

Absurd Games

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## Abstract

This paper presents an attempt to synthesize two philosophical points of view, that of the absurd, primarily interpreted from the works of Albert Camus, and that of “The Joker,” given to us by Alan Watts. That life is absurd is commonly felt. The world, despite our desires and efforts to understand it, never presents us with any inherent meaning or purpose. The world remains silent. The Joker is a character who looks at the world as game-playing, and he does not take it seriously.

Across these two points of view we find an abundance of parallels. The world seems to have an impenetrably weird character to it. There is no meaning to be found from our human perspective. The world is simply there. Our actions, nor those of others, need not be taken seriously. There is no absolute morality. Value judgments therefore feel inappropriate beyond only aesthetic judgments. One may act in accordance with ethical systems, but they are not justified *a priori*. We can, however, find passion, or fun, in our endless arbitrary efforts. While suffering is indeed a reality, and a pointless one, this does not mean we ought to commit suicide. The choice, whether to go on or not, however, is something we must face.

Both philosophies present a point of view on all of these existential problems that is greatly resonant with the other. This thesis argues that we may take both points of view without contradiction. The result is a new point of view, that of Absurd Games. No meaning is unlocked from this synthesis, but rather a rich new philosophical point of view is established. Though, faced with meaninglessness, there is no need to argue for any practical value beyond interest, this new view does present a lens through which we may analyze the behaviour of ourselves and others. We may, without concern for moral judgment—thus seeing more clearly—ask: what games we or others are playing, what rules do they follow, and what do we want?

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

We in this life are in a serious predicament. What we do matters terribly, for we suffer, die, and are ridden with guilt—and it is a serious problem to us. This attitude, to a large extent, is the antithesis of two philosophies, those of Albert Camus and Alan Watts. Camus approaches the problem from an existential point of view: when the habit of living sufficiently drains us, we come face to face with the absurdity of living and whether or not we find life worth the trouble.<sup>1</sup> This question—that of suicide—is the only truly serious question for Camus. His answer, derived through his philosophy of the absurd, is to say Yes to the world. When the world is seen lucidly and as absurd, all else is a matter of indifference, all consequences become equal in value, and no meaning is to be found.

Watts approaches the problem much differently through his philosophy of the “Joker,” grounded in ancient Eastern thought. Just as profound as that of the absurd, Watts’ philosophy and attitude of the Joker presents striking parallels to Camus’ absurd, most saliently that both philosophies, in the most honest and sincere way, do not shy away from there being no meaning to life or this universe. The attitude of Watts’ Joker is that everything in this universe is seen as a game or game playing.<sup>2</sup> Like Camus, in that the absurd is a starting point for his philosophy,<sup>3</sup> Watts too makes his metaphysical assumption clear: that this world is of a playful nature.<sup>4</sup>

Following in this way, this project is a defence of neither starting point. There will be no proof of the absurd, nor of the playful nature of the world. Rather, the aim here is to synthesize

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, translated by Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 5, 8, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Watts, “The Joker,” lecture, unknown location and date, audio recording, Internet Archive <https://archive.org/details/joker-alan-watts-org-official>.

<sup>3</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *ibid.*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Watts, “The Tao of Philosophy,” lecture, unknown location and date, audio transcript, Alan Watts Organization, <https://alanwatts.org/transcripts/the-tao-of-philosophy/>.

these two attitudes, that of the absurd man and the Joker. Why such a synthesis ought to be attempted need be taken no further than to say that both philosophies may be deeply felt through the human experience, and it begs the question as to whether it is consistent to believe both. My argument here is to say yes, and that a new attitude, that of an unhypocritical point of view of Absurd Games, is possible. There are tensions, however, to the total combination of the two philosophies, and they will be discussed, but a synthesis into something new will be a consequence. To ask anything deeper of this synthesis, to expect it to uncover some hidden truth about the meaningfulness of it all, would be dishonest to both philosophies. This project is as absurd a game as any other endeavor. Despite this brute point, we will discuss the “so what?” to some extent: how may this new attitude stimulate our thinking and affect the way we come face to face with our human experience?

Supplementing our discussions of the Absurd and the Joker for the sake of contrast, elucidation, and example, are some additional sources beyond Watts and Camus. On the side of the Absurd we will discuss Thomas Nagel’s “The Absurd” (1971). Nagel has a different approach to capturing the same feeling of absurdity that concerns Camus, but he has different conclusions in the face of it, specifically to approach the world with irony rather than Camus’ suggestion of scorn. Nagel’s discussion of the absurd also highlights the importance of the seriousness with which we take our lives, saying that it is unavoidable, and this will become important in relation to the Joker, whose attitude is fundamentally not serious. Understanding this possible contradiction, we will connect Watts’ distinction between seriousness and sincerity.

