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# A Hyporeflective Response to the Absurd

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## ABSTRACT

If life is absurd in that we cannot help but desire the unattainable, then there is *prima facie* reason to lament the absurd whenever we are confronted with it. This is an intuitive idea: it is fitting to be disappointed by what is essentially disappointing. But if there is nothing we can do about the absurdity of life, we may have reason to minimize awareness of it. My paper explores this hyporeflective response. I present an initial case for hyporeflectivism—what I call the *argument from irremediability*. I proceed to argue that the hyporeflectivist can overcome three difficulties (the *unavoidability objection*, the *involuntarist objection*, and the *truthfulness objection*). They are hard-pressed, however, to overcome the *pyrrhic objection*: in avoiding the negatively evaluative feelings associated with a desire for the unattainable, we may lose more than we gain.

Some philosophers (such as Albert Camus and Thomas Nagel) have held that human life contains an inescapable conflict between aspiration and reality: the world does not live up to some fundamental expectation. This is what, according to them, makes life absurd. But even if life is absurd in this way, perhaps this need not concern us all that much. Of course, the absurd seems to be—qua conflict between aspiration and reality—inherently disappointing. And yet, if the absurdity of life is inescapable (as Camus and Nagel have supposed), then there is nothing we can do to eliminate this source of disappointment.<sup>1</sup> What, then, would be the point of contemplating the absurdity of our lives? Thus, one may argue that it would be best to avoid thinking about it. This is what I call the *hyporeflectivist proposal*: the view that we ought to deal with the inescapable absurdity of life by minimizing awareness of it.

My argument proceeds as follows. In the first section, I give a basic account of the structure of existential absurdity and why it would be cause for disappointment. Then, I present an initial case for hyporeflectivism—what I call the *argument from irremediability*. Next, I address four puzzles that the hyporeflectivist must solve. First, how can avoidance succeed if the absurd is an inescapable feature of human life? I argue that hyporeflectivism

can overcome this difficulty by accepting what Thomas Nagel rejects: what is lacking from life according to the absurdist must be independent of one's experience of that lack. Second, I address the involuntarist objection. Contrary to Nagel's suggestion that we cannot actively avoid the existential perspective, I argue that hyporeflection can be actively cultivated through indirect means. Third, I discuss whether the hyporeflectivist should be worried about the truth of the absurd mattering simpliciter. I argue that even if we accept the value of truthfulness, it remains difficult to establish the importance of maintaining awareness without any reason to prioritize this truth over myriad others. Fourth, I address the loss of potential benefits to reminding oneself of the absurd, which tend to outweigh the benefits of avoiding lament. In contrast with the first three objections, this *pyrrhic objection* offers strong reasons to reject the hyporeflectivist proposal.

## 1 | Reason to Lament the Absurd

Despite the fact that Camus is often seen as far removed from the analytic tradition of philosophy, he resembles an ordinary-language philosopher when he sets out to clarify

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## 2 | The Case for Hyporeflexivism

what 'the absurd' means in the existential sense by looking at ordinary cases of absurdity. "[I]f I tell a virtuous man," he says, "that he has coveted his own sister, he will reply that this is absurd" (Camus 1942: 33). Camus proceeds to explain why the virtuous man would be inclined to respond in this way: "[t]he virtuous man illustrates by that reply the definitive antinomy existing between the deed I am attributing to him and his lifelong principles" (33). Absurdity can likewise be found in actions: "If I see a man armed only with a sword attack a group of machine-guns, I shall consider his act to be absurd [...] by virtue of the disproportion between his intention and the reality he will encounter, of the contradiction I notice between his true strength and the aim he has in view" (33). What exactly ties together these ordinary usages of the term 'absurdity'?

Ordinary cases of absurdity, it seems to Camus, each consist of a conflict between the way the world is and the way it ought to be (33). The same goes for absurdity in the existential sense: if life as a whole is absurd, then it is so in virtue of a demand that the world fails to meet. On a standard reading of Camus, the desideratum at the heart of the absurdity of our lives is some kind of transcendent meaning of life. Of course, there is room for personal significance—things mattering to us—but for Camus there is nothing that gives our lives meaning independent of our giving them meaning.

The absurdity of life is not just one among the many conflicts between demand and reality that may pop up in life. There is something special about existential absurdity in that this absurdity is in some way fundamental to human life. One way of substantiating this fundamentality is to identify it with inescapability: we cannot help but desire the impossible. This view of the absurd as an inescapable feature of human life has famously been endorsed by Albert Camus (1942; see also Sagi 2002: 47-58; Foley 2008: 26-28; Webber 2018: 20-38). In his groundbreaking article "The Absurd," Thomas Nagel similarly expresses the intuition that if life is absurd it must be inescapably so:<sup>2</sup>

The sense that life as a whole is absurd arises when we perceive, perhaps dimly, an inflated pretension or aspiration which is inseparable from the continuation of human life and which makes its absurdity inescapable, short of escape from life itself. [...] 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.

