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The General Theory of Absurdities in Daily Life and Politics

Sceptical and Existential Theories Not to the Point

THERE IS A THEORY ABOUT what answers, in Thomas Nagel's language,¹ to a "philosophical sense of absurdity," a theory that both he and Camus² offer, and that he expresses more clearly, though his conclusions are less helpful than Camus' to the people who might be persuaded by the theory. This is not the theory that I want, arising out of daily life and applicable to absurdities in politics. It is a theory that makes life and every aspect of it absurd; hence it does not discriminate between what in daily life and politics is taken to be absurd and what is not; and it does not invite any action to remedy absurdities in daily life and politics. The theory would not be relevant in these ways even if it were convincing; and it is not convincing, either in Nagel's hands or in Camus'.

Nagel gives some pertinent examples of the absurd that can be discriminated from the not absurd in daily life and politics, which is what I do want a theory about. "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." Nagel takes each case to illustrate a contrast in each case between pretensions and reality, which is at least the beginning of a sugges-

¹ "The Absurd," in Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979) 11–23, reprinted from *Journal of Philosophy* LXVIII, no. 20 (21 October 1971).

² *Le mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942).

tion about the sort of theory I want. However, Nagel does not himself develop this suggestion; and it easily and closely fits only the last of his examples, of the new knight's pants falling down. He goes on from his examples to argue that the same sort of contrast occurs—Stage 1—between anyone's life as ordinarily lived, taken seriously even without any sense of commitment to an overall cause, and "the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt" and—Stage 2—between a life led with a conscious overall commitment, and a perspective in which the perpetual possibility of looking upon everything as arbitrary or doubtful revives even in this connection.

Nagel disavows any reliance on an infinite regress respecting justification, admitting that "justification must stop somewhere." However, with doubtful consistency, he holds that we are inexorably led in either case to "find that the whole system of justification and criticism, which controls our choices and supports our claims to rationality, rests on responses and habits that we never question, that we should not know how to defend without circularity, and to which we shall continue to adhere even after they are called into question."³ Nagel maintains that this finding holds for both Stage 1 and Stage 2; and he maintains that the contrast in both cases, even in Stage 2 ("in which *no* standards can be discovered"—Nagel's emphasis), can be assimilated without trouble to the sort of contrast that comes up with his examples from ordinary life.

However, he doesn't really bother to show how the contrast makes for absurdity in the same way as his original examples. Does it (as they do) even provoke laughter? Why does it make no difference that *no* standards can be found in Stage 2? What are we dealing with in Stage 1 or Stage 2? A finding that is logically inescapable and psychologically unsettling, compelling in just this combination? Maybe the finding is not logically in order at all; in both stages the theorist has extrapolated the form of a practice from contexts in which it makes familiar sense—there is a standard by which something is judged absurd or not absurd—to a context in which the practice cannot be carried out, just because no standard is left operating, or none—a standard for judging standards—was available to begin with. Is the logical inescapability, if it does hold,

³ Nagel, 15.

more than being able to tell a consistent story that cannot be disproved? Then it would be like the inescapability of any of those alternative scientific theories undetermined by any body of evidence, a possibility that looms large in epistemology and the philosophy of science for Quine and his followers. Is it even worrisome? Without bringing in Quine's views, we can tell all sorts of consistent stories that do not require serious attention in science, in daily life, and in politics. The story that we can tell in either Stage 1 or Stage 2 about our pursuits day by day and in our lives can be as consistent as the story that Nagel or Camus would foist upon us, at least so long as we do not raise an epistemologist's question about how every belief is to be justified at once.

As for being psychologically unsettling, Nagel passes over the fact that for many people the conscious overall commitment at issue in Stage 2 will in fact allay any uneasiness about pointlessness in Stage 1. So he doesn't show that the alternative perspective is really compelling in Stage 2; if people wanted an overall remedy for misgivings in Stage 1, do they not get in Stage 2 something designed to give them a remedy? The revived alternative perspective might be just an empty formulaic possibility. And indeed, though Nagel holds that we cannot shake ourselves loose from it, he acknowledges that it leaves our ordinary convictions standing. But Nagel doesn't show that it is compelling even in the case of Stage 1. Consider someone painting a bridge big enough so that she has to begin repainting as soon as one painting is over; or someone doing the gardener's work in the medieval quadrangle of New College, Oxford. Supposedly a visitor once asked, "How do you get such a beautiful lawn?" and was told, "You seed and seed again, weed and weed again, roll from time to time, and keep this up for 600 years." Why shouldn't such persons take substantial satisfaction in what they do and in their lives? She is keeping the bridge up; he is keeping up (even improving) the lawn. Thus even endlessly repetitive tasks can be satisfying; they establish the contrast with complete idleness or with playing a yo-yo first out then in for hours on end; or with unthinking vandalism.