On the side of games and the Joker, we will contrast Watts’ philosophy with a thorough point of view on games and play that occurs when you take play as not the metaphysical assumption that Watts takes, but as what is perhaps the more ordinary sense of the term: that play

is something contrasted to work, seriousness, or ordinary life. This thorough analysis of the role of play in society, regarded in this way which we precisely do not mean, comes from *Homo Ludens* (1938) by Johan Huizinga. Huizinga is explicit that anyone content to call all human activity “play” should not concern themselves with his book.<sup>5</sup> What we find in his discussions, however, is that even when you try to delineate play apart from so-called ordinary life, the language of “play” extends far into all that we do, even when the author refuses to take the step to extend the language to all our activity. We will also consider an author who does not refuse to take this step. Author James P. Carse presents us with a complete view of life through the lens of games, in his book *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility* (1986).

In connection, we also briefly discuss a parallel in ancient Stoicism. Watts’ discussion of the game analogy to life is grounded in ancient Eastern thought: Hinduism, Buddhism (especially Zen Buddhism), and Taoism. However, we see the analogy used in the ancient West, too. Plato, during the classical period and the importance of Drama and Greek theatre, touches on the theme of living life as play, and Huizinga makes note of this in his historical and sociological analysis of play. Later, however, Epictetus becomes even more explicit, analogizing life to game, where the goal is to play the game well, which for the Stoics means aiming at virtue. The Stoic Panaetius, on which Epictetus may be making developments on, provides similar themes of playing or fulfilling our roles in life, and his *doctrine of the four personae*, which is presumed to belong to him but is relayed through Cicero, presents us with interesting connections to Watts’ discussion of *personae*, identity, and the roles of the Joker.

The discussions break down as follows. In Chapter 2, we discuss games, beginning with an explanation of Watts’ Joker figure in his lecture “The Joker,” and what he means by saying that all is viewed as a game (2.1). Next we discuss *Homo Ludens* and the more ordinary usage of

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<sup>5</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, translation (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1964), foreword.

“games” that we do not mean (2.2), as well as a further perspective, that of James P. Carse, that takes the language of games further than what is done in *Homo Ludens* (2.2.1). We follow this by considering Watts’ distinction between seriousness and sincerity (2.3). We then briefly consider the parallels between Watts’ grounding in the ancient East and Stoicism from the ancient West (2.4). Then we consider the implications for morality (2.5). We then turn to the question of suicide and whether to play at all (2.6). Finally, we consider Watts’ position on why we would want the Joker’s point of view at all.

In Chapter 3 we discuss the absurd, beginning with Camus’ expositions (3.1). We then turn to Camus’ view on suicide (3.2), before moving on to the absurd’s implications for morality (3.3). Finally, we consider a second perspective on the absurd, that of Thomas Nagel (3.4).

In Chapter 4 we attempt the synthesis. We begin by considering what metaphysical differences there are between Camus and Watts (4.1). Then we make the central thrust of comparison and synthesis (4.2), considering as well the importance of “seriousness” and “lucidity” (4.2.1). We then discuss the central problem between combining the philosophies and how it is resolved (4.3). Next we compare the various prescriptions that the discussed thinkers suggest (4.4), split into whether to go on at all—suicide (4.4.1), and if we do go on, how ought we to live? (4.4.2). Finally, we consider what to make of the whole project and what it leaves us with (4.5).

## **Chapter 2 Games**

### *2.1 All is Play: What we Mean*

We commonly use the term “game” as an analogy or metaphor—in everyday conversation, in philosophical writing, *et cetera*. If you cannot think of an example, consider

phrases such as, “I don’t go in for those sorts of games,” perhaps in a political or business context; or, “I don’t play games,” in the context of romantic partners; or in philosophy to explain a point, such as, for mostly arbitrary example, Nietzsche: “For the game of creation, my brothers, a sacred ‘Yes’ is needed.”<sup>6</sup> Or, if perhaps Nietzsche bakes a little too much depth into his use of the term “game” than the basic sort of analogy that I am alluding to, take Kant, from the *Critique of Pure Reason*: “One will realize that in the preceding proof the game that idealism plays has with greater justice been turned against it.”<sup>7</sup> We use the analogy constantly—partly because its use is immediately understandable without any explanation. However, since this is our subject, let us consider what it does that is so useful.