(Nagel 1971: 718)

If the absurd is inescapable, it follows that we can eliminate neither the demand (the existential demand) nor the reality that contradicts it (the existential lack). Because of the ineliminability of the demand for something we cannot have, our absurd condition seems inescapably lamentable. Moreover, it is pro tanto fitting to lament what is lamentable. Therefore, the inescapability of the demand that co-constitutes the absurd appears to give us reason to lament the absurd.

Despite the reasons for lament, perhaps the absurd needn't concern us all that much. After all, one could argue that there is no use in crying over spilt milk. In more ordinary cases of conflict between demand and reality, an attitude of lament may prove useful in remedying the situation. Perhaps one will be motivated to make amends for the current lamentable situation and to prevent similar occasions for lament in the future. In contrast, an existential absurdity (if it is, as Nagel and Camus have assumed, inescapable) cannot be remedied. Thus, lament, albeit fitting in relation to the kind of thing that the absurd is, will be pointless.

We might, moreover, have reason to avoid pointless lament, as A.J. Ayer seems to have suggested in response to Camus's account of the absurd (Ayer 1946: 159). Of course, since the demand behind the absurdity of life is, on Nagel's and Camus's account, inescapable (as Ayer, too, recognizes), we cannot avoid pointless lament by abandoning the demand that life be different. That would, in Camus's words, amount to "philosophical suicide" (Camus 1942: 32-50): denying the premises of the absurd in one's very response to it. Rather, the proposal would be hyporeflexivist: instead of abandoning the absurd (by abandoning the demand), we ought to avoid awareness of the absurd as much as we are able to.

This *argument from irremediability* strikes me as a familiar line of reasoning outside of the debates of existential philosophy. For example, some people feel utterly powerless in relation to the moral catastrophes that dominate the news. They feel, whether justifiably or not, that the belligerent and oppressive forces behind these moral catastrophes are unresponsive to moral outrage and other means of persuasion that we, ordinary citizens, may wield in response to their actions. Here, too, it is felt to be impossible for us to promote the (in this case moral) desideratum, nor can one realistically be expected to abandon one's moral compass. Hence, from the viewpoint of a belief in utter powerlessness, it makes perfect sense for people to avoid the news. Even the opponents of those who have decided to avoid the news seem to acknowledge the internal rationality of this response. Rather than calling upon them to stay informed in spite of the pointlessness of being informed, they tend to question that very pointlessness. There are things you can do, they will say, and so awareness will be useful. But if there is in fact nothing we can do about a lamentable state-of-affairs, then there seems to be some intuitive support for the idea that we should not concern ourselves with it.

The argument from irremediability applies not only to inescapable absurdity but also to an existential absurdity for which escape is possible yet all-things-considered undesirable. I have discussed this version of contingent absurdity, among others, in 'A Case for Contingent Absurdity' (Hamer 2025). For all intents and purposes, the situation will be the same: since all things considered there is nothing we have reason to do by way of overcoming the absurd, there appears to be no point in thinking about that conflict between demand and reality.

The argument doesn't apply, however, to an existential absurdity for which escape is both possible and desirable. In the aforementioned paper (Hamer 2025), I have argued that a Beauvoirian

theory of project sedimentation allows us to make sense of this idea of contingent absurdity: through repeated affirmation of a certain way of life, the absurd may have become deeply ingrained (sedimented) in the structures of our lives, which would take time and effort to dismantle. If dismantling the absurdity of life is both possible and overall preferable over keeping one's life absurd, then the argument for hyporeflexivism no longer holds. For, in this case, the absurd is remediable, both in the modal and in the normative sense: it can and ought to be remedied. Moreover, it seems that any serious attempt to overcome an overall undesirable and contingent conflict between demand and reality requires awareness of that conflict. How could we overcome a tyrannical regime without awareness of it and the ways in which it thwarts our demands for justice? It seems, therefore, that if we have reason to work towards dismantling the absurdity of our lives, we will have instrumental reason to think about it. This is especially true when the degree of sedimentation is high. Under such conditions, the absurdity of life will continually resist our attempts at overcoming it, in spite of the ultimate possibility of transcendence. As a result, we ought to repeatedly reaffirm our commitment to eroding the absurdity of our lives, which cannot be done hyporeflexively but requires conscious choice.

The hyporeflexivist thus proposes, in response to an existential absurdity that we cannot or ought not to overcome, that we should avoid awareness of it. Nagel has likewise suggested that we shouldn't concern ourselves with the absurd. After having argued that life is inescapably absurd, he says: "It need not be a matter for agony unless we make it so" (Nagel 1971: 727). Why not? "If [...] there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that doesn't matter either" (Nagel 1971: 727). Thus, Nagel submits that negatively evaluative feelings in response to the absurd "betray a failure to appreciate the cosmic unimportance of the situation" (Nagel 1971: 727).

