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# A Case for Contingent Absurdity

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## Abstract

A popular view on existential absurdity holds that if life is absurd, it must be inescapably so. In opposition to this view, I argue that the concept of existential absurdity allows for life to be *contingently* absurd. In *Nausea* (1938) and *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Jean-Paul Sartre puts forward two distinct conceptions of an absurd life, both of which entail an absurdity that is contingent rather than inescapable. Given the internal coherence of these accounts of existential absurdity, we have reasons to reject the view that existential absurdity is necessarily inescapable. A challenge arises, however, for radically contingent versions of absurdity: if life is absurd in a radically contingent way, it seems that no rational agent will live under absurd conditions for a significant portion of their life. This seems to run counter to the intuition that an absurdity can only be genuinely existential if it is a fundamental feature of human life. In response to this 'problem of triviality', I argue that there can be pro-absurdity reasons that outweigh the pro tanto reasons for escaping absurdity. Thus, it would not necessarily be irrational to continue to live under the yoke of absurdity.

**KEYWORDS**
absurdity, Camus, contingency, existentialism, inescapability, Sartre, triviality

There are no data associated with the article.

There are many ways in which life is claimed to be absurd (Belliotti 2019). Consider a few examples.[1] For some, life's absurdity derives from the way in which death denies us something important (see for example Camus 1942: 56–58; Thomas 2019). For others, life is absurd because the cycle of desire brings about no lasting satisfaction (see for example Holmes 2019). Another view of absurdity is that human beings seek absolute guidance in a world in which all reasons are relative (see for example Camus 1942; Sartre 1943; Webber 2018). And yet others hold that it is fundamentally absurd that we fall short of communicating our subjective experiences and understanding those of others (see Esslin 1961; Sagi 2002: 52–53).[2] Much more can be subsumed under the category of 'existential absurdity', but what all these descriptions have in common, roughly speaking, is that they denote an incongruity between a demand (i.e. something that generates a normative claim) and a lack (i.e. a state-of-affairs that falls short of living up to that claim). In short, what ought to be the case is not the case.[3]

But this cannot be the whole picture. If incongruity between demand and lack were a sufficient definition of the concept of absurdity, it would include any demand not currently satisfiable (such as a promise that cannot be met or a desire for something unavailable). What is required, then, is a structural feature: if life is absurd, then its absurdity must be a fundamental structure of human life. For some philosophers (Camus 1942; Nagel 1971: 718–719; Sagi 2002: 47–58; Baltzer-Jaray 2020: 82–83; Hiekel 2021; Francev 2023: 41–42), absurdity is so deeply embedded in human existence that there is no escape from it. In 'The Absurd' (1971), Thomas Nagel nicely captures the intuition behind this inescapability account of existential absurdity: "If there is a philosophical sense of absurdity [...] it must arise from the perception of something universal – some respect in which pretension and reality inevitably clash for us all" (718). While many philosophers have considered existential absurdity by definition inescapable, I argue against a necessary link between absurdity and inescapability. By turning our attention to Sartre's existentialism (to be contrasted with Camus's views), we can discover the inadequacies of considering absurdity to be necessarily inescapable. The core problem with the inescapability account of existential absurdity is, very briefly put, that it is incompatible with the idea of radical freedom, thus contradicting one of the basic tenets of existentialism. Thus, my argument aims to show that existential absurdity need not be inescapable but could be contingent, contrary to the popular view that an absurdity can only be existential if it is inescapably part of human life.[4]

My argument proceeds as follows. First, I argue for the possibility of a contingent genus of existential absurdity for each of the components of absurdity: a contingent demand (section 1) and a contingent lack (section 2). A contingent version of the normative component can be inferred from Sartre's views in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), while a contingent version of the negative component can be found in Sartre's *Nausea* (1938). Together, then, they show the inescapability account of absurdity to be inadequate. In the third section, I proceed to highlight a problem with seeing existential absurdity as radically contingent. If life is absurd in a radically contingent way, it seems to follow that no rational agent could continue to live under absurdity for any significant portion of their life. Thus, the concept of radically contingent absurdity risks trivializing the absurd, in sharp contrast with the intuitively appealing idea that absurdity must be of fundamental significance if it is to be genuinely existential. In response to this problem of triviality, I argue in the fourth and final section that although there are pro tanto reasons to disfavour absurdity, these reasons can be overridden by considerations that count in favour of an absurd life. By demonstrating the conceivability of all-things-considered reasons to keep life absurd, I show that radically contingent versions of existential absurdity do not automatically entail that it would be irrational to keep life absurd when a non-absurd life is readily available. Thus, my analysis shows that an absurdity need not be inescapable in order to be genuinely existential; it could instead be contingent.

## 1 | CONTINGENCY IN THE NORMATIVE COMPONENT

Whether it be in an ordinary-language, scientific or existential context, one cannot properly call a situation absurd without presupposing some kind of normative claim.[5] Cooking a lavish meal in order to throw it in the bin can be considered absurd only in relation to a norm or an expectation – for example, that one prepare food in order for it to

be eaten. Likewise, scientific theories are deemed absurd when they violate epistemic norms (such as the law of non-contradiction or principles of parsimony). The same pattern occurs in existential philosophy, where absurdities are derived not just from a mere descriptive fact or a collection of descriptive facts, but from the relation between what is the case (a descriptive fact) and what ought to be the case (a normative fact). The prospect of death, for instance, can only be absurd for subject S if there is a normative reason for S to have a pro-attitude towards a deathless form of existence.[6]

Hence, the concept of existential absurdity, broadly construed, contains an incongruity between a negative fact (the fact that not-X) and a normative fact (the fact that X ought to be the case). As we have seen earlier, the concept of existential absurdity plausibly presupposes a structural feature: in order for an incongruity to make life absurd, it must be deeply embedded in human life more generally. And, of course, the structural feature applies not only to the whole of the incongruity but also to its individual components. Thus, the normative fact plays a structural role in human life. How can we further define the structurality of the absurd demand?

