

Absurdity, Faith, and the Meaningful Narrative of Life

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Received: 01 April 2022 / Accepted: 15 May 2023

Abstract

Absurdity is a crucial philosophical problem that has widespread social consequences. In this paper, I discuss three accounts of absurdity: Purposelessness of the world, lack of reasonability and seriousness, and failure and boredom. I suggest that, to discuss absurdity, one should look at the question of meaning in life as the question of narrative of life. Narratives are the way to make life intelligible and understandable. However, contradictory narratives of meaningful life necessitate criteria for evaluating different narratives. I take a step toward such criteria that covers both subjective and objective aspects of truth to evaluate narratives. To do so, I try to make a connection between Narrative and Understanding. Moreover, the theoretical and practical reasoning establish a ground to evaluate narratives. I argue that based on the criteria, one can prefer a meaningful narrative of life. One of the important resources for meaningful narrative is religious faith. Faith can introduce new realities as well as new interpretations of different aspects of life and hence help to develop a meaningful narrative of life.

Keywords: Meaning in life, faith, narrative, absurdity, truth.

The question of meaning of life underlies many other questions. Different answers were presented to the question by theologians, philosophers, novelists, among others, and made a variety of views. One of the widespread views in current literature is absurdity of life. In this paper, I want to re-visit the problem of absurdity and read it as a narrative of life; a narrative among others. Then I try to present criteria to evaluate different narratives and show that one can avoid absurdity. One of the helpful resources in this regard is religious faith.

The Problem of Absurdity

Absurdity haunts modern people in a variety of ways. It has been at the center of philosophical contemplations and some of the philosophers articulated different aspects and the origins of the absurdity. As Camus elaborates, the first question of philosophy is about human life:

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There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest - whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories - comes afterwards. (Camus 1979, 11)

Does life have a meaning at all? Is it purposeless, meaningless, and absurd? This fundamental question is discussed from different points of view. Some advocated the absurdity of life. In what follows, I want to explore the diverse accounts of absurdity.²

Purposelessness of the World

The traditional view depicts the world as a whole that consists of uncountable parts. In this image, every entity is striving to attain its own goal, and in fact, all entities can be studied in terms of their goals. This view is well-presented in Aristotelian philosophy. Besides other causes, Aristotle introduces the final cause that shows the ultimate goal of a being and its end that tends to achieve it.

The idea of the final goal for the world is a predominant image in religious literature. From a religious point of view, the whole universe moves toward a certain end and that end is designated by God. According to this idea, God has a plan for the world and taking part in this plan can help us to have a meaningful life (Levy 2015, 330; Metz 2019, 10). This supposes that the universe is created by God and is running according to a plan. On this perspective, life is meaningful and the universe is purposeful.

One important account of absurdity is based on scientific discoveries. It explores a wide range of discoveries and concludes that the world is not—as we previously supposed—purposeful. The world is basically matter and energy that transforms into different forms and this transformation does not have any purpose. The mechanism of nature is based on evolution and evolution is blind. It has no goal and purpose. Hence, unlike the Aristotelian view, modern science does not study the final cause but focuses on what the universe is made of and how it works.

According to Stace, the new scientific understanding of the universe "killed religion" not because religion cannot accept new scientific discoveries as religion can adapt them by presenting new religious interpretations, but because there is something unprecedentedly unique about new discoveries that make it unacceptable to religion. The new discoveries depict the universe as a purposeless and meaningless place. This notion is not compatible with religious views and no religion, ancient or new, can accept that the universe is some haphazard, aimless and purposeless place. The crucial point, as Stace argues, is that the purposelessness of the universe entails the purposelessness and meaninglessness of human life (Stace 1967).

2. We have discussed three accounts of absurdity in Sohrabifar and Fanaei (2022, 9-16).

Reasonability and Seriousness

Another account of the absurdity of life concentrates on the way one sees one's life. What matters in one's life? What is important and how can one realize its significance? Leading a human life, one has to make many decisions each day and each decision is based on some grounds of values and principles. Where do these values and principles come from?