Here, Nagel concludes in a rather puzzling fashion that the absurd is not the kind of thing that warrants a negatively evaluative attitude. What Nagel fails to address, however, is the way in which the lack of cosmic importance does seem to matter—that is, from the viewpoint of our inescapable aspiration towards cosmic importance. Even if the lack of cosmic importance is unimportant cosmically speaking, it may well have deep personal significance from within the perspective of our subjectivity.

In contrast, the hyporeflexivist's case as it is presented here takes the significance of the absurd as a reason for turning our attention away from it. This is, again, like the internal logic of those who avoid the news: it is because of the moral lamentability of the reported events that these people try to avoid being confronted with them, not because they are a matter of moral indifference. And so it is in response to the inescapable absurdity of life, according to the hyporeflexivist: it is because of the reasons for lament, coupled with the irremediability of that lamentable state-of-affairs, that we have reason to avoid awareness of the absurd.

Having now defined hyporeflexivism and identified the key argument in favour of it, it is important to observe that a hyporeflexive response to the absurd bears some resemblance to what existentialists like Heidegger and Sartre have called

'inauthenticity'. For Heidegger, authenticity involves, among other things, awareness of the fundamental facts of human life, such as being-in-the-world, thrownness and mortality (Heidegger 1927: Division II). In a similar vein, Sartre calls upon us to recognize our radical freedom; if we don't, we are in bad faith (Sartre 1943: 87–117). These fundamental facts differ from the absurd in at least one important way, for they lack (or at least do not clearly contain) an existential demand. The presence of an existential demand fundamentally transforms the object of (in)authenticity, because it is no longer a mere state-of-affairs but a state-of-affairs that ought to have been different. More differences between inauthenticity and a hyporeflexive response to the absurd can be identified. Not only is the absurdity of life just one among many fundamental conditions in relation to which one can live authentically, and quite unique in its presupposing an existential demand, there is also much more involved in authenticity than mere awareness of a fundamental fact of human life. First, authenticity has a practical component: an authentic individual, for both Heidegger and Sartre, acts in accordance with their values. This falls outside of the scope of the hyporeflexivist proposal. Second, authenticity is often associated with an ideal of self-constitution. Rather than letting one's identity be determined by convention ("the They", to use Heideggerian language), the paragon of authenticity decides who to be for themselves. Despite myriad differences between hyporeflexivism and inauthenticity, the arguments in this paper may be extrapolated to answer a skeptical challenge that can be raised in the existentialist debate: why not be inauthentic? Such extrapolation, though very much worthy of being undertaken, falls outside of the scope of this paper, which deals with the more precisely defined question of justifying awareness of the absurd.

### 3 | The Unavoidability Objection

We have seen that many hold an inescapabilist view about existential absurdity: the concept of the absurdity of life entails that there would be no way to eliminate that absurdity; it would, in other words, be an ineliminable feature of human life. But how could this avoidant strategy be successful at all if the absurd is, as we have stipulated, an inescapable fact of human existence?

This may come across as a silly retort to the hyporeflexivist. After all, it is commonsensical to believe that things can, and do, continue to exist when we have ceased to be aware of them. One can hold that it is an inescapable fact that everyone has private parts hidden underneath their clothes while allowing for the existence of those who try, successfully, to avoid awareness of this. Likewise, our mortality may be inescapable, but awareness of it isn't. Insofar as one can even speak of a paradox of escaping the inescapable, the paradox can therefore be resolved by unpacking an equivocation on the meaning of escape: the inescapability of the absurd refers to escape in the world, whereas the hyporeflexivist's notion of escape is psychological.

Silly as it may seem, the unavoidability objection assumes surprising force against those hyporeflexivists who take their cue from Nagel in defining the absurd. For Nagel, the absurd follows "not from a collision between our expectations and the world, but from a collision within ourselves" (Nagel 1971: 722). Unlike Camus, Nagel can thus be seen (as Gordon 1984 has

observed) as an antirealist concerning the ontological status of the negative component of the absurd: for him, the existential lack (in his case the cosmic unimportance of our activities) is constituted by the existential perspective from which our existence appears to be lacking. In short, “the situation is not absurd until the perception arises” (Nagel 1971: 727).<sup>3</sup> This is also why, for Nagel, “the life of a mouse [...] is not absurd, because he lacks the capacities for self-consciousness and self-transcendence that would enable him to see that he is only a mouse” (Nagel 1971: 725). As Jeffrey Gordon has noted in his comparative analysis between Nagel and Camus, “Nagel thus commits himself to the paradoxical view that the life of the person who never perceives the arbitrariness of our human condition is not absurd” (Gordon 1984: 19).