Indeed (though Nagel in his references to Camus takes no account of this point), this judgment fits what Camus suggests very strongly is the lesson to be drawn from Sisyphus: If even Sisyphus can rejoice in having to do what he has to do, in being occupied, why cannot anyone in the world above, within the realm of mortal

cares and the sentiments of ordinary life?⁴ It is there, moreover, that people have to deal with absurdities of the ordinary kind, illustrated by Nagel, but not treated with more than a suggestion of the beginnings of a theory. It is a theory, with its contrast between human pretensions and reality, that will go some distance toward a general philosophical theory of the ordinary (non-philosophical) absurd, but not so far as Camus' somewhat fuller sketch of a theory,⁵ which turns on the thesis that the absurd consists in a comparison or confrontation of one fact with another more or less sharply at odds with it. This overshoots the field of absurdity. I shall develop a theory that the thesis covers, and which even can (I think) be made with some stretching to go at least approximately the same distance over the field as the thesis. In compensation for the need for stretching, my theory will focus more sharply on aspects of the absurd relevant to politics and at the same time easily go farther than Nagel's suggestion about conflicts between pretensions and reality. In particular, the theory will emphasize, as an adequate theory must, and neither Nagel's suggestion nor Camus' anticipates, defeated purposes, of all sorts, pretentious or not, and especially purposes defeated in a collision of purposes—cross-purposes.

One-Purpose Cases of Absurdity; Cases with More than One Purpose

There are examples of absurdity in which no purposes are obvious. But purposes, sometimes even cross-purposes, can often, perhaps always, be found in such examples without indulging in

⁴ *Le mythe de Sisyphe* 165–66. Sisyphus is perfectly aware that what he is doing is infinitely, repetitively, futile. The gods have set him the task as punishment, and where would be the penalty of it, Camus asks, if he were not aware? Though tormented, moreover, Sisyphus takes a certain joy in the task, the joy of having an occupation that engrosses him (that is *sa chose*). Camus would have us understand that Sisyphus illustrates how happiness and the absurd come together; and also however repetitive the doings of an ordinary life may be, it should not be afflicted with the dissatisfaction of pointless regrets; properly regarded, the bent of one's life is a human affair, which is to be judged in human terms (*une affaire d'homme, qui doit être réglée entre les hommes*), and in those terms may be an inexhaustible source of joy. Camus balances as Nagel does not a defiant, freely chosen attachment to ordinary life against the ever-present recognition of its having no ultimate meaning. For Nagel, attachment to ordinary life is just something into which one inevitably relapses.

⁵ Camus, 47–48.

undue contrivance. Consider watching a wall, or the simulacrum on stage of a wall, in which there is a large door, now closed. Behind the wall there are for minutes on end great rumblings as what might be guessed to be a very large and powerful animal moves violently this way and that; then the rumblings cease; there is a pregnant pause; then there emerges through a small door cut into the large one but hitherto invisible—a mouse. Where's the purpose; where, the cross-purposes? But compare this example with Dohannyi's variations for piano and orchestra. The piece begins with a long prelude by the full orchestra, very portentous, and building stage by stage to what we begin to anticipate as a grand climax; then the orchestra stops, and the piano begins, naively, picking out just the melody without the least shading or ornamentation—"Twinkle, twinkle, little star." Here the purposes are not prominent on the face of it, perhaps, but they are easily discovered nevertheless. The composer first presents a build-up to something grand; then switches purposes suddenly and unexpectedly to presenting something entirely trivial. The other example is either to be treated as an example of the same kind, with the purposes ascribed to the circus or zoo impresario or somebody of the sort; or as an instance of "found art," a natural analogue to the circus arrangement.

However, there are other examples in which there is only one obvious purpose and the contrivance required to find another purpose that crosses it up may be reckoned excessive. Someone has a purpose, but the achievement of the purpose is dramatically and unexpectedly defeated. What makes the purpose absurd is an untoward result, which in some instances will consist in the failure of the purpose in the face of an insurmountable obstacle. A better example than Sisyphus in this connection is the simpler one of a tiny boy trying to dislodge a huge boulder. He has just one obvious purpose (and the boulder has none). The failure of the boulder to budge suffices as an untoward result. But suppose a kind, strongly muscled man comes along and with his assistance the boy does move the boulder; it goes over the bank, and falls upon the boy's tricycle, crushing it beyond repair; or it sets off a landslide, which destroys the family home. The defeat—the untoward result—is even more blatant.

