I: Bad arguments for the absurdity of life [176]
1. Nothing we do now will matter in a million years
   RESPONSE: it cannot be the million years that makes the difference, because we can’t know
   whether or not it will matter in a million years. Either we know now that it doesn’t matter, or we
   can’t say anything.
2. We are infinitely small when compared with the universe, and our lives infinitely short
   RESPONSE: suppose we lived for ever: if a short life is absurd, then an infinite life is infinitely
   absurd. Infinite life (contra Craig) wouldn’t solve the problem.
3. All chains of justification stop short.
   RESPONSES:
   a) stopping short is not a problem: a chain of justification can perfectly legitimately stop short
      (examples of aspirin for headache, seeing exhibition of painter one admires, stopping a child
      burning its hand).
   b) infinite chains of justification are no improvement: either they go on for ever and face the
      problem of regress, or they don’t add anything but infinite length.

II: The real reason life is Absurd [178]

In ordinary life a situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or
aspiration and reality

Examples:
1. someone gives a complicated speech in support of a motion that has already passed
2. a notorious criminal is made president of a major philanthropic foundation
3. you declare your love to an answering machine
4. as you’re being knighted “your pants fall down”

How does this apply to life as a whole? There must be a universal aspiration and reality and a gap
between them:

This condition is supplied...by the collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the
perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary or open to doubt. [178]

That is, there’s a gap between the perspective one has as one lives one’s life and the perspective one
can take by “stepping back” to look at one’s life, and according to the latter, the goals and principles
that govern the former are lacking in justification.

1. UNAVOIDABILITY OF SERIOUSNESS:
   Impossible not to take leading one’s own life seriously: “Leading a human life is a full-time
   occupation, to which everyone devotes decades of intense concern” [179]
2. INESCAPABILITY OF DOUBT:
   a) “humans have the special capacity to step back and survey themselves, and the lives to which
      they are committed, with that detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle
      up a heap of sand”
   b) “when we take this view and recognize what we do as arbitrary, it does not disengage us from
      life, and there lies our absurdity: not in the fact that such an external view can be taken of us,
but in the fact that we ourselves can take it, without ceasing to be the persons whose ultimate concerns are so coolly regarded"

In other words, the “pretensions” are our goals within our lives (get a job, get promoted, get a nice house, etc.) while “reality” is revealed when we “step back” and see that our lives are ant-like, and the goals pointless.

III: Can we escape the absurd through our function? [180]
Suggestion: maybe absurdity results because what we take seriously is something so small and insignificant and individual. Perhaps we can find meaning by giving ourselves a role in something larger than ourselves (service to society, the state, the revolution, the progress of history, the advance of science, religion, etc.)
BUT: “a role in some larger enterprise cannot confer significance unless that enterprise is itself significant”

Function as a food source for other beings
1. We still wouldn’t know the function of the other beings
2. Even if this made our lives meaningful to them, it wouldn’t make them meaningful to us.

BUT: maybe this is an unfair analogy, because we wouldn’t identify with the purpose of the people who eat us, but we do with service to the state or God, or whatever.
RESPONSES:
1. even if we did identify, it wouldn’t do the job (example of cow in The Restaurant at the End of the Universe)
2. We can still step back from those higher purposes, so even if we identify with them, in doing so we are no less absurd than when we identify with more individual purposes

Comment on Camus: he says that the absurd arises because the world fails to meet our demands for meaning. But:
This suggests that the world might satisfy those demands if it were different. But now we can see that this is not the case. There does not appear to be any conceivable world (containing us) about which unsettled doubts could not arise. [180-1]

IV: Can we really take an objective standpoint? [181]
Criticism:
when we judge a particular event in life as absurd, we are doing so from a vantage point that has a set of values and principles (according to which the particular event is absurd). BUT this cannot be said of the case when we judge our lives as absurd, because there are no values and principles outside of our lives. This “stepping back” is stepping back into nothing!
Response:
This objection misconceives the nature of the backward step. We do not abandon our values in “stepping back” (because, as the criticism rightly notes, we can’t) “we merely observe them in operation, and recognize that if they are called into question we can justify them only by reference to themselves, uselessly.”
[BUT: in what way can we now compare the absurdity of events like “being knighted with your pants falling down” with our lives, if they are fundamentally different kinds of absurdity?]

V: Comparison with Skepticism [181]
Descartes showed that once one raises the possibility that one could be dreaming, there is no place in one’s experience to which one can turn to refute this. That is, we cannot access the real world and compare it with the way we perceive it. This is like coming to see absurdity for the following reasons:

1. Absurdity results not from being able to achieve an omniscient vantage point (in both cases this is impossible) but from seeing that our believes and goals just depend on one another for justification and cannot rule out other possibilities
2. Neither skepticism nor absurdity cause us to abandon our ordinary beliefs but they ‘lend them a peculiar flavor’:

Unable to abandon the natural responses on which [the beliefs] depend, we take them back, like a spouse who has run off with someone else and then decided to return; but we regard them differently (not that the new attitude is necessarily inferior to the old, in either case). [183]

Recommendation for irony.

VI: Avoiding absurdity (and why it's not so great) [183]
Why is the life of a mouse not absurd? Answer: “because he lacks the capacities for self-consciousness and self-transcendence that would enable him to see that he is only a mouse”. Would we want to lose that ability? Well, we can’t do it consciously – that would be like thinking “don’t think of a hippopotamus” – you can’t do it. The other way to avoid the absurd is to abandon one’s earthly life (the ideal of some “Oriental religions”?) However, merely to embark on this course of action requires taking one’s purposes seriously. One could just drift along on animal impulses, but while this life might not be absurd, it wouldn’t be meaningful either.

VII: Is Absurdity really that bad? [184-5]
Camus recommends defiance or scorn in the face of the absurd. To Nagel that appears “romantic and slightly self-pitying”:

Our absurdity warrants neither that much distress nor that much defiance… Absurdity is one of the most human things about us: a manifestation of our most advanced and interesting characteristics. … what reason can we have to resent or escape it? … It need not be a matter for agony unless we make it so. Nor need it evoke a defiant contempt of fate that allows us to feel brave or proud. Such dramatics…betray a failure to appreciate the cosmic unimportance of the situation.

Again, our absurd lives should be approached with irony instead of heroism or despair.