It is unclear why Nagel insists on this antirealism. One reason could be to accommodate the exceptionalist intuition that it is *human* life that is absurd, not life more generally. However, even if we want to limit the purview of existential absurdity to human beings, we do not need an antirealism of the negative component of the absurd. For it can be argued that only human beings have the constitutive features that give rise to the normative component: only humans, the argument goes, demand that their activities have cosmic importance. Thus, the lives of mice are not absurd, not because they lack the ability to adopt the existential perspective that would bring absurdity into focus, but because they do not demand the existential desideratum. Accordingly, the absurd could still be a collision between our expectations (which are uniquely human) and the world.

Whatever the reasons may be behind Nagel’s antirealism of the negative component, it leads to a paradox for the hyporefectivist. If the absurd is constitutively dependent on the backward step (as the antirealist supposes), and if we can avoid perceiving whatever we would perceive when taking the backward step (as the hyporefectivist proposes we do), then we can escape our absurdity. But this is, assuming with Nagel the irremediability of the absurd, impossible.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, hyporefectivism can only succeed if Nagel’s antirealism concerning the negative component of the absurd is false (or if, pace Nagel, the absurd can and ought to be overcome).

One might counter this by saying that, even though absurdity exists only when taking the backward step, it is an inescapable fact that people at least sometimes take the backward step. But this view runs into a problem as well: how do these occasional moments render *life as a whole* absurd, rather than merely those moments in which the perception arises? It would not be a genuinely *existential* absurdity, since the existentiality of the absurd requires that the absurdity is somehow fundamental to life (see also Hamer 2025). A realist can account for this: the absurdity governs one’s life beyond one’s experience of it as absurd. But if the absurdity of one’s life is, as the antirealist supposes, constitutively dependent on taking the backward step, then it is difficult to see how that absurdity would be fundamental, unless one systematically took the backward step. Yet, if it were a condition for the possibility of an existential absurdity that one systematically took the backward step, then hyporefectivism would be impossible. The antirealist hyporefectivist is thus faced with a puzzle: if hyporefection is possible, then there is no absurd.

It follows that the hyporefectivist must endorse what Nagel rejects: a realist account of the negative component of the absurd. For hyporefectivism to propose a coherent response to an irremediable existential absurdity, it must take whatever is lacking from human life to be independent of taking the perspective from which it appears to be lacking. Realism, that is, must be true if hyporefectivism is to succeed.

This also suggests that the objection, albeit troubling for Nagel, can be countered by the hyporefectivist by endorsing a realist account of the negative component of the absurd. Thus, the unavailability objection is ultimately unsuccessful in offering a case against hyporefectivism *per se*.

#### 4 | The Involuntarist Objection

Even if it is possible to live life hyporefectively in a way that would keep negatively evaluative feelings about the absurdity of life at bay, this does not mean that it is possible to *pursue* a hyporefective life. This possibility is a precondition for the normative claim advanced by the hyporefectivist: we *have reason to pursue* a hyporefective life only if we *are able to pursue* a hyporefective life. This is an intuitively plausible idea, known as the ought-implies-can principle (Vranas 2007).

This idea lies at the basis of Nagel’s objection to hyporefectivism. While he grants that the absurd might go unnoticed, he objects that we cannot actively choose to ignore it: “we cannot refuse consciously, for to do that we would have to be aware of the viewpoint we were refusing to adopt” (Nagel 1971: 725). We could of course happen to be in a state of unawareness with regard to the existential lack, but we cannot *will* hyporefection into existence: “The only way to avoid the relevant self-consciousness would be either never to attain it or to forget it—neither of which can be achieved by the will” (Nagel 1971: 725). Because an answer to the normative question of how to deal with the absurd must center on a course of action that we can choose, rather than a fate which would ideally befall us, involuntary hyporefection cannot be the answer.

This argument against hyporefectivism presupposes what can be dubbed an *involuntarism about hyporefection*: the view that hyporefection cannot be promoted through voluntary control. Is there any reason to accept this involuntarist assumption? The idea behind Nagel’s involuntarism seems to be that it is impossible (or perhaps unacceptably difficult) to *directly* negate our mental states. Suppose, for example, that we tried our hardest to avoid thinking of pink elephants by focusing on the thought we intend to negate and by intending to negate it. Such an attempt would be doomed from the start. This paradox of aiming to negate a thought directly seems to be the driving force behind Nagel’s claim that in order to refuse the existential perspective “we would have to be aware of the viewpoint we were refusing to adopt” (Nagel 1971: 725).

In the empirical literature on emotional regulation, thought suppression receives all but favourable press (Hofmann 2024). There is a vast amount of evidence that indicates that suppressing unwanted thoughts tends to be unsuccessful as a way of regulating them. In fact, it tends to backfire (Wegner 1994; Wang

et al. 2020): refusing to think of an unwanted thought by way of simple suppression tends to amplify the potency of that very thought—not just in the short term, but after the attempt to suppress as well. If this is correct, then a direct attempt at achieving hyporeflexion will not just be futile; it will be counterproductive.