For any project, task, investigation, mission, *et cetera*—for any actor and action—there is a goal, an end sought after. Even if one sets out to live completely goallessly, there is the goal of being goalless. For any action directed towards any given goal, there are parameters of action: what I need to do, or at least what I think I need to do, to move towards the goal. There is also technique, skill, and ingenuity in the actor, and as the actor moves and evolves, what she thinks she needs to do to reach the goal may change, or at least some parameters will and others won’t. All this precisely describes games. It also describes all action. Therefore the analogy is always functional. In more typical games, though, this is more explicit. Consider sports. Soccer or hockey straightforwardly call the goal a “goal.” Of course, the larger goal is for the player’s team to have more “goals” than the other team in the allotted time. These are of course some of the parameters of the game, and for one playing the game, parameters of action. As the hockey player attempts to move towards the win, more micro parameters change according to what he or

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<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 12.

<sup>7</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 327.



she thinks (as well as in consultation with the team): more defense, more offense, focus my efforts here, focus my efforts there, etc. These micro parameters are not rules of the hockey game; they are her freedom within the rules of the hockey game. The rules of the game are the hard parameters that one must follow if she wants to continue playing hockey. She can break the rules, but if she does, she is no longer playing hockey. I do not mean something like penalties either, for the rules accommodate for those. I mean, for example, if a player changes into boots and starts running around the ice, even if she shoots the puck into the net the most times, she is not winning, or even playing, the hockey game. And the analogy to this sort of situation, by way of the game terminology, is one everyone can immediately understand and one that gets the point across. And what is that point? That there are rules for the actor or actions that I am talking about (even if that actor is an abstract thing, like in Kant's quote), a goal to reach, and the actor wants to reach the goal. Without thinking about any of these things, we immediately understand the point of the game analogy when used in writing, conversation, or otherwise. When Nietzsche speaks of the game of creation above, we immediately get the sense that creation is something that has a goal and has certain rules about it for something to be an instance of creation, and that Nietzsche is including "a sacred 'Yes'" in that list of rules.

Although we can apply the analogy to anything we do, what if we take it as something stronger than mere analogy, and adopt it as a point of view for everything all the time? This is the attitude of Alan Watts' "Joker." The crucial move the attitude of the Joker makes, which takes the whole point of view beyond analogy, is that the Joker does not take the world around him with any necessary *seriousness*. Seriousness is what seems to keep the use of the term game, when we use it in this analogical way in our ordinary language, firmly in the place of analogy. Games are not serious. "Real" life is. The rest of what the terminology of games does, however,

seems applicable for the casual way in which we use it as analogy. Seriousness will be an important theme throughout our discussions, but before discussing any of its related issues, let us have a full explanation of the philosophy of the Joker, and the point of view of the world through games.

Alan Watts, active primarily in the 1950s and 60s, is most well known as an interpreter of Eastern philosophy for a Western audience. Though author of several books to this effect, he also hosted many lectures that have been recorded and have since been organized and made available by his children and the Alan Watts Organization. The subject of the Joker is discussed at length in one of these talks of unspecified date, posthumously entitled “The Joker.”

Watts begins his discussion in reference to the court fool of ancient times. He regards the fool’s function to not have simply been about humour, but also about reminding the monarch of his humanity and mortality, so that he would “never, never get too stuffy.”<sup>8</sup> We no longer have someone fulfilling this sort of role, Watts says. We have those roles which poke fun, such as the “political cartoonist” and “satirist,” but they do not “sit in the President’s office.”<sup>9</sup> The closest thing we have got in contemporary times is perhaps Donald Trump, who, though likely far from Watts’ Joker—especially since the king’s court fool does not go in for direct political power—does seemingly poke fun and is, or has been, about as close to the political court and its audience as one can be. And people are outraged by his commentary. So this is Watts’ reasoning as to why there is no longer a place for the fool: “We don’t like nowadays anyone to suggest that our social institutions are not altogether serious. We can’t stand it because we’re much too

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<sup>8</sup> Watts, “The Joker,” *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Watts, “The Joker,” *ibid.*

insecure.”<sup>10</sup> Watts diagnosing this to be a “dangerous state of affairs,”<sup>11</sup> he argues that the institution of the fool—or the Joker—ought to return.