To many scholars, the structural feature suggests that absurdity is inherently inescapable (see for example Nagel 1971: 718–719; Sagi 2002: 47–58; Baltzer-Jaray 2020: 82–83; Hiekel 2021; Francev 2023: 41–42). This concept of the inescapably absurd is embraced by one of the most influential philosophers of the absurd – Albert Camus. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), he asserts that "the sole datum is the absurd" (Camus 1942: 34) and derives from it the requirement that one "carry this absurd logic to its conclusion" and "remain faithful to the commandments of the absurd" (37). Furthermore, he criticizes various authors for trying to do away with what they initially recognized as rendering life absurd. This supposed internal inconsistency – which he finds in Karl Jaspers (35–36), Lev Shestov (36–39), Søren Kierkegaard (39–44), Edmund Husserl (44–48) and arguably Franz Kafka in *The Castle* (114–124) – amounts for Camus to "philosophical suicide" (32–50).

From these remarks, it should be obvious that Camus's concept of the absurd presupposes inescapability. If the incongruity is inescapable as a whole, then it follows as a matter of conceptual necessity that each of the components must be inescapable as well, including the normative fact. This is why Camus speaks of "[t]he mind's deepest desire" (22) and "the essential impulse of the human drama" (23). This suggests that the normative fact is a necessary concomitant of human life. How are we to define the necessity? It is surely not a necessity of the *logical* or *(meta) physical* kind, since there is no reason to assume that the absence of an absurd demand (like a desire for self-preservation) would be logically incoherent or inconsistent with the fundamental structures of the universe (such as the law of causality or the extensivity of matter). Rather, the inescapability account of existential absurdity takes the absurd to be inescapable as a matter of *practical* necessity, where the conceivable possibility of a nonabsurd life is strictly unfeasible given the abilities of even the most able human beings. The absurd demand, then, is necessary (for Camus) insofar as abandoning it would be strictly unfeasible in light of human abilities.[7]

When we focus on the normative component, the inescapability account of existential absurdity presents a challenge, as it contradicts the existentialist idea that "existence precedes essence" (Sartre 1945: 22). As Jonathan Webber argues in *Rethinking Existentialism* (2018), any definition of absurdity that includes a clause of practical inescapability must also ascribe a status of practical inescapability to the normative component. This would effectively render the construct of an absurd demand an essentialist notion – a demand that is an essential part of human nature. In opposition to this essentialist normativity, Webber sums up the existentialist thesis (found in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir) with the key claim that "each person's set values are ultimately the result of their own choices" (Webber 2018: 34). Hence, there are "no inbuilt desires, values, or personality traits that explain any part of an individual's behaviour." (34) When Camus speaks of an "essential impulse" (Camus 1942: 23), he could not be further away from existentialists like Sartre and Beauvoir. Admittedly, an existentialist might concede that certain brute facts about human life are absolutely true (e.g. the fact that consciousness ends with biological death) and thereby allow for the idea of an inescapable *lack* – the other half of existential absurdity. But the existentialist view does not accommodate inescapable *demands*.

At this point, one might consider getting rid of the normative component and reducing absurdity to a singular, negative fact. This is what Sartre proposes when he contrasts his own *monist* notion of absurdity with Camus's

*dualism*[8]: for Sartre, absurdity amounts to the sheer contingency or facticity of human existence, whereas for Camus the absurd is a confrontation between two aspects of human life.[9] Leaving aside the fact that defining existential absurdity as incongruity would be closer to ordinary language and the etymology of the term 'absurdity' (Sagi 2002: 57), there is a more deeply philosophical reason to prefer the Camusian dualism over the Sartrean monism. As previously discussed, it is difficult to see how a negative fact (e.g. the absence of objective meaning) can be significant at all unless there are reasons to have a certain attitude towards it. This presupposes the presence of a normative fact (e.g. the demand that there be objective meaning). Any definition of the absurd needs therefore to include a negative fact as well as a normative fact (Sagi 2002: 55–58; Bennett 2011: 10; Pölzler 2018: §2).

As a result, we should recognize that, while absurdity may be inescapable for some (e.g. Camus), it can also be understood as something that is a structural feature of human life while failing to be completely inescapable. On a revisionary account of Sartre's view of the absurd (modified to fit the dualist conception of absurdity while staying true to the tenets of *Being and Nothingness*), the absurd does contain a normative component, albeit one that is contingent (contra Camus). And of course, if one component of the absurd is contingent, then so is the absurd as a whole, as we can get rid of the tension by abandoning whichever component is contingent.

Consider the following form of existential absurdity that pops up again and again in Sartre's texts (see especially Sartre 1943: part 4, ch. 1; Webber 2018: ch. 3): we generally tend to seek inherent value, but there is none. This latter negative fact is inescapable. But, again, an existential absurdity is only inescapable if both components are, including the demand. And this normative component – the demand for inherent value – is contingent on Sartre's view. For, we can modify our meta-evaluative expectations of the world. In fact, given the impossibility of satisfying a desire for inherent value in light of the inescapable lack thereof, it would be rational to give up that desire (provided it be contingent). Thus, by relinquishing the demand for inherent value, we can, according to Sartre's view, overcome the absurdity that derives from this unsatisfiable demand.

This does not mean, however, that this Sartrean account of the absurd entails that we should give up the pursuit of value as such. In fact, that would be impossible. For, Sartre takes it to be a constitutive feature of being human that we pursue projects, which are for him the source of value. Although it is completely contingent which project a particular agent pursues, the pursuit of projects more generally is not. As a result, we cannot avoid placing value on things. Still, what we can give up is the pursuit of a specific kind of value: inherent value. Instead of seeking something which is inherently valuable, we can commit ourselves to seeking stance-dependent value only, by constructing an evaluative landscape that we know to be of our own making. And because this project of seeking inherent value depends upon our free choice, it is radically revisable: we could all cease to be committed to the project of seeking inherent value, simply by changing our outlook on value.