Many of us would argue that such values and principles come from a reasonable argument. I think and try to rest my actions on a rational basis. This makes my life serious and I can dedicate a considerable part of my life to certain values and principles. I can serve twenty years of my life as a teacher in a charity center because I believe that it is a good action based on my values. I take this service very seriously and it takes lots of effort to fulfill it.

However, some argue that life is absurd because there is not such seriousness, and all rational grounds that we present for our values and principles are rational only from our own perspective. On this account, "what seems to us important or serious or valuable would not seem so if we were differently constituted" (Nagel 1971, 722).

Nagel argues that we take our life seriously and live according to some principles but at the same time it is possible to take a step back and see that the whole life is arbitrary and our serious principles are serious just from our human point of view. We can doubt them if we look at them otherwise. The absurdity of life, in his view, comes from this situation that "we ignore the doubts that we know cannot be settled, continuing to live with nearly undiminished seriousness in spite of them" (Nagel 1971, 719). We should take life seriously while we know that there is no ground for seriousness. This is what makes life absurd.³

The idea that the universe does not support goodness and it is completely indifferent about our values can be traced back to philosophers like Nietzsche: "Skepticism regarding morality is what is decisive. The end of the moral interpretation of the world, which no longer has any sanction after it has tried to escape into some beyond, leads to nihilism. 'Everything lacks meaning'" (Nietzsche 1968, 7).

According to Nietzsche, after the death of God, values are not objective and universal but they vary from time to time. They are constructed by power and that is what makes life meaningful: "There is nothing to life that has value, except the degree of power" (Nietzsche 1968, 37). Unlike Nagel, Nietzsche thinks that there is a way to live life meaningful and that is "a Revaluation of all Values."

They both share the idea that human values are not objective and universal but it is constructed by human reason/power and according to certain circumstances. However, Nagel concludes that life is absurd while Nietzsche suggests creating new values.

3. For a critical study about Nagel's view on absurdity, see Sohrabifar 2023.

Failure and Boredom

The unbridgeable gap between human desires and the undesirable world causes another reason for the absurdity of life. Humans wish for various goals and try to achieve them but life does not always respond accordingly to those wishes. The problem is not just the occasional failures. On this account of absurdity, the human life is set for failure. Our life is designed (if there is a designer) to fail, for the fact that we never can achieve ideal life and all of our efforts are doomed to failure.

The disparity between what one wants and what one actually has is a key element in the ideas of thinkers of absurdity. Camus believes "the absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus 1979, 31-32). In his view, the human efforts, ideals, and all of his enthusiasm will face the cold and indifferent reality of the world and this makes life absurd.

The pain is not confined to the failure, obviously we overcome the problems in some cases and reach the desired goals. However, there is still some pain. According to Schopenhauer even when we reach the desired goals, there is another aspect of pain and that is boredom:

The basis of all willing, however, is need, lack, and hence pain, and by its very nature and origin it is therefore destined to pain. If, on the other hand, it lacks objects of willing, because it is at once deprived of them again by too easy a satisfaction, a fearful emptiness and boredom come over it; in other words, its being and its existence itself become an intolerable burden for it. Hence its life swings like a pendulum to and fro between pain and boredom, and these two are in fact its ultimate constituents. This has been expressed very quaintly by saying that, after man had placed all pains and torments in hell, there was nothing left for heaven but boredom (Schopenhauer 1969, 312).

On this perspective, endless pain predominantly exists in human life and hence it can be a good example of the absurdity of life -the gap between the desired world and the actual world. While Schopenhauer suggests stopping willing to avoid the pain, Camus proposes the rebellion against life.

Narrative and Meaning in Life

Narratives shape the human world. Our thoughts, attitudes, feelings, and acts are deeply rooted in the way that we see and narrate the world. As Abbott asserts, "Meaning and narrative understanding are very closely connected" (Abbott 2002, 11). Humans do not have any image of the world and themselves unless they depict it within a narrative. In other words, it is the narrative that helps us realize who we are and what life is (Abbott 2002, 3).

Considering the importance of the narrative, we need to shed some light on the question of meaning in life. Meaning in life is not a subject for proofs and arguments.

Meaning in life should be discussed in light of narratology. On this picture, even the arguments are part of what makes a narration. This also can be seen in the different accounts of the absurdity.