In other examples, perhaps only a little contrivance is needed to find more than one purpose. Nagel's example of your pants falling down at the moment when you are being knighted presents

prima facie just one purpose, of maintaining one's dignity on a solemn occasion. But one could bring another purpose into view by pointing out that in dressing that morning one intended to put one's pants on securely. Or consider an example of Bergson's: "A lady whom the astronomer Cassini, had invited to come see an eclipse of the moon ... arrived late." She said, no doubt very prettily, "'M. de Cassini will surely wish to begin again for me'."⁶ The main action here is certainly the collision between the lady's purpose, to have the eclipse visible at a time of her convenience, and the inexorable movements of the Earth and the moon. However, we could bring into the picture the purpose of Cassini to show the lady a natural event at the time of its occurrence.

Cross-Purposes; Contradictions; Quandaries

The general theory perhaps does better notwithstanding to allow without fussing for unreduced cases of only one obvious purpose and yet assert all the while that the cases with cross-purposes are more typical and more important.⁷ This even has a special advantage, in presenting the examples each with one obvious purpose as illustrating the conflict between the purpose and the untoward result (failure—waste motion—at least; or something worse than that) at its simplest. In examples with cross-purposes—a purpose 1 crossed with a purpose 2—what has to be considered is how what results—result 2—from carrying out purpose 2 is an untoward result with respect to purpose 1, in which a very different result, result 1, was intended. Consider the joke about the birthday gift for the boxer. What should he be given for his birthday? Somebody suggests giving him a book; to which the reply is, "He's already got a book." The purpose (purpose 1) here of giving the boxer something that he will take up in his life and enjoy (result 1) would have, if it were carried through, the untoward result (result 2) of giving him something that answers only to the purpose (purpose 2) of giving a birthday gift to a book lover.

⁶ Henri Bergson, *Le Rire: Essai sur la Signification du Comique* [1924] (Geneve: Editions Albert Skira, 1945) 38.

⁷ Or the use of "cross-purposes" could be extended to include cases in which there is just one obvious purpose and it is crossed up. But I am already extending the use of "cross-purposes" when I speak, as I shall, of a single agent being at cross-purposes, that is to say, as between his or her own purposes.

If the general theory of the absurd is to emphasize cross-purposes, as I think it should, then contradictions (or something like contradictions, quandaries) are to be expected in every typical case. Indeed, contradictions (or something like contradictions) are to be expected even in the cases with just one obvious purpose. However, taking up this point precipitately may obscure the fact that some absurdities are not expressed in propositions, or even in language. Many absurdities can be expressed graphically. (In some cases the graphical expression lends itself, like the absurdity, to escalation, a feature, variable in many dimensions, as will be discussed later, of many absurdities.) Having one's pants fall down while being knighted is graphic; and so is Sisyphus, pushing his rock up the hill, having it roll back, and pushing it up again. There are audible parallels to the visually graphic in the Dohannyi variations; and in the celebrated liturgical setting of the BBC national weather report. The example in which the rumblings behind the wall and the emerging mouse figure mixes the visually graphic with the audible. Sometimes there is a graphic incongruity between the end and incapacity on the means side. In the film *Jour de Fête*, a tent is being set up for a carnival and an attempt is being made to drive a tent peg into the ground. You see the peg, the mallet, and the hands wielding the mallet. The mallet comes down again and again, with great force, but first on one side of the peg and then on another. Finally you are given the explanation; the camera travels slowly up the mallet, up the hands and arms, up the throat, up the face of the mallet-wielder. He is cross-eyed.

Are there contradictions at work in these examples of absurdity? In some absurdities, if not in those just described, contradictions are prominent. A friend of mine, when, just after the Second World War, he was first at the Sorbonne pursuing a doctor's degree in philosophy, went to Jean Wahl for an assignment and Wahl told him to write a paper on "l'immaterialisme de Berkeley." But Roland, who had been deafened during paratrooper training, heard the topic as "le materialisme de Berkeley." He thought this was a bizarre idea even for philosophy in France, but who was he to argue with a professor of Wahl's fame and standing? Roland went off and contrived to write a paper demonstrating that Berkeley was a materialist. When he turned it in, Wahl began reading it, and immediately burst out, "But this is crazy! C'est tout à fait fou!" There was a contradiction between the topic that Wahl wanted Roland to

write on, that Berkeley was an immaterialist, and the topic on which Roland labored, that Berkeley was a materialist.

