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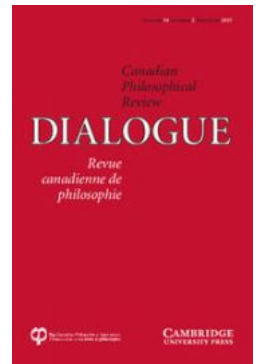
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Articles

Does It Matter that Nothing We Do Will Matter in a Million Years?

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ABSTRACT: People have inferred that our lives are absurd from the supposed fact that nothing we do will matter in a million years. In this article, I critically discuss this argument for absurdity. After explaining how two refutations in the literature fail to undermine the best version of the argument, I produce several considerations that together do take much of the force out of the argument. I conclude by suggesting that these considerations not only refute this argument for absurdity, but also constitute a motivation to be moral.

RÉSUMÉ : On a pu déduire que nos vies sont absurdes en supposant que rien de ce que nous faisons n'aura d'importance dans un million d'années. Dans cet article, j'évalue cet argument en faveur de l'absurdité. Après avoir expliqué comment deux réfutations formulées dans la littérature sur le sujet sont impuissantes à contrecarrer la meilleure version de cet argument, je formule plusieurs considérations qui concourent à réduire de beaucoup la force de cet argument. Je conclus en suggérant que ces considérations non seulement réfutent l'argument en faveur de l'absurdité, mais aussi justifient l'agir moral.

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If not today, then tomorrow sickness and death will come . . . to everyone, to me, and nothing will remain except the stench and the worms. My deeds, whatever they may be, will be forgotten sooner or later, and I myself will be no more. Why, then, do anything? How can anyone fail to see this and live? That's what is amazing! It is possible to live only as long as life intoxicates us; once we are sober we cannot help seeing that it is all a delusion, a stupid delusion! Nor is there anything funny or witty about it; it is only cruel and stupid.

Leo Tolstoy, *Confession*

Tolstoy, above, laments the fact that he will die and that all of his accomplishments will eventually be forgotten, a realization that leads him to conclude life is absurd. No doubt some of us on occasion have made this same inference. We look at the names on our family trees and all but those at the tips of the branches are nothing more to us than that—names. Our great-grandparents mean little, if anything, to us and those before them nothing at all. Likewise, we reason, we will hardly mean a thing to our great-grandchildren and nothing to their contemporaries and everyone else after that time, including our own descendants. It is possible, of course, that while soon nobody will remember us, our actions will reverberate into the distant future positively affecting what goes on, which seems to be what counts. However, we know that, absent divine intervention or some unimaginable astronomical phenomenon, the earth at some point will become uninhabitable. We know that if nuclear bombs, chemical or biological agents, or asteroids do not kill off every living thing, the heat of the expanding sun eventually will. And a future uninhabitable earth means that our individual traces, effects of our actions, will vanish at some point and from that time forward the fact that we led our lives one way rather than another—indeed, that we even existed at all—will be wholly inconsequential to what goes on in the universe. Now if this is what will come of us, we ask rhetorically in concluding this line of reasoning, why go on leading busy, hectic, goal-oriented lives? Our lives appear silly if we will soon be forgotten and nothing we do will matter in a million years, if not long before then. Our lives seem, in the words of Tolstoy, like “some kind of stupid and evil practical joke” (Tolstoy 1996, p. 30). They seem absurd.

Tolstoy eventually withdrew his support from this argument for absurdity, which I will call the Million-Years Argument. He did so by assuming the existence of another world, an afterlife in which we and our actions are preserved. However, an important question in the minds of many atheists and agnostics—and no doubt many theists, too—is whether we can defeat the Million-Years Argument without assuming the existence of another world. One contemporary philosopher who has addressed this question is

Thomas Nagel. In “The Absurd,” Nagel insists that the Million-Years Argument is “patently inadequate,” that it “*could* not really explain why life is absurd” (Nagel 1979, p. 11). While a different argument for absurdity Nagel sets out and defends in the essay has received significant attention (Gordon 1984; Luper-Foy 1992; Smith 1991; Westphal and Cherry 1990; Williams 1986), his refutations of the Million-Years Argument have received none. Whatever the reason for this silence—agreement with Nagel, more interest in Nagel’s own argument (the essay’s focus), or something else—I believe his refutations are wanting, and my initial aim in this article is to explain why. Defending the Million-Years Argument against Nagel’s refutations will help clarify the argument, generate its best version, and ultimately identify the real shortcomings of the argument. My main purpose, then, is to offer the considerations that do succeed in undermining this curious, if not at times unsettling, argument for absurdity. I conclude by noting that these considerations may also provide us with a motivation to be moral.

1. Absurdity

Since I, following Nagel, interpret the Million-Years Argument as an argument for the *absurdity* of our lives, I should say a few words about what generally constitutes absurdity, as well as what distinguishes absurdity from its close relative, *meaninglessness*, before turning to his criticisms of the argument. As it turns out, Nagel is a sound guide on the matter.

According to Nagel, the absurdity of our lives consists in a “conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality” (1979, p. 13). While I, along with others, believe Nagel fails to support this entire claim, its first part does correctly express the general mark of absurdity. Something, say, a situation or a life, is absurd when it involves a *conspicuous discrepancy* between two things. Camus, another absurdist, concurs; however, instead of conspicuous discrepancy, he describes absurdity as essentially involving a “disproportion,” “divorce,” or “confrontation” between two things (Camus 1991, pp. 29-30). A few examples should help clarify their basic idea.

An American man today goes door to door trying to get his neighbours to sign a petition declaring independence from Britain. The situation is absurd because it involves a glaring clash between effort and outcome: the man makes a substantial effort to accomplish what he cannot accomplish (because it has already been accomplished), making the situation senseless, stupid, and silly in the strongest sense. We should notice, though, that if there were a good therapeutic reason to canvass (say, the man is mentally impaired and suicidal, and the only thing his psychologist can think of to get the man’s mind off killing himself is letting him act on his crazy desire to canvass), we would stop short of calling the situation absurd. In such a case, the justification of his actions would be independent of the outcome,

so while a discrepancy would still exist (the intention behind the effort is to achieve an outcome the man cannot achieve), it would not be a striking one.