Many philosophers have argued that our understanding of the world is not necessarily the reality as it is but it just the way that we perceive it. For example the *picture* (Wittgenstein 2009), the *take* (Taylor 2007), and the *religious ambiguity of the universe* (Hick 1989). All of them emphasize the role of the medium in knowing the world. In the question of meaning in life, the narrative is the medium.

Narrative as a way that can depict a picture of us and shape our identity plays a crucial role here. Narrative unifies the scattered pieces of life into one, more or less, intelligible story. It represents various events in a connected and coherent story and hence makes them understandable. Studying narrative can help us realize how we understand the world and ourselves. It can help us to see how we find life meaningful or absurd.

To see the importance of narrative in the question of meaning in life, it is helpful to look at the features of narrative. As De Bres collected, narratives have three main features:

1. Selective: Narrative concentrates on certain people, events, settings, and selects them while there are others as well.
2. Unifying: Narrative turns scattered pieces and details into a coherent and comprehensive whole and it uses casual and analogical connections to relate them.
3. Isomorphic: Narratives incline to follow some fundamental patterns that are shared with other stories. (De Bres 2017, 12-13)

These features help to select different parts of life and generate one intelligible and comprehensible narrative about life.

Different views are presented about the narrative approach to meaning in life. For example, *strong narrativity* considers narratives necessary for deliberation or selfhood, and *weak narrativity* regards narration as supplementary (Westlund 2011, 393). Another example is maximum and minimum views about narrative. Some narrativists believe that all meaning in life is based on narrative and some believe that only a part of the meaning is dependent on narrative (De Bres 2017, 4).

Some thinkers, however, disagree and believe that "Narrativity is neither necessary nor sufficient for meaning—meaning in life" (Strawson 2022, 84). Strawson believes that not only human beings are not narrative beings but also we should not lead narrative lives. He elaborates on these two descriptive and normative aspects in his article (Strawson 2004).

Besides the debate about the extent to which narrative can influence the meaning in life, some theories explain how narrative shapes the meaning in life. In what follows, I want to mention two cases: *progressive relationalism* and *recountims*.

According to progressive relationalism, meaning in life is not just dependent on the story of our lives but is rooted in the "objective narratable relations that obtain

between the events that constitute our lives" (Kauppinen 2015, 197). In other words, our lives are constituted of several events, one can find different relations among these events and make a story about those relations. According to Kauppinen, These relations can establish a progressive shape to life as a whole and make it meaningful. So, it is not narrative but the progressive narrated relations that can make a meaningful life.

What makes events worthy of being narrated? According to him, there are three factors: "their positive or negative causal contribution to the agent's present or future goals, the value of those goals, and the degree to which success in achieving the goal is deserved in virtue of exercising agential capacities" (Kauppinen 2015, 197). These factors qualify certain events to shape relations and those relations confer meaning.

On the other hand, some disagree with Kauppinen and argue that it is not the relations but the narrative itself that can confer meaning. According to Recountisms, relations can only pave the way but at the end this is the story that we tell about ourselves that make us who we are and "Telling a certain kind of story about one's life contributes to the meaningfulness of that life" (De Bres 2017, 7). Moreover, one can see that there are people who do not seek any "progress" in their lives and still we find their lives meaningful, for example monks and nuns who do not lead goal-oriented lives (De Bres 2017, 9).

De Bres presents a new variant of Recountism: fitting story. According to her,

Telling a story about one's life that is (i) true and (ii) adheres to a set of (salient) narrative conventions, contributes to the meaningfulness of one's life. It does so by making the life more intelligible to oneself and others, thereby enabling the goods of understanding and community. (De Bres, 2017, p. 18).

On the one hand, she tries to avoid *progressive relationalism* where the narrative does not play a crucial role in building a meaningful life and on the other hand, tries to emphasize the importance of truth in narrative which is neglected in some variants of Recountism (e.g. Agency-Recountism).

Absurdity and Narrativity

Now let me go back to the absurdist view. All of the above-mentioned accounts of absurdity- even though grounded on some arguments- develop a narrative about the meaning in life. When Stace discusses the purposelessness of the world, he presents a narrative about the world that makes it impossible to have a universal and comprehensive image of the meaning of life. He refers to some scientific discoveries to support his narrative and establish a base for his view, where he believes that in a purposeless world, no religion can survive and no universal theory of the meaning of life can proceed. Hence, he adds, we have to avoid the great illusion that the universe has a purpose and our lives can be meaningful in light of that purpose (Stace 1967, 8).