The basic standpoint of this Joker figure is that he views all social institutions, and indeed the whole world, as game playing.<sup>12</sup> This is to say that the Joker does not take anything that is going on as serious. Nothing matters beyond itself, and no consequences are objectively more or less important than any others. This is not to say, however, that everything is trivial, insignificant, or *merely* a game. The Joker’s use of this point of view is not to lower or degrade anything to the status of a game as something irrelevant to otherwise serious matters about life and the universe. The point is rather that just because we suffer and die does not mean that we need to associate anything dire and therefore serious with our condition. When someone is conducting himself with the utmost seriousness, this is cause for the Joker’s laughter—since he knows it's a game. This is not to say that the Joker derides the man of seriousness with his laughter, for seriousness is part of this man’s game with which he is thoroughly involved, and the Joker is apt to commend him for putting on a good show.<sup>13</sup> We will discuss seriousness directly in section 2.3, but for now we may understand the Joker’s attitude here thusly: that it is because, as Watts explains, the foundation of the Joker’s position is to look at the world, the universe, all this that is going on like a drama, or like music. It is in this way that the Joker does not degrade what is going on to something trivial, frivolous, irrelevant, etc. It is for the same reason that the great stories, plays, and compositions through history are not trivial, frivolous, or irrelevant. Secondly, music (Watts is keen on using Bach as an example) has no other purpose, goal, or destination other than itself. Yes, we stated earlier that games have goals, but in these instances, that is, great music and

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<sup>10</sup> Watts, “The Joker,” *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Watts, “The Joker,” *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Watts, “The Joker,” *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Watts, “The Joker,” *ibid.*

everything the universe is doing, the goal is nothing other than itself. To imbue a value judgment and say that it is merely trivial begs the question: trivial as opposed to what non-trivial thing? And so if we take all that is going on to be a game, where there isn't anything else to compare to and delineate the non-trivial, for the Joker to make such a judgment that the game is trivial would be contradictory to the whole position. Secondly, beyond just the music and the experience of it of itself and for itself, as Watts explains, there is perception of the music to earlier and later phrases, and that is part of the enjoyment of the thing.<sup>14</sup> The trick, however, is getting on board with the idea that the universe is a playful or musical thing in the first place. Though Watts is clear that this is his metaphysical assumption, this is where he supplements the idea with interpretations of, and inspirations from, certain philosophies of the Eastern traditions.

The most central of these supplements to the point of view that all social institutions (as well as everything else) are games is Watts' pronouncement, as well as the philosophy behind it, that identity is a social institution.<sup>15</sup> When someone is asked who he is, he will often, for example, give his name—a title, a label, a category of one that sets this organism apart from the other members of society. This is a useful convention, like other social institutions, for getting along with one another. Time, measured in seconds, minutes, hours, along with the dated calendar, street names, and addresses, are conventions that allow us to arrange a meeting, for example. The convention of naming our walking bags of bones, water, and fleshy bits is no different. He may also answer the question with his occupation in society: "I'm a doctor," "I'm a lawyer," "I'm a student." Or he may give a hobby: "I'm a gardener," "I'm a gamer," "I'm a painter." Or whatever he wants to say along these lines, the point is that he may identify himself with what this particular organism tends to be doing. Or he may identify his "self" with what the

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<sup>14</sup> Watts, "The Joker," *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Watts, "The Joker," *ibid.*

subjective part of this particular organism tends to believe, by appealing to religious or political adherence: “I’m a Christian,” “I’m a Muslim,” “I’m a Liberal,” “I’m a Conservative.” What Watts wants to show is that in none of these cases do you describe the real “you.” The real “you,” Watts demonstrates in *The Book: On the Taboo against Knowing Who You Are* (1966) is the same thing expressed and summed up by the phrase in the *Advaita Vedanta* (non-dualism) tradition, *tat tvam asi*—“Thou art That.” Watts, with his novel explanations and interpretations, aims at describing the same realization found in Vedanta philosophy that the Atman, which is Self, consciousness, or subject, is identical with Brahman, which is underlying, absolute, or ultimate reality.

You may call it God, the godhead, Brahman, the Self, underlying reality, the real Joker or Big Joker, as we will discuss later, but Watts, in his style of interpreting for a Western audience, prefers to simply call it “It,” with his own version of the summarizing phrase: “You’re It.”<sup>16</sup> “It” is simply everything that happens to be going on, or as Watts puts it, playing on the theme of metaphysical music, “It” is “all this jazz.”<sup>17</sup> And that is what you see you really are, when the proofs that anything else used to categorize or delineate the particular self or subject from everything else are institutions and conventions, and that there is really no way to completely identify and describe the self without inevitably making reference to everything else. Let us now spend some time on these proofs and how they connect to the point of view of the Joker.