The preceding example is one of an absurd situation. An example of an absurd life, which Camus has made paradigmatic, is that of Sisyphus in Greek mythology. Sisyphus's life consists of a never-ending cycle of pushing a rock up to a pointed hilltop, watching the rock roll down, running down after the rock, and pushing the rock up again. Here, too, a glaring clash exists between effort and outcome. Sisyphus's never-ending hard work amounts to absolutely nothing. Again, though, we should recognize that futility itself is not the mark of the absurd. If Sisyphus enjoyed his ceaseless, repetitious activity—that is, if it were intrinsically valuable to him—we would (or should) stop short of calling his life absurd despite its futility. Although we may be wholly unimpressed with it, his life, since he likes it, involves no substantial incongruity that would warrant the label absurd. Any tendency to label it so is perhaps best explained by either blurring absurdity and related ideas (e.g., futility) or failing to imagine anyone actually enjoying futile exertion.¹

Now, if we take meaninglessness to mean futility, we can see that meaninglessness and absurdity are not synonymous. As the altered life of Sisyphus shows, a life can be meaningless without being absurd. Moreover, if we take meaninglessness to mean purposelessness, we can see, again, that absurdity and meaninglessness are distinct. Imagine a woman who correctly believes her life has no overarching purpose and who does not have any personal purposes to speak of either. Her life basically consists of eating, watching TV, and sleeping, which a large inheritance enables her to do. Her life, then, is in one sense meaningless. Yet it is not absurd. The reason is that it involves no outstanding incongruity: her beliefs and actions are consistent with there being no purpose to or in her life. Now if the woman, despite knowing better, acted as if her life did have an overarching purpose, then that would be another matter. Unless she had a good reason for acting this way, her life in this case may be absurd, for it seems a conspicuous discrepancy would exist between all her effort (on behalf of the purpose) and the purpose's non-existence.²

2. Nagel and the Million-Years Argument

With a sense of what generally constitutes absurdity, as well as what does not, we can turn to the Million-Years Argument (hereafter MYA) and in particular Nagel's case against it. The formulation of MYA Nagel criticizes is simply this (Nagel 1979, p. 11):

1. Nothing we do now will matter in a million years.
2. Therefore, our lives are absurd.

Strictly speaking, this formulation states that only we who are living today lead absurd lives, but we should not be misled by the terminology. Nagel indicates he is only interested in arguments for the absurdity of human existence as such (ibid., p. 13). Thus his formulation of the argument just as easily could read:

1. Nothing a person does at a particular point in time will matter a million years from that time.
2. Therefore, human existence is absurd.

The specific time “a million years” does not seem crucial either. If we replaced a million years with two million years or a half-million years, the argument’s thrust may well remain the same. This answer, however, does raise an important question. Does the length of time before the effects of our actions vanish even matter to the argument’s defenders? That is, is the point of the argument simply that the effects of our actions will vanish *sometime* (does not matter when)? Or is the point that the time at which these effects will vanish *comes too soon*? On the first interpretation (which I will refer to as the Bold Version of MYA), our actions would need to make a difference *forever* to prevent our lives from being absurd. Tolstoy’s language suggests he has this interpretation in mind (“My deeds . . . will be forgotten sooner or later”), as does the language of a host of thinkers, from the author of Ecclesiastes to the contemporary philosopher and theologian William Lane Craig (Craig 2000). And although Robert Nozick speaks of meaninglessness rather than absurdity, he appears to have the Bold Version of MYA in mind as well:

People do seem to think it important to continue to be around somehow. The root notion seems to be this one: it shouldn’t *ever* be as if you had never existed at all. A significant life leaves its mark on the world. A significant life is, in some sense, permanent; it makes a permanent difference to the world—it leaves traces. To be wiped out completely, traces and all, goes a long way toward destroying the meaning of one’s life. (Nozick 1981, p. 582)

In contrast, on the second interpretation (which I will call the Modest Version of MYA) our actions would need to make a difference only *for a longer period of time* than they actually do to prevent our lives from being absurd. It is clear that these two interpretations amount to distinct arguments and that the first argument is more radical in the sense that it requires a more demanding state of affairs to prevent our lives from being absurd. So naturally the question that arises is which version of MYA is more plausible and deserving of our attention. Since Nagel’s refutations seem to apply to

both, and with equal force, I will hold off answering this important question until the next section. Here, then, are Nagel's refutations.

But if that [nothing we do now will matter in a million years] is true, then by the same token, nothing that will be the case in a million years matters now. In particular, it does not matter now that in a million years nothing we do now will matter. Moreover, even if what we did now *were* going to matter in a million years, how could that keep our present concerns from being absurd? If their mattering now is not enough to accomplish that, how would it help if they mattered in a million years from now?

Whether what we do now will matter in a million years could make the crucial difference only if its mattering in a million years depended on its mattering, period. But then to deny that whatever happens now will matter in a million years is to beg the question against its mattering, period; for in that sense one cannot know that it will not matter in a million years whether (for example) someone now is happy or miserable, without knowing that it does not matter, period. (Nagel 1979, p. 11)

A lot is going on in the passage, but one basic line of reasoning seems to be this. If, as defenders of MYA claim, nothing we do now will matter in a million years, then that signifies that nothing matters at all—not now, not then, not at any time. For how could anything be important if, for example, whether we help or harm others today (or whether the happiness or misery caused thereby) will be unimportant in a million years? The unimportance in a million years of our helping or hurting others today (or of the happiness or misery caused thereby) can only mean that human actions do not matter, period. And since if anything is important, human actions are, we can conclude that nothing matters. Now, if nothing matters, then clearly the fact that “nothing we do now will matter in a million years” itself does not matter. And if it does not matter, it cannot make our lives absurd.