There are contradictions to be found also in examples where they are not so much foregrounded, though perhaps found more readily in some cases than in others. Men or women are to act at least roughly their age; dressing like a teenager, with one's cap put on backwards or in a miniskirt, is not to act one's age; nor is pursuing, or even just seriously flirting with, someone very much younger. The point if any of Sisyphus's endeavors is to get the boulder to the top of the hill and have it stay there; but this does not happen. He is acting in a way that would make sense only if what he is trying to do was within his capacity; but it is not within his capacity, given the way things have been arranged, so it does not make sense to try to do what he is trying to do. (Yet as fate would have it he must, inexorably, go on trying.)

More at Work in Absurdities Than Contradictions or Quandaries

There is something more going on here than contradictions. Contradictions are not necessarily, or even typically absurd in themselves: "The temperature is now over 100 degrees Fahrenheit; and the temperature is not now over 100 degrees Fahrenheit" is a contradiction, but it is not absurd. There is something like a conflict with rules going on in each of my examples; I cheated a little by not using giveaway normative terms like "should" or "ought" and resorting instead to the "is to" construction. "That x is to act his age" is nonetheless a normative expression. Yet there is more going on than a conflict with rules or even a conflict between rules, rendered as a contradiction, or in the latter case as a quandary, the idea of which our book, *Logic on the Track of Social Change*,⁸ puts in place of a contradiction between rules. *Track* reduces all rules to prohibitions; and a quandary results from having all options in a given situation prohibited by one rule or another. A quandary may be far from being absurd, much less absurd and comical, very painful: Shall Antigone obey the laws of her city, or give her brothers a reverent burial? But sometimes a quandary does figure in an absurdity. At Dalhousie University, there used to be on the books, that is to say, printed in the university calendar, a provision for

⁸ David Braybrooke, Peter K. Schotch and Bryson Brown, *Logic on the Track of Social Change* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

majoring in religious studies; but anyone who tried to take it up would have found that if all the applicable rules from other parts of the calendar were heeded, there was no way of benefiting from the provision. Every possible way was ruled out; and anyone who believed that she was bound to major in religious studies would have found herself without even the option of not majoring in it.

Shifts in Perspectives

It may be absurd to disregard a quandary; and it is certainly absurd to try to bring a contradiction into existence—to try to make the temperature of the bath water both over 100 degrees and not over 100 degrees. It is even absurd to try to assert a contradiction as if it made a statement. Here what is operating, however, is not just a contradiction, but cross-purposes, and a shift between perspectives. The agent tries to do incompatible things, one answering in a certain perspective to one purpose and the second in a second perspective to another.

Consider two examples which *The Funny Times*⁹ claims to have been actual exchanges in court: First, “Q: Did you see him bite off the plaintiff’s ear? A: Nope, your honor, but I did see him spit it out.” Second, “Q: Mr. Gonzalez, where do you live? A: Mexia, Texas. Q: Have you lived in Mexia all your life? A: Not yet.” These examples show that it is expectations linked to purposes, rather than the superficial logic, that generate the absurdities; or perhaps one should say that it is the expectations and purposes—here, cross-purposes—that determine the logic by which the performances are absurd. The examples also present shifts in perspectives. Gonzalez’s answer, “Not yet” to the question, “Have you lived all your life in Mexia?” does not fit into one perspective, established by the ordinary presupposition of the question, that it is his life until the present that is at issue, though it fits into a perspective taking his life as a whole. (The question makes a sort of sense in the latter perspective; but it cannot be answered until Gonzalez has finished his life; and Gonzalez will not be able to answer it even then. The difference is an instance of one that Arthur Danto makes much of in his *Analytical Philosophy of History*.¹⁰) The answer about seeing the defendant spit out the plaintiff’s ear does

⁹ December 1999, 20.

¹⁰ Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1965.

not fit the perspective literally presupposed by the question about seeing the ear bit off; it does fit the perspective of another question (not easy to formulate) that seeks conclusive observational testimony regarding the defendant's action. The joke about the boxer's birthday gift also exhibits a shift between perspectives. What should he get for his birthday? The usual perspective is one in which the gift of a book is intended to add variety to a collection (so that a relevant objection is that the book is already in the collection); the perspective suddenly introduced is one in which the book is treated just as an object of one sort contrasted with others, an *étagère*, perhaps, a cell phone, a guitar.