Nagel presents a narrative of life. In his story, life does not have any reasonable ground and if we step back from our human life, all of the important affairs will appear to be unimportant. All of our deep concerns and feelings will fade if we look at them from an unhuman point of view. If we lose the ground of reasonability, then it will be difficult (if not impossible) to save the seriousness of life. Thus, he concludes, that life is absurd but it should not lead to suicide. We have to live in a less serious and more ironic style.

The same is true about Camus and others like Schopenhauer who emphasize the unbridgeable gap between the desired world and the existing world. The gap is the cause of absurdity in their view, and failure and boredom are important part of human life.

Faith and Meaningful Narrative of Life

However, all of these stories can be narrated in other ways. Life fails to have seriousness in itself. It may lead to absurdity and despair. However, as Kierkegaard argues, this is a promising point to realize that the seriousness of life has to come from a source beyond life. We need an authority that has the perfect knowledge about humans and the world and sets the best goal and mission for human life. To actualize themselves, human beings have no way other than God (Kierkegaard 1980, 29-30). On this account, humans are always testing and they lack a solid and trustworthy way of life. They need a certain goal that deserves to dedicate their lives to, but the divine command can solve the problem and make life serious and meaningful again.⁴

The same can be observed about the failure account of absurdity. The idea that there is a gap between our desires and the way that the world exists, can be seen from different viewpoints. One can see it within the story of absurdity -as Camus did- and another can take it as a sign that we need God because "with God everything is possible" (Kierkegaard 1980, 38) and with God's will, the gap will be fulfilled in a place called Paradise. It depends on how we see and narrate life. Accordingly, there is always an alternative narrative.

Similarly, regarding the narrative of Stace, we can see the alternative narrative that depicts the general image of the universe to be purposeful and expand the domain of reality to hereafter where the real ends exist. It can highlight the limitations of human faculties and respond that, with our little knowledge about whole universe, we are not in position to declare the purposelessness of the world.

Faith is a significant resource for a meaningful narrative of life. While some believe that natural values or purposes are sufficient for a meaningful life, others consider supernatural values or purposes necessary for a meaningful life (Metz 2013). This makes a wide range of views on meaningful narratives of life.

4. For more detail about the view of Nagel and Kierkegaard on seriousness of life see: (Sohrabifar, 2023)

Does natural meaning for life really work? What is the religious point of view here? I do not aim to answer these questions but I would like to mention that even the supernatural view can be interpreted in two ways:

1. Life is only meaningful based on supernatural values/purposes.
2. Meaning in life can be seen at different levels, and while the highest level is only achievable through supernatural values/purposes, there is meaning at the natural level (although it is considered to be incomplete).

I prefer the second interpretation that recognizes the possibility of meaning in a natural sense and invites for a higher meaning in supernatural terms.

Although meaning in life can be achieved at different levels, religious teaching can help especially. Religion offers a narrative of life that has some key elements and those elements change the whole picture. In other words, our understanding of life depends on what we perceive and how we interpret them, and while the absurdist narrative has some elements to represent life as purposeless and meaningless, religious narrative, on the other hand, has some different elements that reflect the life as meaningful.

To understand these elements, Hick's imaginary example is helpful:

I am in a strange building, and walking by mistake into a large room I find that a militant secret society is meeting there. Many of the members are armed, and as they take me for a fellow member I think it expedient to acquiesce in the role. Plans are being discussed for the violent overthrow of the constitution. The whole situation is alarming in the extreme. Its meaning for me is such that I am extremely apprehensive. Then I suddenly become aware in the dim light above us of a gallery in which there are silently operating cameras, and I realize that I have walked by accident onto the set of a film. This realization consists in a changed awareness of my immediate situation. Until now I had automatically experienced it as 'real life' and as demanding considerable circumspection on my part. Now I experience it as having a quite different significance. But at ground level there is no change in the course of events; the meeting of the secret society proceeds just as before. However my new awareness of the more comprehensive situation alters my experience of the more immediate one. It now has a new meaning for me such that I am in a very different dispositional state in relation to it. (Hick 2004, 56)

New elements in our perception can change the meaning of the whole scene. Religion, more or less, does the same thing to our understanding of life. It adds some new elements and opens windows to new realities and hence changes the status of the meaning of life.