Before considering some of the more extensive arguments, take Watts’ example—which is more of an explanation than a proof—of what a person is. Watts considers the word “person” itself. “Person,” he explains, is from the drama, as in *dramatis personae*: the persons of the

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<sup>16</sup> Alan Watts, *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 18.

<sup>17</sup> Alan Watts, “The Tao of Philosophy,” lecture, unknown location and date, audio transcript, Alan Watts Organization, <https://alanwatts.org/transcripts/the-tao-of-philosophy-3/>.

drama.<sup>18</sup> “Person” is from the latin *persona*, which refers to the masks worn in the drama through (*per*) which sound (*sonus*) was amplified.<sup>19</sup> Watts argues that our “person” is no different, but we mistake our mask—our role, our occupation, *et cetera*—for the real us, confirming the “illusion of separateness” which society has taught us and which it has become taboo to see through. The truth, of which we will discuss Watts’ proofs for, is that there is no separateness between us and “It,” and our persons are the masks of “It,” or the masks of God, if you like, or the Big Joker. Following the drama analogy, Watts compares death to actors removing their masks at the end of the show.<sup>20</sup>

Watts is clear, to be sure, that the drama or game analogy is an analogy. The world (“It”) is *like* this (drama/games).<sup>21</sup> Or, as I am suggesting, it is something stronger than an analogy, and Watts follows in this. This language of drama and games is a *story* about “It,” a mythologizing.<sup>22</sup> Watts is clear that it is not intended as any sort of scientific description of the world. Watts takes one possibility about the utility of myth to be as follows:

“[M]yth” is a useful and fruitful image by which we make sense of life in somewhat the same way that we can explain electrical forces by comparing them with the behaviour of water or air. Yet “myth,” in this [...] sense, is not to be taken literally, just as electricity is not to be confused with air or water. Thus in using myth one must take care not to confuse image with fact, which would be like climbing up the signpost instead of following the road.<sup>23</sup>

Our discussions of the drama and game playing of “It” should be read in light of this. The myth that Watts wants to tell about “It” finds its roots in his interpretations of Hinduism, Vedanta philosophy, Taosim, and (especially Zen) Buddhism, but Watts adds much that is his own, to the

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<sup>18</sup> Alan Watts, “Image of Man,” lecture, unknown location and date, audio transcript, Alan Watts Organization, <https://alanwatts.org/transcripts/image-of-man/>.

<sup>19</sup> Watts, *The Book*, *ibid.*, 40.

<sup>20</sup> Watts, *The Book*, *ibid.*, 40.

<sup>21</sup> Watts, *The Book*, *ibid.*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Watts, *The Book*, *ibid.*, 16.

<sup>23</sup> Watts, *The Book*, *ibid.*, 13.

same point but which often falls more resonantly on Western ears. We will not here concern ourselves directly with the roots, but only Watts' interpretation and delivery of them.

The most fundamental game that "It" is playing is the Game of Black-and-White.<sup>24</sup> In Watts' own language, this is the same story that Taoism tells with the symbol of Yin and Yang. The world is vibration. It is combinations of ons and offs, sounds and silence, etc. And in the same way that there is no up without down, no crest of a wave without a trough, all of these pairs go together and cannot exist alone. Sound being waves, we only hear anything through sound/silence pairs, the different sounds being different frequencies—*et cetera*. Furthermore, there is a source and receiver. A tree that falls in the forest does not make a sound unless there is an eardrum around to receive the vibrations. Watts wants to show us that all of our senses are like this, and that the world is, basically, vibration: ons and offs, 0s and 1s.<sup>25</sup> The source is of course "It," and so is the receiver, for crest and trough, black and white, Yin and Yang, go together and constitute a whole, a unit (the uni-verse). Watts, however, further mythologizing, wants to cast this fundamental game as the game of hide-and-peek—a peek-a-boo, a "now you see it, now you don't."<sup>26</sup>

One of the ways Watts tells this story of hide-and-peek, which is rather reminiscent of, and surely inspired by, Zhuangzi and the butterfly (is he Zhuangzi dreaming he is a butterfly, or the butterfly dreaming he is Zhuangzi?) is the following. Watts asks us to imagine that we are God (which of course we are, but that is not the point at the moment) and to imagine that we could dream any dream we wanted to dream.<sup>27</sup> Part of this would be that we can incorporate as much time into a dream as we like. You can dream a lifetime in one night's dream. At first we

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<sup>24</sup> Watts, *The Book*, *ibid.*, 25.