Not All Shifts in Perspectives Reversible

In some cases, absurdity may result from following the shift in either direction. But in respect to generating absurdity, not all shifts are reversible. When they are, they may be reversible only for different audiences. In the perspective of orthodox Christian belief, the carelessness with which unbelievers treat their prospects, heavenly or hellish, of eternal life, may seem, as it did to Pascal, absurd to the point of being incomprehensible.¹¹ In the perspective of disbelief, as Pascal comes close to recognizing when he concedes, in setting up his wager,¹² that unbelievers have something to lose—if it is only finite, it may be all that they ever will have—what is absurd is the sacrifice of the pleasures of this world—masturbation, fornication, orgies, et cetera—to minute restrictions of the kind set forth in *Deuteronomy* and *Leviticus* by overwrought desert fantasists in the ancient Near East. It is harder to find an instance of reversibility in which one and the same audience figures, but perhaps this will work: Assume that phonics and the whole-word approach are the alternatives in teaching children to read. The same public, adopting one perspective, may find it absurd that a rigid instance on phonics has the consequence of slowing down the children's reading as they pick apart each work syllable by syllable and letter by letter; adopting another perspective, it may find it absurd that a rigid instance on the whole word approach leaves the children unable to spell and to some degree helpless in dealing with new words.

¹¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Louis Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, 1963) Section II, Papiers Non Classés, Série III (552–55).

¹² Pascal, Section II, Série II (550–51).

In the irreversible cases, which I think include all my other examples, one perspective is clearly the right one. The boxer is not going to transform into a book lover; the Earth and the moon are not going to do M. de Cassini's bidding, much as he may wish to please. There may be some absurdity in the survival of the practice of knighting, as compared with according honors more appropriate to roles in modern society. However, one can hardly think of the knighting in the normal case as an attempt at comedy that would go absurdly wrong if the pants stayed up. These examples tell us, furthermore, something about how to identify which is the right perspective, when there is, with irreversibility of perspective, a right perspective. The right perspective is the one that gives due weight to what is irreversible. In these examples, it is facts that are not going to change. The purposes that the agents in question have or that they might be supposed to entertain on the one hand accord in a sensible way with the facts and on the other hand absurdly disregard them.

In some cases, the basis for identifying the right perspective may be an irreversible prudential or moral difference between purposes. It would not be life-maintaining or prudent to drink a bucket of paint; and refraining from doing so cannot be made out to be equally imprudent, and equally absurd. It would perhaps not be contrary to reason, in a narrow sense confined to truths about the formal relations of ideas, "to prefer the destruction of the whole world [or, short of that, the extinction of millions of people's lives at risk from floods in India or China] to the scratching of my finger."¹³ But, as Hume would be the first to insist, it would fly in the face of correct moral judgment. (He was making in that famous passage a point about the limits of reason in a narrow sense, not a point about what is morally tolerable.) Submitting to having one's finger scratched, or even doing something considerably more substantial toward saving those people in India and China could not be made out to be so obviously morally wrong and absurd.

Variations in the Magnitude of Absurdities

Absurdities vary in magnitude. This turns out to be a complicated subject, since there are a number of dimensions of variation. Some of them do not operate in all absurdities. For that reason and

¹³ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) Book II, Part III, Sect.III.

others, one should be sceptical about there being one homogeneous phenomenon called “absurdity,” any more than (Bentham’s too facile assumption) there is one homogeneous phenomenon called “pleasure.” Nevertheless, there are at least a collection of phenomena that resemble one another in among other things being many of them subject to similar variations in magnitude.¹⁴

(a) Disregarding the Probability of Failure

The observer’s point of view is decisive for appreciating how unexpected an absurdity is. The more probable it is that an agent’s purpose will have an untoward result the greater the absurdity of his trying to carry out the purpose. Consider the old story of an errant husband coming home in the middle of the night, taking his shoes off, and trying to sneak up the stairs without waking up his wife. Suppose he has done this a hundred times and none of the treads has creaked under his step. This time, however, the third tread going upstairs creaks loudly. That is unexpected, and being unexpected brings it sharply to the observer’s attention (as well as to the agent’s), but if it is absurd it is because of the discrepancy between the agent’s intended result and the untoward result that occurred. The observer would not, however, have thought it absurd for the agent to try, given the reasonable expectation, which the observer would share with the agent, that this time again, as on a hundred occasions in the past, the purpose would succeed. But suppose from now on the third tread creaks every time. If the agent persists regardless, in spite of the increased probability of the creaking, he will be running sharply counter to the observer’s reasonable expectations, and the absurdity of what he is doing or trying to do will be greater for that reason. The observer’s point of view is decisive for establishing the absurdity.