Thus, if we are to make sense of a Sartrean notion of absurdity at all, we should make room for the possibility of a contingent demand within the concept of existential absurdity. In so doing, we open up the concept to conditions that are deeply embedded in human life yet not strictly inescapable. Since absurdity is a widely reported aspect of Sartre's philosophy (see for example Webber 2018: 12, 151–168; Belliotti 2019: 49–57; and Kim 2021), and his account of the absurd requires the contingency of the normative component, we have reason to allow for a contingent demand within the concept of existential absurdity. This warrants suspicion towards the popular view that an absurdity can only be existential if it is inescapable.

Between the radical contingency of a Sartrean normative component of existential absurdity and the inescapability of a Camusian demand, there is conceptual room for a position that considers the absurd demand revisable yet rather tenacious. On this broad view, the normative component of absurdity would ultimately be contingent, while also having assumed some power over the subject that makes it difficult for her to transcend the demand and thereby absurdity. The insidiousness of the demand and the corresponding difficulty of overcoming it range from relatively weak to relatively strong: for some, it might be feasible (though not immediately available) to relinquish the normative component of absurdity, via a few steps that function to break down the force of the demand; for others, it will be highly unlikely, though not strictly unfeasible (e.g. Holmes 2019).

In her awareness of the shortcomings of both the Sartrean and the Camusian account of normativity, Simone de Beauvoir offers a view that unifies the various positions between the extremities of radical contingency and practical inescapability. As Webber notes, the Beauvoirian view of normativity presupposes the concept of *project sedimentation*. According to this view, a normative reason increases in weight each time it is acted upon, thus becoming more deeply embedded in the subject's perspective – that is, in the structures that organize her experience (Beauvoir 1944: 124; 1949: 777–780; Webber 2018: 62). The more embedded it is, the more influence it exerts on her behaviour and the more difficult it becomes for her to transcend it. But even in the most insidious cases of sedimentation, a project is never absolutely binding (Beauvoir 1944: 93), as it can be overcome by making a decision to transform oneself ("inner metamorphosis"; Beauvoir 1949: 780) and working towards breaking down the project ("gradual erosion"; Webber 2018: 92).

Hence, absurdity can emerge from a sedimented demand, which has gained some momentum through repeated endorsement. This is likely to be true for the will to live, which is (according to the basic tenets of Beauvoir's philosophy) neither inherently present in humans nor easily abandoned once present. Given that many demands traditionally identified as components of absurdity (e.g. the will to live, the desire to know, the will to power, the need for positive satisfaction) are being endorsed in pervasive and systematic ways, they will likely be insidious, having become heavily sedimented. Thus, even when the demand is viewed as ultimately contingent, it can still be highly resistant to transcendence.

The upshot is that there is reason to reject the popular view that an existential absurdity must be inescapable as a matter of conceptual necessity. Since an inescapable demand is deeply incompatible with both Sartre's and Beauvoir's existentialism, and they both consider life to be absurd in some way, we must acknowledge that existential absurdity need not involve an inescapable demand and thus need not be inescapable as a whole. Instead, life can be absurd in a contingent way. Again, this does not entail that the idea of inescapable absurdity is incoherent and that the absurdity of life *must* be contingent. My argument makes the more modest claim that existential absurdity *can* be contingent – not that it is. Put differently, the family of theories of existential absurdity includes ones where the absurdity is contingent.

## 2 | CONTINGENCY IN THE NEGATIVE COMPONENT

In the previous section, we have seen that if we are to make sense of a Sartrean notion of absurdity at all, its normative component must be understood as a contingent fact. The negative component, likewise, can be construed as contingent – that is, as something that can be overcome. As mentioned before, if either of the components is contingent, then so is the absurdity as a whole, since the absurd can then be overcome by eliminating the contingent component. If it is coherent to consider the absurd lack contingent (and I will argue that it is), then this will count as a further reason to reject the inescapability account of existential absurdity – the widely held view that an absurdity can only be existential if it is inescapably part of human existence. This contingent version of the negative fact can be found in an earlier work by Sartre: *Nausea* (1938). But before we flesh out the implications of Sartre's novel, let's spell out further how the negative component of existential absurdity is understood within the inescapability account.

As with the normative component of absurdity, Camus is notoriously resolute in his claims about the inescapability of the negative fact. This is no surprise, given that he takes the absurd as a whole to be inescapable (Webber 2018: 25; Belliotti 2019: 40–42; Francev 2023: 42). Indeed, it would not really be insuperable if only one of the components were a necessary concomitant of human life and the other a contingent condition. Hence, he postulates an incongruity between "the human need" – which is, as we have seen, an essential part of being human – and "the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus 1942: 32). On various occasions, Camus elaborates on the silence of the world in strong modal terms. He refers, for instance, to "the impossibility of constituting the world as a unity" (Camus 1942: 16) and the alleged fact that "all true knowledge is impossible" (18; cf. 29). The alleged

impossibility of knowledge can be specified further, to constitute for example an inexorable lack of access to the subjective experience of the other (Sagi 2002: 52–53), but typically it is associated with absolute meaning – something that is meaningful independently of any relative meaning. This can be taken in either metaphysical terms (as the inescapable absence of absolute meaning) or epistemologically (as the inescapable ignorance regarding absolute meaning). As Belliotti summarizes, "the silence of the universe arises either from its inherent meaninglessness or the impossibility of human beings accessing whatever inherent meaning the universe embodies" (Belliotti 2019: 32; cf. Francev 2023: 37–46).

At times, Camus seems to allude to the possibility of transcending the negative fact: "I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it." (Camus 1942: 51) But this seems to be a mere theoretical possibility, which does not undermine the practical unfeasibility of actualizing a positive state-of-affairs that would cancel the absurdity. That is why immediately after this expression of doubt he says that "I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it." (51) For Camus, then, it matters very little whether it is possible for there to be absolute meaning outside of our epistemological reach, as there would be no reason to assume that this meaning would ever be grasped by the human mind:

> I can refute everything in this world surrounding me that offends or enraptures me, except this chaos, this sovereign chance and this divine equivalence which springs from anarchy. […] I know that […] it is impossible for me just now to know [the world's meaning]. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms. What I touch, what resists me – that is what I understand. And these two certainties – my appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle – I also know that I cannot reconcile them. (Camus 1942: 51)

Here, Camus is clear about the inescapability of the absurd lack: it is part and parcel of human life and cannot feasibly be overcome.