<sup>25</sup> Watts, *The Book*, *ibid.*, 26.

<sup>26</sup> Watts, "The Joker," *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Watts, "Image of Man," *ibid.*

may dream all sorts of pleasures and adventures to our hearts content. Eventually, however, when we are content in conjuring up everything we wanted to do, we would want a surprise. We want something in which we do not know what is going to happen, in much the same way, as Watts explains elsewhere, that when chess players can see the inevitable outcome of the game, they recognize the victor and start a new round.<sup>28</sup> So we too, in our endless dreams night after night, would eventually want to forget that we are God running the whole show. And after some time of this, like the cliché monkeys on typewriters typing Shakespeare, you would dream what you are doing now. And so the hide of the great game of hide-and-seek is precisely everything, all these sub-games that are going on. There is the rock game, the spider game, the grass game, the fence game, the *people game*, etc. But what about the seeking part? The seek of hide-and-seek is of course essential to it, and is the point of the game in much the same way that self-realization, the realization of non-dualism, enlightenment—whatever you may call it—is the point in Advaita Vedanta, the Yogas of Vedanta, the *Bhagavad Gita*, etc. Vivekenanda writes of Yoga: “The goal is to manifest [the] divinity within”—this is our “seek”—“do this by one, or more, or all of these [yogas]—and be free.”<sup>29</sup> From the Joker’s point of view, this freedom is the freedom to play any game you will.<sup>30</sup>

Since this freedom, or enlightenment, or realization—all of which drive at expressing the same thing—is the finding of the seeking in the hide-and-seek game, it might seem, then, that this is the end of It’s grand game: It finds Itself and that’s the end of it. But it’s not. For one, we die. So the game continues on that alone. Also, not all persons find enlightenment, or even want

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<sup>28</sup> Alan Watts, “The Myopic View of the World (We as Organism),” lecture, unknown location and date, audio transcript, Alan Watts Organization, <https://alanwatts.org/transcripts/the-myopic-view-of-the-world-we-as-organism/>.

<sup>29</sup> Swāmi Vivekananda, *Rāja Yoga*, in *Routledge Library Editions: Yoga*, Volume 7 (Oxon: Routledge, 2019), vii.

<sup>30</sup> This state is also called *nirvikalpa samādhi* in *raja yoga* and is tightly connected to the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta. Watts incorporates all of this into his broader philosophy, which flows through the background of the philosophy of the Joker. Though the depth is unnecessary for our purposes here, one may see the connections in my paper, “Snakes, Ropes, and Waves: Connecting Rāja Yoga and Advaita Vedānta” (2023).



to. So, taking all this mythologizing of It, it's like this: It forgets Itself in all these things that are going on, and here and there, over and over, It pops up and does something of an "I see You," before going down once more away from Itself. This is essentially the picture Watts paints with the game of hide-and-seek, though admittedly he tells it in a more exciting, more captivating, and likely more interesting way.

To get on board with this analogy or myth whatsoever, one will have to accept the conclusion of non-dualism. Watts gives many different arguments to the conclusions of non-dualism. Since this thesis, again, is not presented as a defence of the two points of view under discussion, let us look just briefly at a few of Watts' arguments, only to see the idea.

Watts wants to argue that "The World is Your Body,"<sup>31</sup> and we are not as is commonly thought, at least in rough sentiment: lonely little me in my bag of flesh, separate from the world and pushed around by it.<sup>32</sup> One of the simpler arguments Watts gives regards describing a person walking.<sup>33</sup> The idea is that you cannot completely describe the person walking without reference to everything else—the person's environment. The action of walking is not simply moving one's legs back and forth. It involves interaction with the ground, a direction, etc. Then, since we must describe the ground to completely describe the walking person, we must completely describe the ground, say a sidewalk. But to completely describe the sidewalk, we have to describe its background, and this applies so on until we have to describe everything. The example is arbitrary. To describe anything completely is to describe the universe completely. Normally, however, we simply stop when we are content with the description, but Watts' point is that every

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<sup>31</sup> Watts, *The Book, ibid.*, 87.

<sup>32</sup> Alan Watts, "The Tao of Philosophy," lecture, unknown location and date, audio transcript, Alan Watts Organization, <https://alanwatts.org/transcripts/the-tao-of-philosophy/>.

