half of the twentieth century saw the development of new and radically more effective means of social exposure. These three high-tech developments are mass air transportation, television, and electronic communication. While passenger travel by air was rarely available before 1920, millions of people now engage in rapid international and domestic air travel. Commercial television was only available in 1946 but has now become a relatively ubiquitous means of exposure to different points of view and lifestyles worldwide. Electronic communication stands out, however, as being one of the most successful

means of overcoming the two greatest obstacles to communicating, namely, slowness and expense. The development of the digital computer in the 1950s, the launching of communication satellites in the 1960s, and the revolutionary advances in personal computing in the 1980s have made it possible for people to publish and engage with the widest possible spectrum of points of view and ways of life in an instant (53-61). We are in an age of unprecedented exposure to alternative points of view.

With this intense exposure to alternative points of view comes a feeling that it is impossible or, perhaps, difficult beyond one's abilities, to affirm any particular viewpoint. To put it simply, "as opinions become more varied, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine precisely what is true" (Gergen 1991, 84; see also Anderson 1995).¹⁴

It is this contemporary feeling that it is impossible or simply difficult to the point of being practically impossible to affirm one's favoured point of view that makes Absurdity relevant to people living in the late stages of the twentieth century and the early stages of the twenty-first. The problem is not simply that we encounter alternative viewpoints daily, but rather that this exposure to alternative points of view makes it difficult, when we *reflect* on the validity of our own beliefs, to be confident that our chosen perspective is the correct one. I have argued that feelings of Absurdity involve the following structure: In every instance one takes a backward step or removes oneself from the flow of ordinary life. In taking this backward step, one comprehends the world in a way that is different to how one typically comprehends it. This different way of seeing

¹⁴ It is also possible for technologies of social exposure to allow for increased exposure to favoured points of view. The internet makes it possible to spend much of one's time on fanatical websites, for example. Yet while it is possible for these technologies to support fanatical groups, it also serves the function of undermining some people's beliefs; I am only describing the latter phenomenon in this essay.

the world can either be the result of doubt or the result of recognising an aspect of something that one does not normally appreciate. While these two ways of seeing the world differently need not always elicit a feeling of Absurdity, they do under the following conditions: 1) a profound sense of disharmony is caused by the clash of perspectives, which is prolonged by a death of god *zeitgeist* and one's consequent inability to reassert the validity of one's typical way of seeing things by reference to some unshakable belief or narrative. 2) the fact that one so capriciously moves between the one perspective and the other, which makes one feel ridiculous. The difference between feelings of Absurdity in the 1940s and contemporary feelings of Absurdity is that, originally, one could not reassert the validity of one's typical way of seeing things because of the role that the Second World War had played in undermining one's sense of certainty. In the early twenty-first century, however, more than sixty years on from World War Two, the major reason why certainty is undermined is the intense exposure to alternative points of view that took place in the late stages of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, it is essentially the same thought process that results in the same feelings. All that has changed is the way in which the gods, so to speak, have died. Thus it is not surprising that a seminal Absurdist play, *Waiting for Godot*, which was first produced in 1953, could be successfully restaged in recent decades.¹⁵ Absurdity remains as relevant as it was in the 1940s and 1950s.

¹⁵ Most recently, *Godot* was staged in 2009 at the Theatre Royal Haymarket in London to sold out audiences, breaking box office records for both the play and the Haymarket theatre, and is set to return for an encore run in 2010 (see www.waitingforgodottheplay.com). While there are numerous reasons why a seminal play might be successfully restaged, I think that *Godot* is not the sort of play that audiences would be willing to endure if it did not truly speak to them.

8. Objections from postmodernism.

There are two related objections that can be raised by my linking Absurdity and postmodernism in this way. These objections essentially ask whether postmodern culture does not in fact undermine the possibility of experiencing Absurdity. The first objection is about the process of comprehending the world in a new way and being unable to reassert the validity of one's typical perspective. It might appear that, due to technologies of social saturation, we are constantly being forced to comprehend the world in a new way, and that this would then force us to accept the implausible conclusion that people are now constantly experiencing Absurdity. If Absurdity essentially involves comprehending the world in an atypical way, and people are constantly being exposed to, as far as they are concerned, atypical points of view, then how do we escape the obviously false conclusion that people are thus just as frequently experiencing Absurdity? In answering a variant of this objection, I hope to also provide the answer to the second objection. The second objection involves another aspect of postmodern culture that I have not discussed yet. The claim is frequently made that postmodern discourses, and postmodern sensibilities, are intimately tied up with a sense of detachment from the loss of certainty, that "staying cool in the face of an increasingly chaotic world is the essence of the postmodern attitude" (Solomon 1988, 50). The idea of postmodern detachment is often linked to the fact that postmodern people are well aware of the fragility and contingency of any perspective, and that it is this "knowingness that dissolves commitment into irony" (Gitlin 1989, 59; see also Kvale 1990). This kind of detachment would seem to preclude the possibility of being *disturbed* by one's inability to reassert

one's favoured viewpoint, if, indeed, one favours any particular viewpoint at all. In this section, I will show that these two objections do not succeed, and that it is possible to possess a postmodern sensibility and experience Absurdity.