More concisely and in schematic form as a hypothetical syllogism, the argument is:

1. If [A] nothing we do now will matter in a million years, then [B] no human actions at any time matter.
2. If [B] no human actions at any time matter, then [C] nothing matters.
3. If [C] nothing matters, then [D] the fact that “nothing we do now will matter in a million years” does not matter.
4. If [D] the fact that “nothing we do now will matter in a million years” does not matter, then [E] that fact cannot make our lives absurd.
5. Therefore, if [A] nothing we do now will matter in a million years, then [E] it cannot make our lives absurd.

The first problem with this refutation is that its second premise is questionable. While we may have reason to believe that nothing is important if no human actions are important, it is at least possible that some things matter even though no human actions do. More questionable, however, is the refutation's fourth premise. It is not at all clear that if something is unimportant it cannot make our lives absurd. Indeed, Nagel explicitly states later in his essay that part of what he thinks does make our lives absurd (viz., "no reason to believe that anything matters") itself does not matter (Nagel 1979, p. 23). So, in direct opposition to the fourth premise of this refutation, Nagel himself maintains that a fact that does not matter can nevertheless contribute to the absurdity of our lives.

I will not press these two criticisms further, though, since the refutation has a deeper problem. Before revealing it, I want to mention another possible refutation contained in Nagel's passage, one which has nothing to do with its opening lines. The reason for mentioning this alternative refutation now is that it equally succumbs to the main criticism of the other refutation I am about to give. The alternative refutation is simply this: nothing we do now mattering in a million years (the main claim of MYA) depends on nothing mattering, period; therefore, defenders of the argument must first establish that nothing matters, period, and in any case, their main claim cannot be what *fundamentally* makes our lives absurd—only nothing mattering, period, can.

To understand the main problem with both refutations, we need to note three expressions from Nagel's passage: actions that matter now, actions that matter in a million years, and actions that matter, period. The term "matter" appears in all three expressions, and, as suggested above, Nagel takes it to mean "importance" in each of them. Thus, when he speaks of our actions mattering now, he means they are important now; when he speaks of them mattering in a million years, he means they are important then; and when he speaks of them mattering, period, he means they are important, period. As for the term "important, period," he probably has in mind important without regard to time, place, or what any particular person may happen to feel or believe—what some people seem to mean by the term "objectively important."

Now, the fundamental problem with the two refutations is that Nagel misrepresents MYA by universally defining the term "matter" as "have importance." Proponents of MYA may insist that the term in fact only means "have importance" in the locution "matter, period." In the locutions "matter now" and "matter in a million years," it means "has an impact" or "makes a difference." Thus, to say of our actions that they *matter, period*, is to say they are *objectively important*. But to say of them that they *matter now* is to say they *have an impact now* (or make a difference now), and to say they will *matter in a million years* is to say they will *have an impact then* (or make a difference then).³ With this clarification, MYA

reveals a line of reasoning that appears to avoid Nagel's refutations: since none of our actions will have an *impact* on what happens down the road (say, in a million years), such actions are not *important*, and hence our lives are absurd. In schematic form:

1. If our lives are not absurd, then our actions are objectively important.
2. If our actions are objectively important, then they will *have an impact* in a million years.
3. Our actions will not *have an impact* in a million years.
4. Therefore, our lives are absurd.

Still, Nagel may question whether our actions' having an impact long after they take place, such as in a million years, is really a necessary condition of their being objectively important, or their mattering, period. That is, he might accept the reformulation of MYA and yet re-ask the rhetorical questions in his passage: "Even if what we did now *were* going to matter [*have an impact*] in a million years, how could that keep our present concerns from being absurd? If their mattering [*having an impact*] now is not enough to accomplish that, how would it help if they mattered [*had an impact*] a million years from now?" To this Nagel might add that millions of children being undernourished today may not causally effect what occurs in a million years, or even a hundred years, but still may be objectively important (important in the negative sense, of course).

Nagel seems on the mark here. However, we need to ask whether the argument's defenders are committed to maintaining that *all* actions are objectively important only if the actions will make a lasting impact on the world. It seems they may agree that actions of certain kinds are objectively important whether or not they have lasting effects on the world, but insist that actions of other kinds are objectively important only if their effects do endure. The formulation of the argument reflecting this suggestion is:

1. If our lives are not absurd, then *certain actions of ours* are objectively important.
2. If *these actions* are objectively important, then they will make a lasting impact on the world.
3. *These actions* will not make a lasting impact on the world.
4. Therefore, our lives are absurd.⁴

I can imagine proponents of MYA defending the new second premise in the following manner. If the objective importance of certain kinds of actions had nothing to do with making an enduring impact on the world, then the question of whether the accomplishment of a task will make such an impact would be irrelevant in judging whether one should take up the task. However, we usually regard such a question relevant, and often one that will determine whether we take up the task. Consider, first, this mundane scenario. This spring Sam, the manager of a high-rise apartment complex, does not ask his workers to wash the windows of the building, even though he instructed them to do this every previous spring. He does not have them wash the windows this year because the city has recently condemned the building and all tenants must be out of their apartments by July. Sam reasons: "It wouldn't make much difference if we went ahead and washed the windows now, since the renters would only benefit from the clean windows for a few weeks." Sam thinks washing the windows now is unimportant because doing so will not have a lasting effect.

Consider next Sam's sister Sally who is a novelist and who has been recently abducted by men from a radical religious sect who have been offended by her books. With the nearly completed copy of her next book in hand, Sally has just been informed that in two weeks, on a religiously symbolic day, she will be killed and her manuscript destroyed, but that she may go right ahead and finish it since no one would ever read it anyway. When left alone, Sally, convinced the religious fanatics are insane and will kill her, contemplates whether she should finish the book. She reasons: "Completing this book would be senseless because the book won't do any good."

Why do painters devote themselves to their work? Why do filmmakers, actors, poets, novelists, essayists, politicians, teachers, and scientists devote themselves to their work? To survive, to get instant gratification, to be famous—yes, all of these answers are probably generally true. However, in many cases a more fundamental motivation may be at work: to make a lasting impact on the world. It seems to be a fact that people, correctly or incorrectly, associate the importance of their lives with having a lasting effect on the world. Many people claim that Aristotle and Jesus and Darwin and Einstein were all great people, that their lives were really important. The basis of their claim seems to be that these men, unlike the rest of us, have made a big difference.