There is good news, however, for the hyporeflectivist: active avoidance of some undesirable thought need not be direct. When we aim to avoid thinking of pink elephants, there is a host of strategies at our disposal. One might, for example, implement preventative strategies (Hofmann 2024), aiming to select situations or to control relevant stimuli related to pink elephants. One could avoid going to the zoo and avoid watching children's animations. When the thought does come up, one may distract oneself with other stimuli. All of these techniques are within our voluntary control.

The same goes for avoiding the thought that the hyporeflectivist judges ripe for avoidance. In his account of self-deception (which, too, deals with avoiding awareness of some undesirable fact), Jean-Paul Sartre likens self-deception to putting oneself to sleep (Sartre 1943: 115).<sup>5</sup> When trying to fall asleep, it is pointless to make a direct attempt at falling asleep. If anything, it will backfire, leading to a kind of mental hyperactivity that is at odds with dozing off. Instead, one ought to promote the conditions that are conducive to falling asleep: turning off the lights, closing the blinds, getting cosy in bed, relaxing one's muscles, thinking happy thoughts, and so on. Likewise, the hyporeflectivist may submit that, each time we take the existential perspective and are therefore at risk of negatively evaluative feelings that are of no use in remedying our condition, we ought to promote the conditions under which the existential perspective is most likely to fade from consciousness. Rather than pushing it out, we ought to let it wane. Situation selection, stimuli control, distraction, and other strategies can aid this pursuit of a hyporeflexive relationship with the absurd. Thus, it seems plausible that this form of hyporeflexion can be cultivated through indirect yet unmistakably active means.

Given that this course of action is, albeit indirect, still active, it therefore qualifies as something which we can have reason to pursue. This is important, because the ought-implies-can principle requires the hyporeflectivist to identify an available path towards minimizing awareness of the absurd. Contrary to Nagel's suggestion that hyporeflexion cannot be achieved voluntarily, we can exert control over the backward step that would lead to lamenting the existential lack. It follows that we can have overall reason to minimize awareness of the absurd, as the hyporeflectivist claims we do.

## 5 | The Truthfulness Objection

It is clear that, for Camus, we ought to live in a way that is consistent with the absurd: "If I judge that a thing is true, I must preserve it. If I attempt to solve a problem, at least I must not by that very solution conjure away one of the terms of the problem. For me the sole datum is the absurd." (Camus 1942: 34) This means, first and foremost, that we ought not to pursue what the absurd entails is impossible. This is a familiar idea: it is not fitting to try to do what we cannot do. But Camus endorses a stronger claim:

if life is absurd, we ought to preserve awareness of it. This can be called *the lucidity requirement*:

Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully. Now, no one will live this fate, knowing it to be absurd, unless he does everything to keep before him that absurd brought to light by consciousness. Negating one of the terms of the opposition on which he lives amounts to escaping it. To abolish conscious revolt is to elude the problem. [...] Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is above all contemplating it.

(Camus 1942: 53)

Following this insistence on maintaining awareness of the absurd, he warns against ways of life that involve a denial of the absurd: "Everything that destroys, conjures away, or ex[or]cises these requirements [...] ruins the absurd and devaluates the attitude that may then be proposed" (Camus 1938: 35).<sup>6</sup> Many have noted the presence of this lucidity requirement within Camus's philosophy of the absurd (see for example Sprintzen 1988; Gordon 1984, 27–28; Sherman 2008: 45, 70). Following the lucidity requirement, *the truthfulness objection* holds that the truth of the absurd is deeply important in some way; therefore, a hyporeflexive response to the absurd cannot be justified.

Why should we uphold the truth of the absurd in this way? If the absurd man has, as Camus supposes, nothing but "the moral code of his likes and dislikes" (Camus 1942: 69), then the lucidity requirement cannot be absolute. Rather, it must be understood as conditional on one's likes and dislikes: if, and only if, one likes to be aware of the absurd, or dislikes being unaware of it, then one ought to maintain awareness of the absurd. Perhaps this requirement follows from a more abstract value of truthfulness that one happens to have: if, and only if, one values being aware of things that are true, or disvalues being unaware of things that are true, then one ought to maintain awareness of the absurd. At any rate, the lucidity requirement will be relative to particular individuals with the prerequisite attitudes. The problem with this relativization of the lucidity requirement is that the normative claims of Camus's philosophy of the absurd become incredibly weak: they have no persuasive force against those who don't already value being aware of the absurd in particular or of the truth at large.