It highlights the inner part of human beings and emphasizes needs that do not properly fulfill in the natural approach. It stresses the spiritual dimension of human beings and responds to the need of going beyond the material world. It helps to

flourish the spiritual capacities and also depicts the world in a way that humans have immortal life and this belief lends a helping hand to people to cope with sufferings and experience life meaningfully.

Another element that religion adds to life is what Hick calls "cosmic optimism". In his view, all the great religions share this good news that the end of the world will be desirable and humans will be in a better position and will be saved, delivered, or awakened. Hence, we should be happy to be a part of this great plan. He adds:

I mean by the cosmic optimism of the world faiths then, that in each case, if their conception of the nature of the universe is basically correct, we can be glad to be part of it and can rejoice in and be thankful for our present human existence. For the meaning of life is such that we can have an ultimate trust and confidence, even – at least in principle – in life's darkest moments of suffering and sorrow. (Hick 2004, 58)

He tries to show that cosmic optimism exists in all the great religions and they all share a positive view about nature and the end of this world. They also depict a promising image about a human being where he can move from an undesirable situation toward a desired status (Hick 2004, 58). Hope Walker also believes that religions (especially theistic religions) offer elements that make life meaningful and non-religious worldviews are deprived of. These include elements such as "goodwill wins out over evil," "God loves and cares for us," "cosmic justice reigns in the universe," "all persons are of equal worth," "there is life after death," "grace and forgiveness—a happy end for all" (Hope Walker 2006). In this way, religion attaches some elements to the narrative of life and hence makes it meaningful.

Which Narrative is Better?

Considering the crucial role of narrative in meaning in life, the important question is to find criteria to evaluate different, and sometimes contradictory, narratives. In other words, since narratives are very selective, how one can evaluate and assess different narratives?

The question is not confined to narratives but it can be posed about understanding. Some epistemologists distinguish knowledge from understanding. For example, Zagzebski stresses understanding as a non-propositional and holistic way of knowing as opposed to propositional knowledge. She takes understanding a map or a graph as examples to show the difference. In understanding, there is a holistic grasp of meaning that makes connections and relations meaningful and is beyond mere propositions (Zagzebski 2009, 142).

Understanding is not focused on details, rather it aims to present a general image that may be imprecise in details. As Zagzebski elaborates:

understanding is achieved partly by simplifying what is understood, highlighting certain features and ignoring others. This process

compensates for our cognitive limitations. Understanding aims at comprehensiveness, not exactness, and we usually need to sacrifice one for the sake of the other. (Zagzebski 2001, 244)

This is very close to the narrative in terms of selectivity. In both, the agent highlights some parts and underestimates others. Hence, one can say that the meaning in life is an understanding of life, a special general and holistic look on life. It is a narrative of life that highlights some parts of life and ignores some other parts. It is not just meaningful views about life, the absurd views also present their ideas about life within the selective structure of a narrative.

How can we evaluate different narratives? That is the important question. Are there criteria by which we can accept or reject a narratives or at least make it more/less plausible?

A sketch of such criteria should meet different conditions. On the one hand, it should cover the need for truth. Any narrative that is not rooted in reality cannot be a valid ground for a meaningful life. Truth refers to the facts of life and is hence assumed to be an objective factor. Moreover, since I consider the meaning in life to be a kind of narrative, the agent is very important. The agent is the one who highlights some part of her life and ignores the others. The narrative has to present a subject factor to confer meaning to the life of a certain person.

So one of the conditions is truth and the narrative that has more shreds of evidence and fits better to the facts is more plausible. However, considering both objective and subjective factors, the meaning of truth is not clear here. The truth here does not represent pure facts. It is closer to understanding than to knowledge in terms of epistemology. The agent clearly plays a role in shaping it. How can we call it truth knowing that it is not pure fact?