Objection 1: Doesn't our constant exposure to atypical points of view mean that we are thus constantly experiencing Absurdity? The reason why this is not correct is because engaging in life's everyday activities and circumstantially being exposed to alternative points of view during these activities does not necessarily result in one bringing one's own point of view into question. One lives one's everyday life according to one's chosen beliefs and values, and simply hearing or encountering alternative points of view will not necessarily bring one's own point of view into question. One will not necessarily reflect on one's own point of view, realise the clash of perspectives, be unable to reassert one's own point of view and thus experience Absurdity. During everyday life alternative points of view become part of the background of life, and it is only when one steps out of the flow of everyday existence and reflects on one's own point of view and alternative points of view that feelings of Absurdity might result.

We saw in our discussion of Flanagan that people necessarily live according to certain values and these values will not seriously be brought into question until one finds the time for reflection. By endorsing particular views about the six spaces of meaning we make sense of things, orient our lives, and find our way. While we are busy experiencing life through the values that we have ascribed to the spaces of meaning those chosen beliefs and values will remain relatively firmly entrenched. It is only in moments of reflection, or when we are otherwise brought out of the flow of life (say, in hearing or seeing something unusual, or, for whatever reason, seeing something familiar in an

unusual way), that that which we normally take for granted can be brought into question, potentially resulting in feelings of Absurdity. We are too heavily invested in life and that which allows for us to make sense of it for it to be possible for most people to constantly experience Absurdity.

It might appear that this objection can still be salvaged, however, and in a way that relates to the next objection. What if, perhaps due to the prevalence of the postmodern theme that all points of view are contingent or fragile, someone negotiates the six spaces of meaning in what might be called a “nihilistic” or “relativistic” way? What if someone lives their everyday life thinking that nothing substantial can be said about art, science, technology, ethics, politics and spirituality because every point of view is the construction of specific social circumstances? If this is possible, then in what sense would this person be disturbed by the recognition that they cannot affirm their own favoured perspective?

Such a person would be affected by Absurdity in exactly the same way that any other person is affected. The kind of relativism that this person ascribes to is itself a particular point of view, a point of view that can be brought into question just like any other (see Gergen 1991, 134). For example, might not such a person feel at times that there might really be something to that argument in favour of stem-cell research, or that it is incontrovertible that it is wrong to deny certain population groups the right to vote? In considering such questions, the ardent relativist might feel that her own point of view that seemingly denies one taking a sincere stance on such matters is itself flawed in some way, or, at least, that it cannot be held with the same assurance. These doubts and the

subsequent inability to reassert her favoured point of view can thus result in Absurdity, which will be disturbing for the reasons that have been given above.

Holding any point of view, even one that suggests comfort with the idea of points of view being fragile, makes the person vulnerable to experiencing that clashing of viewpoints and the inability to assert one's own viewpoint that results in feelings of Absurdity.

Objection 2: The second objection involves ideas that are similar to those that we have just been addressing, and thus I think the answer has already been suggested. The worry here revolves around the idea that postmodern sensibilities are typically characterised by a sense of cool detachment from the loss of certainty. A central claim is that postmodern people are so comfortable with the idea of viewpoints being contingent or fragile that it would be impossible or, perhaps, unlikely, for them to experience Absurdity at all. As Kvale puts it, "to the existentialists, the discovery of a world without meaning was the point of departure; today a loss of unitary meaning is merely accepted; that is just the way the world is. Postmodern man has stopped waiting for Godot" (Kvale 1990, 25). In the terms of this essay, if Absurdity importantly involves a disturbing recognition that one's own point of view cannot be reasserted, then how could someone who has accepted the fragility of all points of view be affected by Absurdity?

The answer has already been suggested, namely, that the perspective that all points of view are fragile or contingent can itself be brought into question. And one's inability to reassert one's favoured perspective can then result in one experiencing Absurdity. It is one thing to say that one is comfortable with the idea that all points of

view are fragile, and another thing to find oneself doubting whether that point of view can in fact be asserted.

It appears that anyone who subscribes to a particular point of view or set of perspectives thereby makes themselves susceptible to experiencing Absurdity, provided that the circumstances are such that it is difficult for them to reassert their favoured point of view. The circumstances that were identified in this essay were the European post-World War Two loss of faith in Western civilization's ability to furnish us with absolute knowledge, the late nineteenth century undermining of certainty due to social dissatisfaction and intellectual revolutions, and the intense exposure to alternative points of view in the latter half of the twentieth century that has made it difficult for many contemporary people to reassert their favoured perspective in light of the many alternatives.

9. Conclusion.

We have seen, then, that while it is important to locate Absurdity in an appropriate historical context, for feelings of Absurdity will be most widespread during a death of god *zeitgeist*, we are currently living within an historical period that makes the concept of Absurdity relevant. The contemporary death of god *zeitgeist* is the result of the improvement and invention of technologies that expose us to alternative points of view. The result of such exposure is, generally speaking, a loss of confidence in our own perspective when it is brought into relief by an atypical perspective that we have adopted for a moment. This loss of confidence means that we cannot dispel the clash between our

typical and atypical perspective, leaving us in a state of disharmony in which the means by which we have come to understand the world and ourselves is shaken. Part of this experience is a moment in which we also feel ridiculous for so capriciously moving between the typical and atypical perspectives, instead of being able to settle the matter.

What this account has in its favour is its ability to make sense of the underlying structure of the experience of Absurdity, in such a way that it does not exclude any of the major themes and moments of Absurdity that are dealt with by Absurdist artists and intellectuals.

If this account of Absurdity is correct, then it would be incorrect to think of Absurdity as a metaphysical affliction that affects all people simply in virtue of their being human; rather, whether or not one experiences oneself as Absurd depends importantly on one's own state of mind.

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