In order to defend the claim that we ought to maintain awareness of the absurd, it must therefore be argued that the lucidity requirement applies universally, or at least generally. Notwithstanding perhaps some exceptions, human beings generally ought to maintain awareness of the absurd—or so the universalist version of the lucidity requirement would go. One way of substantiating a universalist conception of the lucidity requirement is to hold that the truth matters simpliciter. However, this is difficult to reconcile with Camus's claims about meaning and value. As Thomas Nagel has noted, if nothing matters, then that doesn't matter either (Nagel 1971: 727). It follows that it cannot be required, as though from the point of view of the universe (what Nagel calls the view *sub specie aeternitatis*), that one be truthful about the absurd.

Insofar as the assumption is that truthfulness matters simpliciter, and the absurdist denies the existence of the property of mattering simpliciter, the objection against hyporefectivism is likely to fail.

This echoes a question that is often raised in response to the ideal of authenticity in existentialist literature: why be authentic, if one lacks a positively evaluative attitude towards being authentic? Sartre, for example, claims in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) that value depends on the projects one freely chooses to adopt, but then the ideal of authenticity is without ultimate normative ground; as a result, it seems difficult to claim that it is always bad to be in bad faith. Similarly, Heidegger rejects the idea of stance-independent normativity, thus reinstating the question: why should we maintain awareness of being-in-the-world, thrownness, and all the other facts that Heidegger discusses as objects of an authentic existence? It seems that neither Camus nor Sartre nor Heidegger can require or recommend awareness of the fundamental facts of human existence on the basis of a stance-independent ideal of truthfulness.<sup>7</sup>

Even if a philosophy of the absurd somehow allows for the existence of an absolute value of truthfulness, it is still not clear how this value would get us to the lucidity requirement. Why prioritize the truth of the absurd over a plethora of other things that are true? It is true, for example, that there are microscopic arachnids living in my eyebrows, but it would be silly to suppose, even with an insistence on truthfulness, that I ought to live my life in constant, systematic, or even occasional awareness of this fact. Therefore, the proponent of the lucidity requirement needs more than the absolute value of truthfulness; what is needed is a reason to place such high value on living life in lucid awareness of our existential absurdity. Camus hasn't offered any such reason.

But there might be one. This reason in favor of lucidity, I argue, will ultimately derive from the benefits associated with awareness of the absurdity of life. The foundation for a lucidity requirement should therefore be derived not from the absolute value of truthfulness about the absurd, but from the idea that awareness of the absurd comes with significant benefits, which are out of the hyporefectivist's reach. This argument for awareness of the absurd amounts to what I call *the pyrrhic objection*.

## 6 | The Pyrrhic Objection

Even if the truth doesn't matter simpliciter, it may still matter in a way that is universal. For example, even if living truthfully is not valuable in and of itself, it still seems to be universally important to live life in accordance with the truth that  $3 - 2 = 1$ , because doing so allows us to promote our well-being. After all, if three lions go into a cave and two come out, it is of vital importance for me to believe that there is still one lion left in the cave. If there is a truth the awareness of which is generally beneficial to human beings, then we will have reason to stay true to it. We need not invoke the property of mattering simpliciter to establish universal norms of this kind because they can be entirely dependent upon the attitudes generally held by human beings. By extension, one may argue that living life in lucid awareness of the absurd may offer certain benefits upon which human beings generally place high value.

In response to this prudential yet universalist interpretation of the lucidity requirement, one may question whether it can really be all that helpful for human beings to maintain awareness of the absurd. How could it be beneficial to remind oneself of the absurdity of life, if there is nothing we can do to change it? In ordinary cases of unfulfilled demands, we may be in a position to do something to remedy the situation, but if the absurdity of life is, as many have supposed, an inescapable feature of being human, then we can neither remedy the existential lack nor relinquish the existential demand. It follows, then, that awareness of the absurd cannot guide us towards remedial action. If we cannot remedy the absurd, then what is the point of being aware of it?<sup>8</sup>

This brings us to the final argument against hyporefectivism, which I call *the pyrrhic objection*. According to this objection, there are general benefits to reminding oneself of the absurdity of life; these benefits are unavailable in a hyporefective response to the absurd; and the loss of these benefits tends to outweigh the merits of a hyporefective response to the absurd. In short, the objection concludes that the hyporefective victory over negative feelings associated with awareness of the absurd tends to be a pyrrhic one, resulting in an all-things-considered loss. I think there is reason to believe that the objection succeeds.

Despite the fact that awareness of the absurd cannot guide us towards remedial action, I believe that there are significant reasons to remind oneself. These reasons are threefold: awareness of the absurd can (1) aid us in avoiding futile pursuits, (2) reorient us towards valuable alternatives, and (3) offer consolation. While these arguments may not support a case for systematic awareness of the absurd (as Camus sometimes seems to require), we can be content with less. For the hyporefectivist supposes that we minimize awareness of the absurd. If it can be shown that awareness of the absurd should generally play a meaningful role in our lives, then this will be enough to reject the hyporefectivist proposal. This is what the following reasons aim to establish.