(b) Lesser or Greater Untowardness

Variation in the dimension just mentioned may occur with more spectacularly untoward results: It may begin to happen, time after time, that it is not just the third tread creaking; the whole staircase collapses, or even more discomfiting, the house falls down

¹⁴ I originally thought that I was inquiring into the absurd rather than into absurdities. But the comparison with Bentham led to using the plural, with the present caution.

with it. The wife will surely wake up then! But acting counter to the observer's reasonable expectation that the agent, when he has grounds to apprehend such results, will avoid having them happen is quite different from having one result more spectacularly untoward than another. The probabilities of the tread's creaking, the staircase's collapsing, the house's falling down, may all be much the same, and all so high that the observer will reasonably expect the agent to avoid such results. Of course, there is respectively a bigger and much bigger discrepancy between having the staircase collapse or the house fall down and the agent's purpose of coming to bed quietly. Variation of this sort is distinct from other sorts; but it may contribute to the observer's sense of absurdity, since it is more amazing and much more amazing for the agent to act without regard to what is from his own point of view a more spectacularly and a much more spectacularly untoward result.

(c) Threshold Discrepancies Between Means and Ends

In many cases of absurdity an overt conflict may occur between adopting an end and adopting an inappropriate means to that end, to which can easily be assimilated the lack of the appropriate skill or human capacity. The inappropriateness of the means is another variable feature, found in some absurdities, which is subject to variation and hence escalation. It must come up to a certain threshold to be absurd at all; perhaps using a book to drive in a nail crosses the threshold; but to use a cooked noodle is even more inappropriate, and hence more absurd. The boxer might be given, not a book, but a lady's handbag; the man assigned to drive the tent peg in might be, not just crosseyed, but blind, or too frail to lift the mallet. Kenneth Koch, an American poet close to being exactly contemporary with me, says,

To lack a woman, to not have one, and to be longing for one
That is the worst thing in life, but nowhere near the best is to have one
And not know what to do.¹⁵

That lack of capacity, too, is subject to variation; or at least in my generation, when it was not uncommon for a man to emerge from

¹⁵ Kenneth Koch, *The Art of Love* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975) 73.

the teenage years without acquiring any useful experience in dealing sexually with women.¹⁶

In some absurdities, the means-ends relation is not realized at all in the contrast between purposes. In the case, offered by Samuel Beckett, of holding a conversation with the furniture, it is the end chosen, of communicating with the furniture, that is absurd, not the means chosen, if it ranks as a means, of speaking. The man, so youthfully dressed, does not use inappropriate means so much as have an inappropriate goal; there is no means by which he can make himself over as a teenager. Does the flirtatious old person use inappropriate means? He or she has a goal to which no means at their command are appropriate.

Yet in many cases, even when it is not overt, the full means-ends relation does insinuate its way back onto the scene; at least it does with a shift in perspective. If the elderly man is taken to be clothing his nakedness to be warm and respectable, the goal is reasonable, but the means is inappropriate; if the elderly person is seeking, reasonably enough, to make of someone a source of affection, the appropriate source would be a person of his or her own age. Even the person trying to hold a conversation with the furniture may have a story to tell that he needs to tell, and have appreciated, though he would have done better to unburden himself to a more sympathetic listener.

(d) Appropriate Means Used to Excess

Means and capacity may vary in quantity and technological sophistication. Sometimes, in greater quantity or power, even though they were ineffective to begin with, they snatch success from the jaws of failure; and success turns out to be something that no lesser quantity could have achieved. Then there is no absurdity. But if, above a certain threshold, they are larger or much larger than necessary, their application may be overkill, and absurd in the way using the proverbial sledgehammer to crack a nut is absurd. Further escalation is possible, and bringing to bear even more powerful means, perhaps one of those machines that reduce scrapped automobiles to bundles of metal, is more absurd.

¹⁶ I put in this qualification about the difference between generations because I tried the lines from Koch out on my youngest daughter Linda and she did not find them very funny.