The two contrived examples involving siblings Sam and Sally, the statement concerning what motivates many people to do the work they do, and the rationale for the claim about the famous men certainly do not establish a relation between (lack of) lasting impact and (lack of) importance. However, I believe they do suggest that we—as a matter of fact—often determine whether certain actions are important or unimportant by asking whether they will have such an impact. If so, then, contrary to Nagel's

two rhetorical questions in his passage (interpreting “matter,” “mattering,” and “mattered” as “have an impact,” “having an impact,” and “had an impact,” respectively), it is not obvious that the question concerning the lasting impact of our actions is irrelevant to the question concerning their importance. Consequently, Nagel’s refutations of MYA are unsatisfactory as they stand.

3. The Best Version of the Million-Years Argument

Critically examining Nagel’s refutations of MYA has brought into sight the most plausible formulation of the argument. This formulation begins with the statement that our lives are largely composed of actions that lack intrinsic justification, that is, whose justification lies in other events taking place. For most people, as for Sam and Sally, window washing and book writing are not their own rewards. These activities are work, and something must come of them if they are to be worth doing. The same goes for the host of domestic chores we do regularly—grocery shopping, dishwashing, laundering, lawn mowing, leaf raking, broom sweeping, vacuuming, bed making, and many tasks associated with child rearing. Moreover, except for a few of us perhaps, elementary and secondary schooling, to which we devoted years of our lives, fall into this category of the merely instrumental, as does higher education. And while some of us may love our jobs, few of us would do them simply for their own sakes. Therefore, if our lives are to make sense, if living them is reasonable, then the effort we exert in performing these tasks—which do seem to make up the bulk of wakeful living—must be compensated by experiences and activities that are intrinsically valuable. However, when we step back and evaluate our lives from birth to death, the quantity and quality of intrinsically valuable states of affairs do not adequately compensate for the quantity and (negative) quality of our tasks. Perhaps that is why we concern ourselves with leaving traces behind or, to use another metaphor, sending reverberations into the future. These traces or reverberations, these positive effects on the world, reduce the deficit of worth in our lives. Notwithstanding, the central problem remains, for these traces or reverberations are too miniscule and short-lived to make up the difference. Even taking into consideration whatever impact we leave on the world after we die, we recognize a significant disproportion between all the effort we exert (along with bad that befalls us) and the good we experience or produce. This disproportion or, to use Nagel’s term, “conspicuous discrepancy,” makes our lives absurd.⁵

If this is MYA, then a few considerations present themselves. First, two groups of people might actually escape absurdity: people who have greatly influenced humankind and people who have exerted little effort, such as those born into great wealth. Historical figures arguably produce enough good to compensate for their effort, and a number of those born into wealth seem to produce the little good needed to compensate for their lit-

tle effort. If so, and given no other conspicuous discrepancy exists in the lives of these two groups, defenders of MYA may need to concede that human existence is absurd only *generally*, not *as such*. Still, this may not be much of a concession. Since next to nobody is or will be a historical figure and few were or will be born into great wealth, the argument's force remains basically the same.

A second consideration, which addresses an important question posed earlier, is that this version of the argument implies that traces of our actions need not last *forever* to prevent our lives from being absurd. At some finite point in time these traces would successfully compensate for the deficit of worth in our lives stemming from the disvalue of our tasks that lacked intrinsic justification and bad events that befell us. The demand that we *never* be forgotten or that our traces be *eternal* (the main idea of the Bold Version of MYA) is overkill. We may best explain it as an exaggerated emotional reaction to the felt disproportion between effort we expend and good we experience or produce, especially at times when we are expending a lot of effort with little or no short-term compensation. Despairing over this disproportion, we complain about more than we should, as does the author of Ecclesiastes: "The wise man is remembered no longer than the fool, for, as the passing days multiply, all will be forgotten" (New English Bible, Eccles. 2:16). Another plausible explanation for the overkill demand that our traces last forever is that some of us have, or at least on occasion have, a deep-seated desire to be indispensable to humankind (or, alternatively, a deep-seated irrational belief that our lives must be indispensable to be worth living). Consequently, realizing that our lives are not crucial to humanity, we utter the same unjustified complaint that at some point—no matter when—nobody will remember us.

I think, in fact, that this second explanation of the overkill demand may reveal the true main point of the Bold Version of MYA. Its defenders might contend, first, that what sufficiently compensates for our tasks and other occurrences in our lives needing justification is a subjective matter and, second, that nearly all people feel their lives need to be indispensable to compensate for these tasks and occurrences. As W. D. Joske observes, "Many people have an incurable desire to cast a shadow across the future and affect the world so that it is forever modified by their intentions" (Joske 2000, p. 288). On this view, indispensability is the bare minimum. Nothing less will do. This argument is a formulation of the Bold Version of MYA, for one way to make a permanent impact on the world is to be indispensable to it.⁶

But two plausible replies to the argument are available. The first is that what sufficiently compensates is not a subjective matter. If someone demands twenty thousand dollars compensation for a half-hour lawn-mowing job, we immediately dismiss the demand as wildly irrational and unfair, even if we are convinced it is sincere. Such a person is not thinking

clearly or feeling right. This is not to say that we can easily or exactly determine what is adequate compensation, or even that determining it is always a wholly objective matter. But surely we can think up compensatory demands that are patently silly. The demand that the rise or fall of humanity depends on one's existence—or else one's life is not worth living—seems to be a good example. The second plausible reply to this Bold Version of MYA is that even if compensation were subjective through and through, the argument's defenders are factually wrong to think that many—not to mention most or all—people make such demands. Many of us are much more modest in what we believe would compensate for our toil and the bad events that befall us.