First, awareness of the absurd prevents us from pursuing the impossible. If the absurdity of life involves an existential demand (e.g., a demand for transcendent meaning, or a desire to overcome death), then this demand is likely to have motivational force. It disposes us to be motivated, that is, to pursue the existential desideratum (e.g., transcendent meaning, or death-transcendence). The connection between a desire and a disposition to act is commonly made (Schroeder 2025): if I crave a cigarette, then I will be disposed to try to get a cigarette. However, if there is no way for me to get a cigarette, for whatever reason, then it seems that I should remind myself of the inescapable absence of cigarettes. Doing so will prevent me from undertaking a futile quest for cigarettes. In the ordinary case, one could argue that I should abandon my desire for a cigarette, but in an analogy with the absurdity of life this wouldn't work, because in the latter case we cannot help but desire what cannot be had. Only if we remind ourselves of the existential lack can we therefore inhibit our tendency to act upon the desire that constitutes our absurdity. This is one key reason why absurdist can claim that awareness of the absurd is important, without having to ground the lucidity requirement in the idea that the

truth matters simpliciter. Hence, Camus says: “The absurd enlightens me on this point: there is no future” (Camus 1942: 57).

Second, not only can awareness of the absurd prevent us from pursuing impossibilities, it can also reorient us towards valuable possibilities that we would otherwise overlook. This is what, I think, awareness of our mortality tends to do: it brings into view the importance of making the most of life now. “Death,” Camus says, “has patrician hands which, while crushing, also liberate” (Camus 1942: 58). For, when someone is “completely turned towards death (taken here as the most obvious absurdity), [he] feels released from everything outside that passionate attention crystallizing in him” (58). If we contemplate our mortality, Camus suggests, we will nurture within us a passionate focus on the here-and-now. As David Sprintzen has noted in his analysis of Camus’s approach to mortality, “[t]he call for lucidity in the face of death is only an invitation to make the most of that which is given to us” (Sprintzen 1988: 286).

Heidegger likewise thought that an awareness of death could guide us towards a more meaningful life.<sup>9</sup> His reasoning, however, is different. While for Camus an awareness of one’s mortality heightens one’s appreciation of the here-and-now—harking back to the adage of *carpe diem*—Heidegger insisted that such awareness impels us to unify our lives into a coherent whole, anchoring them in values that we hold dearest and overarching projects that best express those values.<sup>10</sup> Of course, both can be true at once: awareness of death can help us embrace the here-and-now as well as aid us in structuring our life as a whole.

This reorientation argument can be applied not only to a death-based absurdity but also to an absurdity that revolves around the quest for meaning in a meaningless world. If we remind ourselves of the inescapable absence of transcendent meaning, then we will no longer live our lives in accordance with transcendent expectations. Of course, given the existential demand, we might still be inclined to seek forms of meaning that cannot be found, but awareness of the existential lack will help us reorient that quest for meaning towards forms of meaning that can in fact be found within the limits of human life. This is why Camus submits that while “[i]t was previously a question of finding out whether or not life had to have a meaning to be lived,” full lucidity of the absurd will reveal that “it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning” (Camus 1942: 53). If we remind ourselves of the lack of a predetermined meaning of life, we can find joy in the ability to create meaning for ourselves. When, in contrast, we minimize awareness of the absence of transcendent meaning, as the hyporefectivist proposes we do, then this creative enthusiasm becomes unavailable.

A third benefit to reminding oneself of the absurd can be found, interestingly, in A.J. Ayer’s harsh critique of existentialism. In ‘Some Aspects of Existentialism’ (1948), he submits that the existentialist emphasis on the meaninglessness of life “gives a certain show of dignity to failure, a consolation to those who, for one reason or another, are unwilling to accept the world as it actually is” (Ayer 1948: 13). Ayer’s point seems to be that existentialists tried to console themselves in the face of contingent individual or sociopolitical failings (with which the world was surely rife during the heyday of existentialism) by asserting that those failings were simply part of the human condition.<sup>11</sup> But

if life really is absurd, and thus inherently lamentable, Ayer’s observation reveals a key virtue of being aware of the absurd:<sup>12</sup> not only does this mental state represent human life as it really is, but it also allows one to put one’s hardships in perspective. Instead of blaming oneself for the meaninglessness of one’s life, one’s inability to find a purpose in life, and so on, one can point to the features of human existence per se that contribute to those failings. Seeing some lamentable state-of-affairs as an expression of an inescapable human condition can therefore foster acceptance, thus benefiting psychological health.<sup>13</sup>

Following this triptych of arguments, it can be concluded that a hyporefective response to the absurd comes with significant loss of value, which can be explained without invoking the idea that truthfulness somehow matters simpliciter. These losses are both significant enough and sufficiently universal to warrant a case against hyporefectivism, which holds that minimizing awareness of the absurd is generally justified. It is intuitively plausible, I have argued in opposition to the hyporefectivist, that it is occasionally (and perhaps even often) in our interest to remind ourselves of the absurdity of life. As a result, we simply have to tolerate the negative feelings that befit awareness of the absurdity of our lives.