It is possible, however, to construe the negative component of existential absurdity as a contingent fact, parallel to the account of the normative component entailed in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and Beauvoir's views around the same time. The contingency of a negative fact giving rise to absurdity is, I will argue, entailed in Sartre's earlier literary work – *Nausea* (1938). As the novel gives a coherent picture of absurdity as something that is both existential and can be overcome by transcending the negative condition of meaninglessness, it offers a further reason to reject the view that existential absurdity must be inescapable as a matter of conceptual necessity.

In *Nausea*, Antoine Roquentin struggles with the meaninglessness of existence. He has discovered that there is no objective meaning to anything, as all meanings are contingent upon the subject. This subject, the novel suggests, projects meaning onto an inherently meaningless world. A pair of scissors, for example, has meaning only because people use it for cutting. When viewed outside of the practice of cutting, it becomes a meaningless entity. And this is exactly how Roquentin comes to view the world around him – as an assemblage of meaningless entities. "Things have broken free from their names," Roquentin reports (Sartre 1938: 150), alluding to the discrepancy between the mind's tendency to project meaning onto things and the fact that these meanings do not inhere in the things themselves. This is why the world has become strange to him: "Nothing looked real; I felt surrounded by cardboard scenery which could suddenly be removed." (92)

The absurdity of Roquentin's condition thus involves a negative state-of-affairs: a lack of meaning. As we have seen in the previous section, the absurd is sometimes reduced to this negative fact in Sartre's works and in the reconstructions of it (see Sagi 2002: 55–58; Kim 2021: 3). In the terminology list appended to a translation of *Being and Nothingness*, for example, translator Hazel E. Barnes describes the absurd as "[t]hat which is meaningless" (Barnes 1992: 628). Furthermore, Sartre himself often contrasts his own concept of absurdity with that of Camus. For Sartre, "the fundamental absurdity is 'facticity' or, in other words, the irreducible contingency of our 'being-there', of our existence that has neither purpose nor reason." He contrasts this notion of absurdity with that of

Camus, according to which the absurd "resides in the fact that man is an insoluble contradiction" (Sartre 2010: 236–237). If we take Sartre's word for it, it seems that the novel presupposes an existential absurdity that is wholly negative, thereby missing a relation to something normative.

Notwithstanding these remarks, it is difficult to see how Roquentin's condition could be so anxiety-stricken if it weren't for some kind of demand that things ought to have been different. Without something like a demand for meaning, one's encounter with the meaninglessness of existence would be rather peaceful. Thus, Roquentin's horror under the yoke of meaninglessness betrays a normative presupposition within the absurdity of his condition: he yearns for meaning in a meaningless world. Despite Sartre's own monistic remarks, then, the absurdity at the heart of *Nausea* must therefore be understood dualistically, as an incongruity between a demand for meaning and the lack thereof.

While Roquentin despairs of an objective source of meaning that could remedy his absurd condition, he slowly discovers the possibility of another remedy. In the absence of objective meaning, one can still satisfy one's desire for meaning – namely, by adopting a project (Webber 2018: 152–153). This is why Roquentin only discovers absurdity once his core projects have broken down: both his relationship with Anny and his academic interest in the life of the Marquis de Rollebon (two foundational projects) are definitively in the past at the start of the novel (Webber 2018: 30). This dependency of meaning upon projects is also evidenced by the solution that Roquentin endorses on the final pages of the book. By resolving to become a writer, Roquentin has taken the first step towards reconfiguring a meaningful engagement with the world.[10]

Thus, *Nausea* presents a meaning-focused analogue to the normative antirealism found in *Being and Nothingness*. Instead of normativity being contingent upon the projects undertaken by a subject, *Nausea* entails the view that meanings are project-dependent. Sartre came to reject this view by the time he published *Being and Nothingness*, though the reasons behind this shift are debated (Webber 2018: 44). The development can be summarized as follows: while *Nausea* puts forward a worldview in which "the meanings of things are dependent on our projects", *Being and Nothingness* advances a modified view, according to which "structures of meaning are already present as a result of our physically and socially determined relations with our surroundings, but we experience these meanings as presenting us with reasons [insofar as they] reflect the values enshrined in our projects." (Webber 2018: 153)

Given the account of meaning as fundamentally dependent upon the individual's projects, the meaningless predicament in which Roquentin finds himself constitutes an absurdity from which there is, according to the narrative of the novel, a clear way out. One must commit oneself to projects. Only then can one satisfy the desire for meaning. This shows that the absurdity in *Nausea* is construed as contingent rather than inescapable: by pursuing something which fills the lack that co-constitutes absurdity, one can overcome that very absurdity. And despite its contingency, it remains a profoundly existential form of absurdity, owing to the extent to which absurdity structures Roquentin's outlook on life. Both the normative and the negative, that is, fundamentally shape the way in which Roquentin lives his life.

In short, *Nausea* offers further reasons to reject the idea that existential absurdity is by definition inescapable. It shows how the negative component of an absurd condition can (like the normative component) be contingent without thereby failing to be genuinely existential. As long as the incongruity is a structural feature of human life, we have no need for including inescapability in the concept of existential absurdity. Thus, a negative state-of-affairs can give rise to absurdity and still be liable to escape. Although existential absurdity *can* still be inescapable, it need not be.