Kvanvig suggests that to accept an understanding, it does not need to be all true:

When the falsehoods are peripheral, we can ascribe understanding based on the rest of the information grasped that is true and contains no falsehoods. In such a case, the false beliefs are not part of the understanding the person has, even though they concern the very material regarding which the person has understanding. So in this way, the factive character of understanding can be preserved without having to say that a person with false beliefs about a subject matter can have no understanding of it. (Kvanvig 2003, 201-2)

In some cases, he refers to scientific understanding as a "quasi-factive view" that involves the scientific models and reality. The quasi-factive understanding is not about knowing the model itself or about knowing the reality, it shows the relationships between reality and a scientific model (Kvanvig 2009, 343).

Like understanding, a narrative has a two-sided nature. On the one hand, it is factive and aims to represent reality and on the other hand, there is a role for the agent who

shapes that narrative. The objective and subjective factors shape truth as a criterion for evaluating narratives. The truth here, while being shaped by the agent, still represents an important part of reality and if the main parts of the narrative correspond with the major part of reality then we can consider that narrative to be true. In this way, we can evaluate different narratives based on the criterion of truth.

In the question of a meaningful life, there are different narratives of life, some describe life as coherent, purposeful, and meaningful, others depict an absurd, unreasonable, and meaningless picture of life. Here, we can evaluate the shreds of evidence that each of these approaches offers, even if this means to talk on a smaller scale and choose a more humble claim and speak about meaning *in* life rather than meaning *of* life.

Another criterion is practical reasoning. We lead our lives toward some goals. They may differ from one to another but some general, shared goals are common among people; for example, moral life, less painful and more joyful life, and meaningful life. One can evaluate several narratives of life based on general goals of life. Everyone wants to have a joyful life and suffer less. Human beings enjoy pleasure and avoid pain, so if a narrative can help with this goal, it has a better position than the others.

Moreover, we need to lead a moral life and if a narrative can depict life within a moral framework that is not indifferent toward good and evil, then we consider a special point for that narrative. Or if a narrative describes life as purposeful, valuable, and meaningful, then it will be more suitable to the general goals and hence can be preferred.

Another important need of a human being is the demand of feeling well about herself. We all need to have a good image and a positive feeling when we are thinking about ourselves. We also want others to have the same feeling when they are thinking about us. As Wolf expresses:

humans have a need to think well of themselves— a need for self-esteem. If one is prone to imagine oneself from an external point of view, to see oneself as if from without, the wish quite naturally follows that from that point of view one will be able to see oneself and one's life as good, valuable, and a rightful source of pride. (Wolf 2010, 28)

The way that others see us and *recognize* us has profound impacts on our life. As Taylor argues, it is deeply related to identity, and misrecognition or non-recognition and can lead to real damage and deep suffering of a person or a group (Taylor 1994, 25).

To respond properly to this profound and decisive need, we must have an understandable and intelligible life, an image that can reflect our characteristics and identity. Narratives can put different parts of our lives into one story that can define who we are and how we like others to see us.

To evaluate different narratives, if a narrative can respond to this need in a better way and satisfy our demands reasonably, then considering practical reasoning, we can have a criterion by which we may prefer it over other narratives.

It is noteworthy that there is an important difference between wishful thinking and practical reasoning. While wishful thinking is just dreaming without any evidential base, practical reasoning works along with truth and factive dimension. In the first step, it begins with truth, as much as we can know, and in the second step, it takes a practical criterion for evaluating the narratives.

Conclusion

In this paper, I began with a discussion of the problem of absurdity and explored three absurdist accounts of life: Purposelessness of the world, lack of reasonability and seriousness, and failure and boredom. Then I suggested that to address the question of absurdity one should revisit the debate of the meaning in life as the narrative of life. I emphasized the role of narration and how it shapes our understanding of the world, life, and human being. I tried to shed some light on the nature of narrative and take a look at similar concepts life understanding and knowledge. I tried to show that religious faith can help to build a meaningful narrative of life. It does so by adding new realities and new interpretations to the world as we know it. The important point here is that all sides of the debate, provide a narrative about life and we need to be able to evaluate them. Next, I presented criteria to evaluate different narratives. The criteria are based on both theoretical and practical reasoning and it has subjective and objective views on truth.

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