Proponents of the Bold Version of MYA may at this point begin a new line of reasoning. Consider, they may say, our evaluation of a particular woman's life. (To avoid complications, let us imagine that we are omniscient and hence know everything about this woman and the world.) We carefully weigh and balance the good and the bad in her life, including her actions' good and bad effects on others, and conclude that the good in her life, taken as a whole, does compensate for all the effort she exerted along with all the bad that befell her—but barely so. (To avoid further complications—such as whether this kind of estimation is objective in some sense or subjective through and through—let us imagine that, if asked, the woman would concur with our assessment.) Therefore, the woman basically breaks even. Even so, we have reason to regard her life as absurd, for there is something silly about a life that, when all is said and done, just breaks even. To prevent a judgement of absurdity, we must do more than break even; we must have in some way substantially “profited” in life, even if only retrospectively through our traces. Leaving an indelible mark on human civilization would constitute sufficient profit.

This new line of reasoning goes wrong, but it is instructive. The problem with it is twofold. First, it simply does not yield the Bold Version of MYA. Even if more than “just breaking even” is needed to prevent our lives from being absurd (which in a moment I will argue is not the case), surely less, much less, than being indispensable to humankind constitutes sufficient profit. Ironically, then, this line of reasoning yields the Modest Version of MYA. The second problem with the line of reasoning is that it fails to distinguish between absurdity and another close relative to it: worthlessness. Just as absurdity is distinct from futility and purposelessness, so too is it distinct from worthlessness. A life that just breaks even may not be worth living, but if no significant incongruity is present in it—and “not being worth living” would not by itself constitute an incongruity—the life would not be absurd.

Now, why this line of reasoning in defence of the Bold Version of MYA is instructive is that it exposes the fact that there are three categories, not two, regarding the worth of a life: (1) a life worth living; (2) a life not worth

living; and (3) a life neither worth living nor not worth living. We may not be automatically catapulted to a worthwhile life if we avoid a worthless one. We may only manage a neither-worthy-nor-worthless life. A worthwhile life requires that the good we experience or produce significantly outweighs the effort we exert and bad that befalls us. If this view is correct, then wealthy slackers—who, as I mentioned above, comprise one of two small groups possibly avoiding absurdity since they live a relatively untoilsome existence—do not thereby lead worthwhile lives. While their lives may not be absurd, they are not worthwhile. That squares with our intuition that these lives are certainly not enviable.

4. A Case against the Best Version of the Million-Years Argument

We have seen that the most plausible version of MYA is one that centres on the disproportion between, on the one hand, the effort we exert and bad that befalls us and, on the other, the good we experience or produce. This is a modest version of the argument since it implies that we can avoid absurdity without being remembered forever, without our traces being eternal, or without leaving an indelible mark on human civilization. Though modest in this sense, its defenders insist it shows just the same that practically all of our lives are absurd, for the net value in our lives does not cancel out the disvalue. Now, what about this version of MYA? Can a successful case be made against it? I think so. I divide this case against MYA into two main objections, which in the end dovetail.

First, we might question whether defenders of MYA have taken into consideration all sources of value, all kinds of good. One kind of good is one or another state of mind, such as being happy, feeling pleasure, or having preferences satisfied. This kind of good, associated with utilitarianism and other consequentialist ethical theories, we might call *consequentialist good*. Corresponding to consequentialist good is consequentialist bad, also one or another state of mind, such as being miserable, feeling pain, or having preferences frustrated. As mental states, consequentialist good and bad are (at least in principle) empirically measurable, and it is precisely they that proponents of MYA seem to measure in reaching the conclusion that the bad in our lives (much of it the mental states associated with the effort we exert in doing work day to day) outweighs the good.

However, another kind of good exists, too—one which defenders of MYA appear to forget or underestimate. Along with labouring away at our full-time jobs and doing the dishes, laundry, and lawn work, most of us are telling the truth, keeping our promises, and respecting the lives, liberty, and property of others. That is, day to day we are doing much of what morality demands, and that by itself—aside from any good states of mind that doing it might cause—contributes significantly to the overall good in our lives. In many cases this second kind of good accompanies consequentialist good and for that reason may be overlooked. If we have a general

moral duty to promote the well-being of others, to bring about or otherwise facilitate the existence of good states of mind in them, and we go ahead and do that, we may think that the sole good that arises is their pleasure or happiness. However, in addition to this good is the good in doing our duty. Whether accompanied by consequentialist good or not, this second kind of good—let us call it *non-consequentialist good*—is real and offsets the disvalue in our lives.⁷

Moreover, the *attempt* to do our duty (which may include the attempt to produce consequentialist good) is itself an instance of non-consequentialist good. We who genuinely *try* to tell the truth, keep promises, and respect the lives, liberty, and property of others add value to our lives. Of course, the value in this effort in some cases may be offset partially or even fully by failing to do what we will to do. For example, if, all effort notwithstanding, we fail to resist an urge to commit a crime, the pain and suffering we cause may negate or even substantially outweigh the sincere attempt to do otherwise. Nevertheless, any sincere attempt to do our duty, right along with actually doing it, is itself a form of non-consequentialist good and hence should not be overlooked in weighing and balancing the value and disvalue in our lives.

Finally, we might understand non-consequentialist good in the context of a life plan. John Hick gives a characterization of the meaning of life in Christianity in which the main purpose in life is character-building or, as he puts it, “soul-making” (Hick 1978). Situated in a world that challenges us with many tests in the form of trials and tribulations, a person’s main aim is to become someone with great moral integrity, someone who consistently resists temptation and rises to duty. (Included in this worldview is the idea of being rewarded with a blissful afterlife for having made one’s soul, but Hick no doubt would affirm that soul-making itself is valuable, not merely a means to a valuable end. Human beings endure pain and suffering so that souls can be made; certainly, if soul-making were not intrinsically good, God would not have bothered with it.) Now, whether we have reason to take seriously the existence of God—and for the purposes of this article we are assuming we do not—we do, I think, have reason to take seriously the idea of independent merit in a life of character-building. It seems plausible that living a life whose object is to build one’s character, to become a person with high moral integrity, is better than not living at all, at least if not too much evil afflicts the life.