## 3 | THE PROBLEM OF TRIVIALITY IN RADICALLY CONTINGENT ABSURDITY

If it is radically feasible to escape absurdity (in Sartre's case by simply revising one's projects), then why not immediately implement this solution? Insofar as the radical feasibility of ameliorating an inherently disappointing reality

gives us reasons to ameliorate it, it seems inexplicable how people could continue to live under an absurd condition for any significant portion of their lives. Without an explanation of this kind, the view predicts that most lives would only be absurd for a negligible amount of time. And yet, the concept of existential absurdity suggests that it is a fundamentally significant aspect of life. Thus, a tension arises. How can this condition be at once fundamental and radically contingent? In short, radical contingency threatens to trivialize what seems at face value to be fundamentally significant. This puzzle for radically contingent versions of existential absurdity can be dubbed *the problem of triviality*.[11]

A similar objection has been levelled against the basic tenets of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. In response to his account of normativity, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945: 462; see also McInerney 1979) and Simone de Beauvoir (1945: 163) argued that the idea of "radical conversion" (Sartre 1943: 607) entails an untenable view of projects. The primary issue with this account is that the notion of a radically revisable outlook on normative reasons is at odds with the phenomenology of commitment. One cannot genuinely be considered committed while being aware "that the following instant will find it, in every way, just as free and just as little established" (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 462). To exemplify, it is a ubiquitous feature of human activity that one sometimes begins with a strong resolution or even an epiphany of a newfound purpose, only to revert to old habits and patterns. In situations like this, the old version of oneself often remains deeply ingrained in the normative structures that shape one's life. The part of the self that opposes the newly discovered purpose is a "sedimented project" – that is, a project that has gained momentum through repeated affirmation and thereby wields some influence over the subject that has been affirming it until conversion (Beauvoir 1944: 124; 1949: 777–780; Webber 2018: 57–75).

One version of the problem of triviality infers from the above line of reasoning that a radically revisable demand would not even be structural in the first place, thus falling short of constituting existential absurdity. Even affirming a radically revisable demand for the entirety of one's life would not save it from the non-structural, since pervasiveness under the yoke of radical freedom reduces to nothing more than a sequence of normative affirmations, instead of a veritable structure. A structure in the proper sense of the word has, on this view, some degree of independent influence over the subject and can only be overcome by "gradual erosion" (Webber 2018: 92). That is to say, a structure needs to be carefully dismantled – and this takes time.

Yet, this version of the problem fails to appreciate the way in which a commitment can organize the normative structures of one's experiential reality even when one can withdraw commitment without much trouble. For the sake of exemplification, consider an ordinary game of chess (say, a low-stakes game between two friends, rather than a world championship finale). When initiating the game, a player resigns herself to the rules of the game: for example, one ought not to move the rook diagonally, one ought not to move a pawn backward, and so on. As a constitutive goal of the game, she commits herself to checkmating her opponent – or at least tries to do so. It should be obvious that these norms are only binding for her insofar as she remains committed to the game; the bindingness of these norms is radically contingent upon her commitment. Without a commitment to the game, she would have no normative reasons to try to achieve checkmate. But it does not follow from the ever-available possibility of withdrawal (or "conversion" towards another activity) that this set of radically contingent demands fails to be structural. Indeed, it systematically guides her actions for the entirety of the game. This systematic action-guidingness makes the demand positively structural. In similar ways, a life-project plays a structural role in organizing one's life, even when one can revise it at any moment. And likewise, the normative component in existential absurdity can be contingent upon the decision to maintain it, without thereby losing the structural feature. Even if an absurd demand is radically contingent and can be retracted at any time, it does not divest life of a structural end.[12]

This applies not only to the notion of radical revisability in *Being and Nothingness*, but also to its analogue in *Nausea*. According to the latter's conception of absurdity, it is not the demand but the lack that is susceptible to revision at any time. This follows from the claim that meanings are fully contingent on the subject's projects, which are freely chosen. Following the above line of reasoning, the negative component can still serve a structural role in organizing the meanings that present themselves in experience, even when it stands powerless against the revisionary whims of the subject; for, it suffices if the negative state-of-affairs structures the meanings that present themselves in

experience. In *Nausea*, this is certainly the case. Roquentin's state of meaninglessness drastically alters his experience: the objects around him begin to look strange (Sartre 1938: 149–161), his grasp on other people breaks down (4, 32–33, 40–41), and even his sense of self loses its familiar substance (202–203). Despite the radical revisability of his meaningless mode of being, the lack of meaning is as structural as can be.

Therefore, we must interpret the problem of triviality without the worry that trivialization would render absurdity non-structural. The problem can be formulated as follows. Insofar as absurdity presents itself as a source of distress and impairment – for, it consists of a positive demand and a reality that fails to satisfy it – the decision to conserve the absurdity of life would seem to be irrational. When the demand is radically contingent, one could simply revise it in order to do away with the absurdity, along with the harm that accompanies it. In the case of a radically contingent lack, one could likewise decide to ameliorate the state-of-affairs in a way that would remove the absurdity. If revision is readily available, then absurdity seems like needless masochism – easily overcome by the power of the will. Why would one ever continue to suffer for longer than a moment from a radically contingent source of distress and impairment? If the concept of radically contingent absurdity predicts that rational agents will escape absurdity almost immediately, then the majority of lives will be absurd for little more than an instant. Meanwhile, it is intuitively plausible that absurdity must be more significant than this if it is to be genuinely existential.

Camus avoids trivialization, as the inescapability of the absurd offers an obvious explanation of this continued suffering. And Beauvoir, too, appears to dodge an objection along these lines. For, the notion of sedimented projects explains how one is likely to suffer from a contingent source of distress and impairment: if absurdity has become deeply ingrained in one's life, through repeated affirmation, then it continues to exert an influence independently of one's will to overcome it. Nonetheless, my response to this triviality objection against radically contingent absurdity will help to consolidate less radical accounts of contingency as well, such as the Beauvoirian approach to absurdity as contingent yet sedimented. It does so, I will argue, by identifying possible reasons for wanting to keep life absurd that are extrinsic both to the normative component of absurdity and to the force of abandoned projects that are yet to be fully eroded.

## 4 | REASONS FOR LIFE TO REMAIN ABSURD

Before detailing what I consider the appropriate response to the problem of triviality, let's explore a closely related strategy, which may succeed in answering the problem only to some extent. This strategy aims to point out the difficulties in coming to recognize the way out of existential absurdity. Generally speaking, the fact that it is easy to solve a problem once the solution is known neither entails nor presupposes that it is easy to become aware of this solution. To offer a familiar example, it is (for many people) relatively easy to stand on one leg without wobbling, but the key to doing this may not be immediately obvious: one must focus on an unmoving point in space. Without the proper knowledge, it may seem difficult to accomplish this task. This distinction allows us to contend that the solution to the absurdity of life may be both readily available and non-obvious to many people. The difficulty in recognizing the way out of absurdity may be due to cognitive obstacles, the force of habit, or other factors. Factors like these could explain why Roquentin takes so long to adopt a project to restore to some extent the meaningful character of his world. If the proponent of a radically contingent form of absurdity can substantiate in any of these ways the non-obvious nature of the escape route(s), the absurdity will be saved from being a trivial state-of-affairs.