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#### Consent

The author has nothing to report.

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#### Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In contrast with Camus’s and Nagel’s views on the absurd, I have argued (Hamer 2025) that the absurdity of life need not be inescapable; life might instead be absurd in a contingent way. In section two of the present paper, I argue that the hyporefectivist’s argument applies equally to an existential absurdity for which escape is possible yet overall unfavourable. It does not apply, however, to a contingent version of the absurdity of life in which we have overall reason to dismantle that absurdity, since awareness of the absurd is of instrumental importance to transcending it.

<sup>2</sup> Though see Hamer (2025) for a defense of the view that life may be absurd in a contingent way. I will address the (in)compatibility between hyporefectivism and forms of contingent absurdity in various places throughout this paper, though the emphasis remains on inescapable absurdity for the sake of simplicity.

<sup>3</sup> I use the terms ‘the existential perspective’ and ‘the backward step’ interchangeably. The latter is Nagel’s term.

<sup>4</sup> A similar argument may be given with respect to an absurdity for which escape is possible yet overall unfavourable. If we have reason to keep life absurd, and if the absurd is constitutively dependent on the backward step, then we have reason to adopt the backward step. With an antirealist assumption, hyporeflexivism would therefore fail, strictly speaking not because it entails remedying what cannot be remedied, but because it entails remedying what *ought not* to be remedied.

<sup>5</sup> I am simply borrowing this analogy from Sartre to illustrate how voluntary hyporeflexion would be possible. It is not meant as an exegetical point about Sartre’s use of the analogy.

<sup>6</sup> This lucidity requirement can already be found in Camus’s *Nuptials*, in which he stresses the importance of remaining aware of one’s mortality: “[H]ere in the presence of this world, I have no wish to lie nor to be lied to. I want to keep my lucidity to the last, and gaze upon my death with all the fullness of my jealousy and horror. It is to the extent I cut myself off from the world that I fear death most, to the degree I attach myself to the fate of living men instead of contemplating the unchanging sky. Creating conscious deaths is to diminish the distance that separates us from the world and to accept a consummation without joy, alert to rapturous images of a world forever lost” (Camus 1938: 78).

<sup>7</sup> Despite the parallels, we should not lose sight of the aforementioned differences between awareness of the absurd and authenticity. First, the concept of authenticity in the existentialist literature typically involves much more than awareness of the object of authenticity (e.g., self-constitution and alignment between one’s values and one’s actions). Second, the object of hyporeflexivism in the absurdist debate has a unique normative component (i.e., an inescapable demand/desire for life to be different) which is not necessarily present, and often decidedly absent, in the object of authenticity. This fundamentally changes the problem. For, in the absence of an inescapable demand, there is no inescapably lamentable situation and thus no clear reason to avoid awareness of it.

<sup>8</sup> A normative analogue of this argument can be given in the case of an absurdity for which escape is possible yet overall unfavourable (which I have argued (Hamer 2025) is a coherent notion of existential absurdity). If life ought to be kept absurd, then we should neither remedy the existential lack nor relinquish the existential demand. As a result, awareness of the absurdity of life cannot lead us to take a justifiable form of remedial action. If we shouldn’t remedy the absurd, then what is the point of awareness?

<sup>9</sup> Heidegger’s characterization of authentic being-towards-death lacks (or at least does not clearly contain) an inescapable demand for death-transcendence, without which it lacks the conditions needed to give rise to an existential absurdity in the present sense. Still, we can adapt his reasoning about the value of death awareness to support a case against hyporeflexivism in response to a death-based absurdity.

<sup>10</sup> This ability to unify one’s life through an awareness of its finitude is what Heidegger calls “anticipatory resoluteness” (Heidegger 1927: 2.III.62; see Guignon 2015: 15–18).

<sup>11</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre (1964: 526–528) advances a similar argument in response to Sartre’s notion of the absurd. For example, he says that “the vogue of Sartre is easily explained. He provides a picture of human existence which can easily be accepted by many uprooted and displaced people.” (MacIntyre 1964: 528) Essentially, the idea is that belief in the absurdity of life can offer relief to those who experience alienation, even if this alienated state has nothing to do with existential absurdity and can in actual fact be explained by contingent features of one’s life.

<sup>12</sup> This argument has been raised primarily as an objection to the very idea of existential absurdity (something like a psychological debunking argument). I am unaware, however, of any appearances of the

consolation argument as an argument for awareness of the absurd or for authenticity as an existentialist ideal.

<sup>13</sup> See also Iris Murdoch’s remark on Sartre’s existentialism: “to be told that one’s personal despair is a universal human characteristic may be consoling” (Murdoch 1953: 111).

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