Defenders of MYA may challenge this objection in one of three ways. First, they may deny the existence of both consequentialist and non-consequentialist good, that is, deny that moral realism is true. Second, while acknowledging the existence of consequentialist good, they may deny the existence of non-consequentialist good. Or third, while acknowledging the existence of non-consequentialist good, they may deny it amounts to much.

A defence of a non-consequentialist moral view, not to mention moral realism, is beyond the scope of this article. However, a different, more manageable, kind of response to the first and second challenges may suffice. This response is that the plausibility of a non-consequentialist moral view or of moral realism may be moot, for many of us seem to value highly non-consequentialist good for its own sake (including the idea of a life of character-building). If nothing else, we are genetically and/or environmentally built to do so. Therefore, whether this subjective valuing corresponds to anything objective may be irrelevant as far as compensating for the disvalue in our lives is concerned. If so, then the important question is how much we value what we take to be non-consequentialist good, which takes us to the third challenge above (that non-consequentialist good, though existent, is negligible). In response, I think at least this much can be said. Many of us do feel that following particular moral rules—such rules as prohibiting killing, stealing from, lying to, and using others—count for a lot. For example, many of us are not apt to laugh at the impoverished man who refuses to steal despite excellent opportunities to do so. To the contrary, we are impressed, inspired, and moved by him. Despite his ongoing efforts to make ends meet, we think that he and his life are honourable. Similarly, on a larger scale, many of us feel that consistently acting on the rule “Improve the world” is a good thing, even if we are unable to produce much consequentialist good. Whether our response to these and other such actions is a reflection of their objective moral worth or simply how we are put together, their value is high, and perhaps high enough to cancel out the disvalue in our labour-filled lives.

I think it is worth pointing out that the high value we place on non-consequentialist good may explain a final reaction to the analysis of the lives of wealthy slackers given thus far. I first suggested that if MYA is sound their lives, unlike ours, might avoid absurdity. In response to readers who think that could not be, I later pointed out that, while not absurd, the lives of slackers would not be worth living, and hence certainly not be enviable. Still, their lives, on this analysis, would not be as bad as ours, and I can imagine readers who are not willing to buy that. I now want to suggest that what may likely fuel this understandable reaction is the recognition of the existence and weightiness of non-consequentialist good. This recognition—along with the recognition that we produce much more non-consequentialist good than do slackers—makes it very difficult to imagine a possible world in which their lives are not as bad as our own.

As the first objection to MYA has been presented so far, the non-consequentialist good at issue is a type of *moral* good—doing, or attempting to do, our (moral) duty. However, we ought not to neglect non-consequentialist good that is *non-moral* in nature. Candidates include love, friendship, wisdom, creativity, and beauty. Of course, one main reason these things are good is that they tend to cause, or be accompanied

by, positive states of mind, such as pleasure, happiness, and satisfaction. But, upon reflection, many people, I think, would agree that these things are good in themselves and that the positive states of mind they are apt to produce, though important, are only secondarily so. While Sally (the novelist mentioned in §2) may not care to finish her manuscript since she is convinced the religious fanatics will burn it, chances are she believes *some* of the value in writing the book comes from the creativity involved in writing it, not just how the finished piece of work will positively affect her and others. Creativity itself is a good thing. And Sally's friendship with her brother Sam—wanting the best for each other whether or not each benefits from the other's good fortune—is a good thing in itself, too, that is, aside from good states of mind that such a relationship may foster.

I might add, in concluding this objection, that were defenders of MYA able to produce a credible case for the view that the generation of non-consequentialist good, both moral and non-moral, does not entirely compensate for our lifelong toil and bad that befalls us, generating it may still significantly *reduce* the disproportion, which when combined with other mitigating factors (explained next) may more than eliminate the disproportion.

The gist of the initial objection to MYA, stated most boldly, is that no disproportion exists between the effort we exert and the good we experience or produce because of the existence and weightiness of *non-consequentialist* good, which defenders of MYA overlook or underestimate. In contrast, the main point of the next objection is that proponents of MYA do not substantiate their major claim that the *consequentialist* good we produce is too little to eliminate the disproportion. In setting out MYA on behalf of its defenders, I drew attention only to the extent to which we toil throughout our lives. I offered no real evidence that the consequentialist good we experience and produce falls short of compensating for this toil. Unless the argument's defenders can produce such evidence, the argument is unsound.

An immediate reply to this objection, I suspect, is that producing such evidence is unnecessary because obviously, with very few exceptions, had any one of us not existed, the world would have been basically the same. Who among us believes that had he or she never existed, the world would have been a different kind of place? No one who is honest does. And if the course of the world would be the same whether we existed or not, it seems clear that the consequentialist good we produce is negligible. Why, then, even bother trying to add it up and weigh and balance it against the disvalue in our lives? Surely the extent to which we work our lives away far outweighs the meagre consequentialist good we might produce.

However, the inference here—Person *P* has not changed the course of the world; therefore, it would not have mattered had *P* not existed—seems to commit the fallacy of false dichotomy. It implies that exactly two pos-

sibilities exist: either *P* has changed the course of the world or *P* has done practically nothing. But a third possibility exists: Although *P* has not changed the course of The World (capital “T” and “W”), *P* has changed the course of one or more of its parts: a family, a neighbourhood, a workplace, or maybe even a village.⁸ Perhaps nothing illuminates this third possibility better than the popular holiday film *It’s a Wonderful Life*, starring James Stewart and Donna Reed.⁹ This film shows the great extent to which an ordinary, decent person can have a positive effect on part of the world, in this case his family, workplace, home town, and even beyond. Most remarkable about the film is its illustration of the snowball effect, both the *positive* snowball effect virtuous acts can have on parts of the world and the *negative* snowball effect the removal of virtuous acts can have. The film shows that while the immediate effects of good acts done are impressive enough, the ensuing chain reaction can multiply the significance of good acts exponentially.¹⁰ The film also nicely illustrates how easily an ordinary person’s positive impact on the world can be overlooked, even by that person. The gentleman played by Stewart, George Bailey, at one point regards his life as such a failure that he is on the verge of committing suicide.