<sup>33</sup> Alan Watts, "Eco Zen," lecture, unknown location and date, audio transcript, Alan Watts Organization, <https://alanwatts.org/transcripts/eco-zen/>.

organism is an “organism-environment” pair.<sup>34</sup> Nothing is separate from the whole, and so the whole is the only thing you can truly identify with as the real “you.”

Coming to the same point, Watts will commonly draw a round figure.<sup>35</sup> He makes the point that though commonly people will identify the drawing with the enclosed area—it’s a circle, a ball, etc.—it could very well be that he has drawn a wall with a hole in it, or something in which the primary identifying element is on the outside of the enclosed area. The identification is arbitrary, or is a convention of language in order to communicate some point or other. But in any case the inside and the outside always go together and present a whole. There is no separateness beyond our conventions of communication. Consciousness *qua* consciousness, or subject *qua* subject, also has some background or other. If we follow Sartre, in that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something,<sup>36</sup> we can see the point clearly enough. It is worth noting here in passing that Watts explicitly disagrees with Kant’s notion of the thing-in-itself. He takes his arguments about figure and background to prove that the thing-in-itself “is not only unknowable—it does not exist.”<sup>37</sup>

Following the line of conventional separateness, Watts discusses a net on a wiggle.<sup>38</sup> Watts draws an arbitrary wiggly line on the page and has it represent the world, the point being that it is moving around in whichever way it happens to be going, it is doing whatever it is doing, and it is a completely continuous thing. Then Watts draws the same wiggle but with a net or grid through it. At this point, he explains, we may speak of the wiggle in relation to the grid: it moves this many squares up, or down, etc. His point is that this dividing process is precisely what we do to the world. In the case of longitude and latitude it is exactly what we do to the Earth.<sup>39</sup> All other

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<sup>34</sup> Watts, “Eco Zen,” *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Watts, *The Book*, *ibid.*, 90.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*.

<sup>37</sup> Watts, *The Book*, *ibid.*, 89.

<sup>38</sup> Watts, *The Book*, *ibid.*, 58.

<sup>39</sup> Watts, *The Book*, *ibid.*, 59.

classifications, categories, etc., are no different. Here is a category, a word: “tree.” We give the word a definition to separate out these objects of interest from the rest of the world. We put a boundary on the object. But the boundary is a convention. The tree is not the word “tree,” and the separateness is a convention. It is a convention that has been adhered to to such an extent that it has become an illusion, or a “ghost,” that Watts argues has duped us into seeing ourselves as truly being separate from everything else.<sup>40</sup>

In a lecture dedicated to what he calls “ghosts,” Watts also argues that, just how separateness is not really there, the same is true of any meaning to the world. In the lecture, Watts, arguing that both separateness and meaning or purpose to the world are ghosts, compares Zen Buddhism to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. I provide a full discussion the subject elsewhere,<sup>41</sup> but I will summarize what is interesting for our purposes. Wittgenstein, searching for the form of thought, concludes that it is logical. He provides a picture of the world as the facts, which, in short, corresponds to a truth-table. Meaningful thought corresponds, then, to logical space: what can be said of the world corresponds to the true and false values on the truth-table. However, thought being unable to get outside itself and access the other side of its limit, any sense the truth-table picture of the world has is ultimately ungrounded, and is therefore actually senseless. Though admittedly with more emphasis and importance given to the point than in Wittgenstein, Watts, with reference to the *Tractatus*, explains that Zen Buddhism gets to the same conclusion. In short, the problem is with the question of meaning in the first place. Watts plays on Wittgenstein’s theme that the goal of philosophy is to clarify what can be said, which for Wittgenstein, is whatever can be said through the natural sciences. Only facts have a place on the truth-table. Meaning to the world, or morals, or aesthetic judgments, do not. Watts

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<sup>40</sup> Alan Watts, “Ghosts,” *Early Radio Talks*, recorded audio, Alan Watts Organization, <https://alanwatts.org/>.

<sup>41</sup> Maximilian Biezenski, “Ghosts All the Way Down: Wittgenstein and Watts” (2022), unpublished.

argues that asking for the meaning of the world is like asking, “why is a mouse when it spins?”<sup>42</sup> The question itself does not make any sense, or for Wittgenstein, does not correspond to a place on the truth-table. As Watts sums up in another talk, we want the world to have meaning as if it were words.<sup>43</sup> The world is not that kind of thing. Rather, it is just the wiggle that it is. However, this desire for meaning haunts us just as does the feeling of separateness—thus the ghosts.