This approach to the problem of triviality works well for absurdities that can be overcome by eliminating the negative component (thus satisfying the demand after all), but much less so for absurdities whose contingency derives from the contingency of the normative component. If it is possible to transcend the absurd by simply revising the demand that gives rise to it, how could revision be non-obvious? The struggle need not even be a clear object of deliberation: when we consistently fail to satisfy a desire, for example, we will often be motivated to abandon that desire without having to introspect all that much. Why would revision in the case of absurdity be any different? It

seems, therefore, that an appeal to difficulties in recognizing the solution is likely to fail here. As a result, it cannot save from triviality those absurdities whose normative component is radically contingent.

Instead, the key to answering this objection lies in Sartre's remarks about the costliness of alternative courses of action:

> There is no doubt that I could have done otherwise, but that is not the problem. We should instead formulate it like this: could I have done otherwise without markedly changing the organic totality of projects that I am, or would the fact of resisting my [pro tanto reason for revision], rather than remaining a mere local and accidental modification of my behaviour, be possible only with a radical transformation of my being-in-the-world – a transformation that is, moreover, possible. In other words, I could have done otherwise, agreed: but at what cost? (1943: 595)

Following Sartre's analysis of the reality of revision, I submit that rational agents can justifiably uphold the absurdity of their lives insofar as abandoning either of its components would make them worse off. If the proponent of a radically contingent version of existential absurdity can identify costs with abandoning either of the components of absurdity, then they have effectively found an answer to the problem of triviality. That is, absurdity will not be a trivial problem, because there are reasons to keep life absurd in spite of the negative consequences incurred by absurdity itself.[13]

This calls for further analysis of the normative landscape surrounding absurdity. It would not be justifiable to keep life absurd unless there were reasons in favour of absurdity that outweigh the reasons against it. Because of the basic structure of existential absurdity (as the structural absence of something which we have reason to desire), there are a priori pro tanto reasons to have a con-attitude towards absurdity. It is something inherently lamentable. If escape is feasible, these attitudinal reasons would likely ground action-guiding reasons: to try to eliminate absurdity from one's life. Again, these are *pro tanto* reasons, which is to say that there might exist competing reasons that could guide an agent towards a different course of action.

Thus, the proponent of a radically contingent variant of existential absurdity can argue that, in spite of the pro tanto reasons to lament and transcend absurdity, there are further considerations that make it best to keep life absurd. There would, in other words, be an all-things-considered reason to uphold the absurdity of one's life.

What could trump the pro tanto reasons for transcending a radically contingent variant of absurdity? The overriding considerations are likely to differ across different first-order accounts of existential absurdity. For, it is difficult to see how, for example, the benefits of mortality could be analogous to the benefits of meaninglessness. This is why I will offer two examples of possibly overriding reasons to keep life absurd in some way, one for each of the two components of absurdity. After this, I will identify some considerations that likely keep Roquentin from immediately escaping his contingently absurd condition.

First, consider an account of existential absurdity that derives from death. Suppose that one has a variety of hopes and dreams for the future and lives an altogether happy life with a steady sense of progress. It follows, then, that one has a reason to continue living. Given the prospect of death, then, one faces an existential absurdity – an incongruity between one's reason to continue living and the fact that one will ultimately die. According to Sartre, however, this normative outlook on death is not an essential component of human life[14]: the value which someone places on their life derives from the contingent totality of their projects (Sartre 1943: 574). One can give up this reason to continue living by abandoning the projects that give rise to it. In doing so, one has effectively overcome the normative component of the absurd. And because an existential absurdity can be overcome by overcoming either of its components, one will thus have transcended the absurdity of death itself (even if death, as the negative component of that existential absurdity, is inescapable). But even so, it is likely that many people would not want to forgo the will to live. Why? This has to do with the way in which projects are intricately connected (Webber 2018: 52): the project of self-preservation undergirds many other projects, such as the project of living an active lifestyle or the pursuit of a career. If one opted to revoke the will to live, this would jeopardize the projects that give substantial

meaning to one's life. Because we value projects that couldn't do without a will to live, we wouldn't want to abandon the will to live even if it solved the absurdity of death.[15] As a result, it seems probable that, even if the normative component of a death-based absurdity is radically revisable, we have reasons to tolerate the absurdity of our lives.[16]

Is it likewise conceivable that there would be reasons to keep life absurd if the *negative* component were contingent? I argue that it is. Specifically, I argue that a freedom-based version of existential absurdity can be overall preferable over its non-absurd alternative. According to this freedom-based account of the absurd, there is a pro tanto reason to wish for a substantial amount of guidance in life, whether it be through commands laid down by God, through the inherent telos of the kind of being that one is, through the imperatives of desire, or some other source of normativity. Meanwhile, we find ourselves lacking guidance. As such, we are, in Sartre's words, "condemned to be free." (Sartre 1945: 29) While this negative state-of-affairs is pro tanto lamentable from the viewpoint of these aforementioned reasons for wanting guidance, it can also give rise to certain benefits. Without substantial guidelines, we are free to live life on our own terms, with an air of spontaneity and excitement towards the possibilities that we may forge for ourselves. Thus, we steer clear of a sense of restriction and heteronomy. Insofar as these positive concomitants of the negative component of freedom-based absurdity outweigh the pro tanto reasons for lamenting it, one will have overall reason to keep life absurd and tolerate the negative effects of that absurdity – even if absurdity could be eliminated by making oneself unfree. In other words, we might be better off *with* absurdity, thus making it rational to maintain that absurdity even if it is contingent.