Of course, *It’s a Wonderful Life* does not constitute proof or even anecdotal evidence that our decent everyday actions have a much more positive effect on the world than we may think. The film is a work of fiction. The point of mentioning it is that it reminds us of something we can so easily overlook—the *possibility* that our lives are significant or important, that they matter, even if they do not affect the course of The World. In addition, the film serves as a reminder that the onus is on defenders of MYA to provide evidence for the claim that the effort we exert indeed outweighs the consequentialist good we produce. In other words, the film challenges them to show that the message it presents does not in fact reflect human life.

Defenders of MYA may switch gears at this point and offer another reply to the second objection. First, they may concede that for all we know ordinary, decent people can make a difference to parts of the world. However, they may go on and point out that a world of people whose lives basically consist of toil and mutual efforts to reduce suffering leaves much to be desired. As noble as the life of George in *It’s a Wonderful Life* and the lives of people in our world may at first appear, all these lives, upon honest reflection, are rather pathetic. People labour just so they can reduce each other’s suffering? Why would not all these people be better off dead? They would gain the absence of toil and suffering and would lose nothing but the opportunity to reduce suffering, which would not be much of a loss. We might call this last defence of MYA, whose aim is to negate the relevance that any credibility of the main point of *It’s a Wonderful Life* has, the better-off-dead defence. Interestingly, Nagel, in *The View from Nowhere*, written some years after “The Absurd,” presents this argument. He writes:

Granted, one advantage of living in a world as bad as this one is that it offers the opportunity for many activities whose importance can't be questioned. But how could the main point of human life be the elimination of evil? Misery, deprivation, and injustice prevent people from pursuing the positive goods which life is assumed to make possible. If all such goods were pointless and the only thing that really mattered was the elimination of misery, that really *would* be absurd. (Nagel 1986, p. 217)

Although he does not recognize it, Nagel in the passage indicates one of two plausible responses to the better-off-dead defence of MYA. The one he does not mention, which goes hand in hand with the first objection to MYA sketched earlier, is simply that our lives do not consist only of toil and mutual efforts to reduce suffering; they also include a substantial amount of non-consequentialist good, including many instances, both moral and non-moral, not even associated with reducing suffering. This non-consequentialist good alone, or perhaps combined with consequentialist good (in particular the "positive goods" discussed next), more than compensates for one's toil.

The second response to the better-off-dead defence of MYA, to which Nagel himself alludes, returns us to consequentialist good. We may recall that the underestimation of this kind of good by proponents of MYA is the alleged focus of the second objection to MYA. Now, in view of the better-off-dead defence, we may question whether such underestimation has really been the focus of the second objection, for up to this point it does seem its real focus has been the underestimation by defenders of MYA of the extent to which people reduce pain and suffering—reduce consequentialist bad—not experience or generate consequentialist good. This may not be a correct assessment of the objection as it has been presented thus far (and if it is incorrect, then so much the worse for the better-off-dead defence of MYA, for it rests on this assessment). However, if it is correct, then the next response to the better-off-dead defence clearly gets the second objection to MYA back on track.

Nagel mentions "the positive goods which life is assumed to make possible." The goods he probably has in mind here are such things as food, sports, entertainment, travel, beauty, knowledge, friendship, sex, love, and even at times our jobs. Now, the main point of the second response to the better-off-dead defence of MYA is that our lives do not consist entirely of working and experiencing consequentialist bad, on the one hand, and reducing (or trying to reduce) future occurrences of consequentialist bad, on the other. The enjoyment of "positive goods" is a big part of our lives as well. We go through life enjoying the company of friends and acquaintances; enjoying intimate occasions with our partners; enjoying learning about the world; enjoying the arts—books, film, theatre, and music; enjoying camping and hiking and trips to other parts of the world; enjoying

playing and watching sports—football, basketball, baseball, golf, and tennis; and, of course, enjoying food and drink. Therefore, if doing our duty, building our character, and reducing pain and suffering alone do not entirely compensate for our toil and bad that befalls us, they in conjunction with the enjoyment of positive goods do, making our lives well worth living.

Of course, not everyone has been fortunate enough to enjoy these goods. The number of past lives that did not get to enjoy them, or at least enjoyed very little of them, are many, and most likely a multitude of present and future lives will face the same fate. Consequently, provided other kinds of good are non-existent or not enough to compensate for all the toil and pain and suffering in some people's lives, maybe some lives are absurd. However, the issue is the plausibility of MYA, which is an argument for the absurdity of human existence as such, or in general, and since many people are fortunate enough to enjoy positive goods, many people avoid absurdity, meaning MYA is unsound.

5. Conclusion

I began this article by showing why Thomas Nagel's refutations of the Million-Years Argument do not succeed as they stand. In the process of doing so, this argument for absurdity became clearer and two versions emerged, a bold one and a modest one. I went on to explain why the modest version is more plausible and finally set out a strategy for successfully dealing with it. This strategy, consisting of two objections, involved discussing sources of value that defenders of MYA seem to overlook or underestimate. The first objection concerned the oversight or underestimation of what I called non-consequentialist good, both moral and non-moral, and the second objection concerned the oversight or underestimation of consequentialist good. The upshot of the two objections, viewed in tandem, was that once all sources of value are recognized and given their due, we have good reason to believe that defenders of MYA have in fact reversed the disproportion between, on the one hand, the effort we exert and bad that befalls us and, on the other, the good we experience or produce. Although not true of all lives, the good in the lives of many people outweighs the bad.