(e) Inappropriate Means Used to Excess

A very different sort of escalation, though it is also founded on a variation in the quantity and power of the means deployed, comes into play, if the means is inappropriate to begin with, coming up to the threshold of absurdity as using a book to drive in a nail would do (and a metal file would not). If to begin with, at the threshold or above, they are counterindicated in respect to any amount of use, then it is at least waste motion to use them, and greater waste motion if they are increased in quantity and power. The untoward result, maybe the persistence of a disease for which massage is an ineffective treatment, stands. It may be worse than waste motion: Using the means in question may be counterproductive, and the more so, the greater the quantity or power of the means is applied. An aspirin a day may after a year's time induce a perforated stomach ulcer; five aspirins a day would induce a bigger one, more quickly. The untoward result becomes more spectacularly untoward, and hence more absurd (though not very funny even so). The untowardness—the discrepancy between what the agent's purpose aims at and the result—is, of course, essential to the absurdity, but here it is increased as an effect of an increase in the quantity or power of the means used, which is a dimension of variation not found in all cases of absurdity. The affront to the observer's reasonable expectations about what the agent will do also increases with the increase in the untowardness, which is another effect of the increase here in the inappropriate means, and thus another contribution to the combined absurdity.

(f) Variation in the Stake at Issue

Gonzalez and the witness in the other case offer testimony that sharply overturns expectations. But what is at stake in the large perspective of world history is a rather small thing, even if it is a defendant's life or freedom, and even less is at stake with the birthday gift for the boxer. In other cases, the stake is large. It would have been absurd, Maistre says, for the little republic of Ragusa to declare war on the Sultan, even for the city of Geneva to declare war on the King of France.¹⁷ And it is absurd because what

¹⁷ Joseph de Maistre, *The Saint Petersburg Dialogues*, Seventh Dialogue. Maistre is preparing the way for his thesis that unless the discrepancy in forces is absurdly great, it is morale rather than numbers that determine victory.

Ragusa would be so absurdly disregarding is the risk that it would be running of disaster to thousands of its own citizens. Still another dimension of variation, and hence of escalation comes on the scene with this consideration. Imagine a government making decisions that obstruct the practice of safe sex; the consequences may be tens of thousands of avoidable cases of AIDS. This again is a stark case of an absurdity that is not at bottom laughable.

Some Absurdities Capable of Escalation, Some Not

Some absurdities, whether or not they have escalated already, are capable of further escalation, in any of the dimensions in which their magnitude as absurdities may vary. This is true, as I have already pointed out, taking the dimensions so far treated one by one, in most of my examples. But some absurdities have already, as it were, escalated to the limit, like the courtroom cases about Gonzalez's testimony and the plaintiff's ear.

Immediate or Gradual Emergence of a Given Magnitude

Sometimes the magnitude of an absurdity in any of the dimensions (or in the multiplication of dimensions) arises immediately and sharply in the given instance. But at other times it emerges gradually. This is not a variation in the magnitude of the absurdity, I think, that is to say, we would not rate something more absurd, once it had presented itself, and then were told that it came quickly or was a long time in coming. Yet it is a variation of some importance, since if the magnitude of an absurdity develops gradually in any dimension, that softens the impact of an absurdity of any given magnitude and assists in inuring people to its presence. What the automobile has done to the possibilities of walking in towns and cities—even to the possibility of holding a conversation on the sidewalk—would have had more impact in the way of being felt intolerable and absurd if it had come in overnight.

Single Agent Cases of Absurdity (Personal or Collective) v. True Multiple-Agent Cases

A government is a collective agent, but like a person, a single agent nevertheless; and in applications of the general theory of the absurd, one, like me, might be more concerned with single-agent cases, personal or collective, than with true multiple-agent cases. But I should say something about multiple-agent cases, both

for the completeness of the theory and because there at last we come upon the ordinary, non-extended use of “cross-purposes.” A simple example can be found in the cross-purposes with which one person tries to get past another going to the left while the other person tries to get past going to the right. We feel that it is absurd because though it is so familiar and so easy to remedy, we do not give up our cross-purposes right away. Le professeur Wahl and my friend Roland were at cross-purposes, Wahl having the purpose of having Roland write an essay on Berkeley’s immaterialism, and Roland having the purpose of writing an essay on Berkeley’s materialism. As I was writing this, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation supplied another multi-agent example in the radio news. A man in Walkerton, Ontario, was complaining about the slowness with which water pipes in the town were being flushed clean to get rid of *E. coli*, which had caused death and sickness in Walkerton late in the spring some months before. According to the man, “They say they’re on schedule, but they keep changing the schedule.” There’s one purpose, having established a reasonable schedule, to keep it, on which both the residents and the team doing the flushing seem to agree. The team has another purpose, of keeping the residents patient, and to do this in respect to appearing to keep to schedule, they change the schedule from time to time. But this sets at naught the purpose of keeping to the schedule initially defined.