If we turn our attention to the costs of transcending absurdity within the narrative of *Nausea*, we can explain more adequately why Roquentin struggles to overcome his absurd predicament. Surely, there may be difficulties in coming to recognize the way out, but it strikes me as more plausible that there is a type of trepidation that keeps him from implementing the solution. What scares him, that is, is the burden of responsibility that comes with committing oneself. By committing oneself, one decides to pursue one possibility and thus to exclude alternatives, even if only for the time being. If one chooses X, and X excludes Y, then one has effectively chosen not to pursue Y, despite any meritorious qualities associated with it. This means that there necessarily are worthwhile possibilities that cannot be actualized. Even if one manages to realize an impressive number of possibilities (say, becoming a brain surgeon, a successful jazz composer, and a professional tennis player, all at once), there are innumerable possibilities that will be left unpursued. It also means, moreover, that one bears the weight of possibly having excluded possibilities that would have been far better than the chosen course of action. Indeed, one could even be sorely mistaken in one's decisions, leading to profound suffering in oneself or in others. In conclusion, there is plenty of cause for anxiety when confronted with choosing a project. This is likely one of the core factors contributing to Roquentin's reluctance to escape the meaninglessness of a life without projects: even though he suffers deeply from a sense of meaninglessness, the way out is fraught with anxiety. Insofar as his experience of anxiety in the face of commitment is stronger than his suffering under the yoke of meaninglessness, he disfavours escape from the absurdity of his life.

The upshot is this: absurdity may be favourable over its alternatives. Even though the concept of existential absurdity entails that there are pro tanto reasons to lament absurdity and, if it is contingently absurd, to try to escape it, there may be further considerations that count in favour of keeping life absurd. Transcending the absurd can be unacceptably costly, insofar as every possible transcendence of absurdity entails a loss in value that exceeds the evaluative benefits associated with a nonabsurd life.[17] As we have seen in the abovementioned absurdities, the costliness of transcendence is not inconceivable.

This is not to say that transcending the absurd is always unacceptably costly. Such a strong claim is not necessary to resist the idea that radically contingent versions of the absurd render absurdity trivial. What is needed is a conceivable scenario in which one reasonably chooses an absurd life when escape is possible. This is what I have shown. In demonstrating the conceivability of absurdity being favourable over alternatives, I have shown that the concept of radically contingent absurdity does not render inexplicable how rational agents could continue to live under an absurd condition for a significant portion of their lives.

Finally, one might worry that the idea of absurdity being all-things-considered favourable over its alternatives undermines the normative component. According to this worry, it is unintelligible to say that the negative

state-of-affairs is worthy of being lamented if there is no better state-of-affairs imaginable. But of course, the argument proposed here is not that absurdity may be the best condition imaginable; if something is in some respect the best condition imaginable, then it surely fails to be a candidate for existential absurdity. Rather, my argument rests on the idea that absurdity may be the best condition within our grasp. Within a radically contingent form of existential absurdity, the possibilities of non-absurdity that are readily available might all be worse than absurdity, but this allows for the superiority of unfeasible but conceivable states of non-absurdity (such as immortality). In light of the conceivability of a better condition that is at the same time unfeasible, the absurdity remains a lamentable state-of-affairs. In this way, the normative component remains intact.[18]

In conclusion, the concept of radically contingent absurdity can be saved from triviality, provided that there be strong normative reasons to uphold the component(s) of existential absurdity. Given such reasons, it would not amount to needless masochism if one chose to maintain the absurdity of life. This is, then, why one could continue to suffer from a radically contingent source of distress and impairment: it is the best feasible world.

Given the novelty of the idea that there can be reasons to keep life absurd even if absurdity can be overcome, further research into these reasons is needed. These pro-absurdity reasons would to some extent (if not completely) depend upon the subjective make-up of the individual. Still, a general reason for both of the components can be formulated: abandoning either the demand or the lack would be inconsistent with core values and thus hamper the sense of purpose and motivation within one's life. Which reasons for conserving the absurd are widely held for each of the substantive, first-order notions of absurdity (e.g. death, freedom, ignorance, and so on) is a question that has been touched on here but must be addressed more fully in future inquiries.

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## ENDNOTES

[1] These examples figure in many overviews of existential absurdity (Sagi 2002; Cornwell 2006; Belliotti 2019; Sharpe et al. 2020; Francev & Kałuża 2023).

[2] To say that these are claims of absurdity is of course not to claim that life is absurd in these ways. The former is a conceptual claim, the latter ontological. Taking a *metaexistential* approach, I refrain from making ontological claims, i.e. claims about what human life is like. Insofar as some formulations can somehow still suggest ontological statements, they have to be interpreted as conceptual inferences from the view under discussion, rather than endorsements of the view's ontological claims.

[3] Put more technically, existential absurdity involves a negative state-of-affairs (what is not the case), towards which there is a normative reason to have a con-attitude. This is why one says that *something ought to be the case, while it is not*. The normative reason might for example be generated by a desire, a need or an objective value.

[4] This is not to say that the absurd could be at once both contingent and inescapable, but that there is the *possibility* of contingent absurdity alongside the *possibility* of inescapable absurdity. Contrary to the popular assumption that a genuinely existential absurdity *must* be inescapable by way of conceptual necessity, I argue that it is possible for an existential absurdity to be contingent.

[5] It is worth noting that the nature of normativity is widely debated, without much consensus. Some consider value to be the fundamental normative concept (Olson 2006; Orsi 2013; Maguire 2016), while others endorse ought fundamentalism (Broome 2018) or reasons fundamentalism (Parfit 2011; Scanlon 2014; Cosker-Rowland 2019; Schroeder 2021). Here, I resist an overly narrow view of normativity, lest the argument be skewed by premature definition. Instead, I assume a broader view of normativity (Copp & Morton 2022), including not only reasons for action but also evaluative facts: facts about what is good, regardless of whether anyone can or ought to promote or honour that goodness. Besides, reasons fundamentalism does not necessarily exclude instances of goodness that cannot be promoted (or badness that cannot be mitigated). Indeed, we can allow for *attitude*-guiding reasons in addition to *action*-guiding reasons (Stratton-Lake 2018; Smith 2013: 70–74). Thus, the normative component of existential absurdity can be identified with an *evaluative fact* that a hypothetical state-of-affairs would be good, a *reason to have a pro-attitude towards* a hypothetical state-of-affairs, or a *reason for pursuing* a hypothetical state-of-affairs.