I want to conclude by noting that this discussion of the Million-Years Argument may have exposed a good reason to be moral: to maximize our chances of avoiding absurd lives. First, if we create non-consequentialist good in doing (or even in attempting to do) what morality requires of us, and if as a result this good negates or at least lessens the disvalue in our lives, then we should try to do what morality demands—that is, we should try to be moral—for the sake of avoiding absurdity. Second, if our actions can significantly impact at least a part of the world, thereby creating consequentialist good, and hence negate or at least lessen the disvalue in our lives, then again it is reasonable to be moral. And third, if the more we col-

lectively take morality seriously, the more hospitable this world will be, with less pain and suffering and more opportunities to enjoy the positive goods of life, and if with more opportunities to enjoy these goods, the more likely they will compensate for all the disvalue in our lives, then once more we have reason to be moral. When we take morality seriously, we may thereby avoid leading absurd lives.¹¹

Notes

- 1 Readers familiar with meaning-of-life literature will recognize these alternative Sisyphean narratives as the focus of an essay by Richard Taylor (2000). While our analyses differ, insofar as I use the narratives to elucidate absurdity, whereas Taylor uses them to illuminate two senses of meaninglessness (and correspondingly two senses of meaning), I think our analyses are compatible and even may help explain one another. On Taylor's analysis, Sisyphus's life in both narratives is objectively meaningless since Sisyphus's efforts do not culminate in anything of lasting importance. However, his life in the second narrative, in which he enjoys pushing and running after his rock, is subjectively meaningful. Taylor then argues that subjective meaning is much more important than objective meaning and concludes that Sisyphus's life in the second narrative, which Taylor maintains our own lives resemble, is meaningful in the important sense. On my analysis, Sisyphus's life in both narratives is objectively meaningless, in Taylor's sense, but while his life is also absurd in the first narrative, it is not so in the second. The reason, as I have already indicated, is that because his effort is intrinsically justified, no conspicuous discrepancy exists between his effort and its failure to culminate in something. Perhaps another way to express this last remark is to say that the discrepancy is not conspicuous since Sisyphus's life (his effort) is subjectively meaningful, in Taylor's sense.
- 2 Nagel would describe the discrepancy differently, as one between the woman's actions and the truth—that is, between “pretension and reality.” He would add that the conspicuousness of the discrepancy, which is essential for absurdity, is that deep down she knows no overarching purpose exists. I agree with Nagel about such a discrepancy in this case and believe that multiple discrepancies can constitute, or contribute to, the absurdity of a life or situation. My reason for highlighting effort/outcome (instead of pretension/reality) is that it is the kind of discrepancy behind the best version of the Million-Years Argument, as will become evident.
- 3 I think there is a sense in which the expressions “has an impact” and “makes a difference” are synonymous, which is why I include them both. However, hereafter I will use only “has an impact” since I believe “makes a difference” can mean “importance” too, as I think it does in the following question, which does not appear to be vacuous: “Does it make a difference whether Sally writes a book when doing so will have no impact on the world?” As for the expression “has an impact,” I take it roughly to mean “is causally efficacious.” So to say

that my actions will have an impact in a million years, is to say roughly that they will causally influence what happens at that time.

- 4 Interestingly, Nagel, sixteen years after the original publication of “The Absurd,” presents a version of MYA that reflects the principal change made in this reformulation. Referring to the argument, he writes: “The idea seems to be that we are in some kind of rat race, struggling to achieve our goals and make something of our lives, but that this makes sense only if those achievements will be permanent. But they won’t be. Even if you produce a great work of literature which continues to be read thousands of years from now, eventually the solar system will cool or the universe will wind down or collapse, and all trace of your efforts will vanish. In any case, we can’t hope for even a fraction of this sort of immortality” (Nagel 1987, pp. 95-96). Here Nagel speaks specifically of our “goals” and “achievements” and uses as an example a “work of literature.” He does not speak of *all* our actions and does not seem to mean all of them. Moreover, he suggests that a necessary condition of these goals or achievements making sense is that they have at least a “fraction . . . of immortality,” which seems to be tantamount to “having a lasting impact.”
- 5 Whether we can be benefited posthumously has been an issue of debate. If we cannot, then MYA is more compelling. I thank an anonymous reviewer for reminding me of this. I should note that while my case against MYA is stronger if we can be benefited posthumously, its success does not depend on this view being true. I argue that we have reason to believe the good in the lives of many of us outweighs the bad—while we are alive.
- 6 Indeed, I think value-laden indispensability, rather than permanence of any kind, constitutes the best formulation of the Bold Version of MYA. If permanence of any kind is a sufficient condition to avoid absurdity, it can hardly fail to be met. While we may not always be remembered or while our actions may not have a positive impact on what goes on in the universe forever, it does seem that our actions generate facts about us that will exist eternally. Facts about us (of the sort, “So-and-so did such-and-such”) arise and never cease to obtain. Billions and billions of years from now facts about us will obtain as they do now, just as it will be true then, as it is now, that $2 + 2 = 4$.
- 7 Strict Kantians would insist that the generation of non-consequentialist good depends on our *intentions*. On their view, doing our duty with the wrong intentions amounts to little, if any, non-consequentialist good. If this view is correct, then we do not produce as much non-consequentialist good as I have suggested. Notwithstanding, since we often do have the right intentions, the amount would be substantial.
- 8 Why is it so easy to overlook this possibility? The answer is probably complex, but mass media may be partly responsible. They usually have us focused on the big world stage and give us the impression this is the only stage, or at least the only one that counts. If we are not main characters in the scenes on this stage, we are mere theatre-goers, passive and still in our seats where all is dark, nothing happens, and no one matters.

- 9 *A Christmas Carol* is an equally fine illustration of the third possibility. I should note that the argument in these two religious holiday classics—ordinary, decent people do make a difference—is entirely secular. The religious elements in both works (visits from an angel or from spirits) are incidental to the argument.
- 10 One way to start (or to continue) a chain reaction, as the movie suggests, is to affect others' hearts and minds so that they are apt to perform good actions. There is perhaps no better way to do this than to raise children. We are often able to affect profoundly the hearts and minds of the children we raise, which might lead to our children profoundly affecting their children's hearts and minds, and so on. I thank an anonymous reviewer for reminding me of this particular way to produce consequentialist good.
- 11 I thank Thomas A. Mappes and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

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