In single-agent cases, there is normally no need to make any special assumption about a common purpose, or perhaps it could be said that the assumption is automatically made when one person with normal psychological unity is brought into view. With normal psychological unity, the agent will have some concern to behave consistently, even if she does not go all the way in seeking to maximizing utility. In multiple-agent cases, the assumption calls for some explicit attention. Roland could have written an essay on Berkeley’s materialism; and Wahl could have assigned somebody the task of writing an essay on Berkeley’s immaterialism. These purposes, though they conflict in a way, can be pursued at the same time. What put Roland and Wahl at cross-purposes was their having a common purpose: to have an academic task completed, in which Wahl assigned the topic of an essay and Roland wrote on the topic. In both the court cases, the lawyers and the witnesses have the common purpose of having the witnesses testify in response to the lawyers’ questions. They are at cross-purposes just

because they have this common purpose. Similarly, in Walkerton, Ontario, the man complaining and the workers flushing out the water pipes have a common purpose of having the town's water supply restored to a safe condition.

Effectiveness of Remedies When Present; Delay in Attention to Them—Two Further Dimensions of Magnitude

Absurdities happen and once they happen they cannot be undone. They need not in most cases be repeated or continued, however. Gonzalez's interrogator can put another question—"Have you lived all your life so far in Mexia?" The interrogator in the other case can (with some effort) find a question about conclusive observational evidence for which the witness's testimony that he saw the defendant spit out the plaintiff's ear would count as an appropriate answer. Those are cases in which the situation is reconstructed and an original purpose pursued more carefully. In other cases, repetition or continuance can be avoided, and in that sense remedied, by abandoning a purpose: The lady will not again ask M. de Cassini for the astronomically infeasible; the person trying to hold a conversation with the furniture will turn to a more responsive audience. Or, as a feature of a compromise, a purpose will no longer be pursued seriously. In a compromise over approaches to teaching reading, both parties can win substantial achievement in a compromise that combines the phonics approach with the whole word approach. A compromise is not always necessary: A remedy can be produced that admits of fully accomplishing both (all) the purposes in conflict. Increase the national income, and tax cuts become feasible at the same time as relief of poverty with a guaranteed annual income.

But not every absurdity has a remedy; some will repeat or continue regardless of what people do. Sisyphus's troubles, to be sure, would be at an end if he could walk away from his rock and the hill; but the gods will not let him. In this world, under the sun, there are many bureaucrats who are compelled to enforce regulations that have absurd results. Under the mandatory sentencing provisions of the "three strikes and you're out" laws, a judge may have to put a prisoner away for life who has driven someone else's car around the block—it was the prisoner's third offence. To leap to the other end of the scale in stake for human consequences, it is absurd for the human race to be in the position, as a result of

human actions, of being able to destroy the race and make the world uninhabitable; but this capacity in some sense, if not in actual armaments, then in knowing how to make them, will inevitably continue. So will the all too likely prospect of overpopulation, a prospect ever capable of reviving even if birth rates go down for the time being.

Nevertheless, it heightens an absurdity if it is allowed to persist though an effective remedy is at hand. Something effective can be done, if not to eliminate the capacity to destroy the inhabited world, at least to prevent the destruction's happening; something effective, if not to eliminate the capacity for overpopulation, at least to bring the increase in human numbers under control. So there is yet another dimension of variation: The longer an absurdity is repeated or continued, when an effective remedy is at hand, the greater is the absurdity. Postponing effective international arms control increases the absurdity; so does postponing effective measures to limit population. The proliferation of firearms in the United States and the War on Drugs with the attendant soaring rate of imprisonment, the two absurdities that set me off in the quest for an applicable theory of absurdities, are not so grand as international arms control or limiting world population. They are grand enough, however.¹⁸

¹⁸ More or less visible in the text of this paper are ideas that I gratefully picked up in discussions at Dalhousie from Nathan Brett, Scott Edgar, Duncan MacIntosh, Sue Sherwin and Michael Watkins; and at Texas from Benjamin Gregg.