[6] When speaking of normative reasons, I mean *pro tanto* reasons, not *all-things-considered* reasons (unless specified as such).

[7] Cf. Camus 1942: 51: "I hold certain facts from which I cannot separate. What I know, what is certain, what I cannot deny, what I cannot reject – this is what counts. I can negate everything of that part of me that lives on vague nostalgias, except this desire for unity, this longing to solve, this need for clarity and cohesion."

[8] On some readings, Sartre's concept of the absurd is still dualist, without positing an incongruity. Instead, the absurd consists in an *ambiguity*, as suggested by Jo Bogaerts: "Seemingly close to the insoluble contradiction between an indifferent universe and man's longing for harmony, described by Camus, the tension between facticity and transcendence for Sartre is an ambiguous situation, not a contradictory one. The situation described by Sartre is ambiguous insofar as the subject is always at once master of his own life (he can always 'transcend') and oblivious to its meanings (once acted out in the world, one's choices turn into the factical aspect of the situation)" (Bogaerts 2018: 20; cf. Aho 2014: 52–53). But even here, there is still incongruity amidst ambiguity. This incongruity seems at least twofold, comprising (a) the incongruity between the desire to know the meanings of one's actions beforehand and our ignorance and (b) the incongruity between our desire to have complete control over the consequences of our actions and our powerlessness.

[9] Sartre contrasts himself with Camus in the following way: "For some [himself included], the fundamental absurdity is 'facticity' or, in other words, the irreducible contingency of our 'being-there', of our existence that has neither purpose nor reason. For others [Camus included], [...] it resides in the fact that man is an insoluble contradiction." (quoted in Bogaerts 2018: 20; cf. Sartre 2010: 236–237; Sartre 1938: 154; Cruickshank 1960: 45n; Kim 2021: 3)

[10] It may be argued that Roquentin overcomes not only the negative component of absurdity (by finding subjective meaning), but also the normative component of a closely related absurdity: the desire for objective meaning in an objectively meaningless world. According to this interpretation, Roquentin overcomes absurdity by relinquishing the desire for objective meaning, which he realizes is not the only kind of meaning that would make life meaningful. It seems to me that the two are compatible: the incongruity between a desire for objective meaning and a lack thereof is an expression of the more general incongruity between a desire for meaning per se and a lack thereof. Still, the former could exist without the latter, as many people plausibly wish that life were objectively meaningful while still feeling life to be meaningful through one's projects. The presence of multiple absurdities does not matter for my argument here.

[11] The term 'triviality' is sometimes used to refer to propositions that are obviously true (e.g. tautologies). My usage of the term, in contrast, is closer to its meaning in ordinary language, as related to the quality of being insignificant, inconsequential or pointless. I avoid these closely related terms, however, because they often feature in first-order accounts of existential absurdity. For instance, some deem life absurd in light of the alleged insignificance, pointlessness or inconsequential nature of human strivings. Because of this potential confusion, it's best to stick with 'the problem of triviality'.

[12] Some readers might be tempted to be suspicious of the analogy. For, in a game of chess, one's commitment to participating in it is typically contingent upon reasons outside of the chess game, such as the fact that one enjoys spending time with a friend in this way. It follows from the Sartrean account, however, that the same would be true for an absurd demand: the demand derives its normative force from a project (or a set of projects), as all normative reasons do (Webber 2018: ch. 3). Like in a game of chess, one can relinquish the project from which the demand originates.

[13] In a Sartrean conception of absurdity, these costs would of course not be objective, since the idea of objective costs would be incompatible with Sartre's views on normativity. Instead, they should be taken to derive, like all value, from one's projects.

[14] Besides, the debate around euthanasia suggests that one can in principle have reasons to end one's life, rather than (as an inescapable version of death-based absurdity suggests) inescapable reasons to wish for self-preservation.

[15] In case there is any confusion, the view articulated here is not that the costs would consist in the loss of projects. This would be an inadequate response to the problem, as we could simply not care about this loss by virtue of our radically free relinquishment of these projects and their value. Instead, the view is that one simply is committed to other projects and does not want to stop valuing them, which makes relinquishment of an absurd demand costly in relation to these valuations. Of course, one could relinquish as many projects as possible in order to avoid disappointment, but this would result in a dramatic decrease in value (not unlike Roquentin's condition in *Nausea*). Few, I think, would prefer this, even if it led to more instances of disappointment.

[16] It should be noted that this escape from the absurdity of death does not necessarily entail the abandonment of pursuing projects more generally. As we have seen in section 1, Sartre considers the pursuit of projects a constitutive feature of being human. Therefore, it cannot be given up. Still, not all projects generate a will to live. For example, some projects might actually require death; a soldier might rationally sacrifice his own life for the lives of his comrades. Furthermore, someone at the end of their life might still pursue projects, such as going for nice dinners, sitting in the sun, and spending time with friends and family, but it is not obvious that they thereby have a reason to stay alive. These projects are contingent on them staying alive and do not obviously generate a reason to keep living. Likewise, someone who fundamentally

aims to be a famous actor but becomes disillusioned with the reality of the world of acting, seeing no way of promoting that evaluative framework within the context of their possibilities, still has a project, but might see death as the only way of advancing it (or of avoiding its frustration). Not because they have ceased to see things as valuable, but quite the contrary: because they continue to do so, albeit without the belief in the feasibility of promoting those values. This suggests that it is possible for human beings to abandon the will to live without thereby falling into projectlessness.

[17] Compare my argument with Nagel's brief remark that one might "achieve a life that was less absurd than most" only "at considerable dissociative cost" (Nagel 1971: 726). Nagel, however, maintains that absurdity is inherently inescapable (718–719).

[18] The idea of a reason for having a con-attitude towards an irremediable state-of-affairs is rather uncontroversial (Stratton-Lake 2018: 291–293).

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