Having now seen Watts’ picture of everything (or “It”) thusly—as a musical, wiggly whole without any meaning beyond itself—we can understand what sort of world the Joker’s point of view assumes. Now we may finish our primary exposition of the Joker and the point of view of the world as games.

As I mentioned earlier, Watts, in his lecture on the Joker will call what he calls “It” in *The Book* the true Joker, or “Big Joker.” Big Joker is playing the roles of everything. In the deck of cards, Watts mentions, the function of the joker is the wild card: it can be any card.<sup>44</sup> And so, in his metaphorical style, Watts explains that Big Joker is like that. It can and does play the role of anything and everything. The “Little Joker,” on the other hand, is any person who makes the realization and sees that it is all a game. For anyone familiar with the character, a great analogy is that of Deadpool in the Marvel comics.<sup>45</sup> The central feature of Deadpool’s character is that he knows he is in a comic, and he acts accordingly. Since he knows it is all a show, a drama, a story, he does not take any of it seriously—and he plays as he likes. However, he knows all the while that his playing is nonetheless written and directed by the writer. His knowledge of this does not grant him any special power to not be written and directed. This is the same situation of the Little Joker, the realizer. He knows its a game, he plays how he will, but he still knows that Big Joker

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<sup>42</sup> Watts, “Ghosts,” *ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Alan Watts, “Play and Sincerity,” *The Works of Alan Watts*, recorded audio, Alan Watts Organization, <https://alanwatts.org/>.

<sup>44</sup> Watts, “The Joker,” *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Credit is given to my father, sociologist and, particularly relevant here, scholar of the sociology of super heroes, for pointing out this comparison to me.

is conducting the whole affair. Deadpool, too, knows that he is really the writer, or an expression of the writer, and obviously the writer is under no illusion about this. So, with Deadpool as Little Joker, and writer as Big Joker, Watts' point is precisely like this. There are all these characters in the story, all expressions of the same thing, whether comic or everything there is, and some of the characters, like Deadpool or the Little Jokers, may see this. Again, however, we must remember that Watts wants to say that the world, or "It" is *like* this. It is a myth, these are words, to communicate some insight about the world. It should not be mistaken for the world. Watts follows in the Zen Buddhist fashion, which one may see in his book *The Way of Zen* (1957),<sup>46</sup> where to express this "truth" in the most direct possible way would be to say nothing at all, then the world is just the wiggle that it is without any words at all to ask for, define, or obscure the "meaning."

There may be lingering questions as to why we should bother with this myth (the point of view of the Joker) at all, what it does for the one who buys it, and what the Joker is to actually do with his point of view, and we will discuss these questions and Watts' response to them in 2.7. Next, however, with the point of view of games established, we will turn to a consideration of games and play in the more ordinary sense, which is a sense we do not mean. This will provide the necessary context to clearly see the way in which we are using the terminology of games as opposed to the way we might ordinarily think of the term.

## 2.2 Play is not "Real" Life: What We Don't Mean

Johan Huizinga, in *Homo Ludens*, presents what is essentially a brilliant and thorough sociological analysis of play, *if* taking play in the more usual sense of the term. He defines play thus: "play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and

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<sup>46</sup> Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Vintage Book, 2019).

place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is ‘different’ from ‘ordinary life.’”<sup>47</sup> None of this is necessarily opposed to the Joker’s point of view, except for play being “different from ordinary life.” It is essential for Huizinga’s analysis that he takes play as a sub-phenomenon of human activity. He is even explicit in his opposition to the sorts of views like those of the Joker, when he says: “It is ancient wisdom, but it is also a little cheap, to call all human activity ‘play.’ Those who are willing to content themselves with a metaphysical conclusion of this kind should not read this book.”<sup>48</sup> Against his advice, let us take a look anyway.

Near the beginning of Huizinga’s analysis, he references several attempts to define the biological function of play, such as fulfilling a need for relaxation, a “training” for the “serious work” of adult life, as an outlet for harmful impulses, and others.<sup>49</sup> Huizinga notes that each attempt assumes that play “serves” something that is not play.<sup>50</sup> He argues that each attempt may be fine insofar as they go, but he also wants to pursue the objectioning question as to what the actual *fun* of play is. We need not go into the details of his response to the question. The current point is to illustrate what sense of “play” Huizinga is working with. He is taking play in the more ordinary sense we think of: something contrasted with work, seriousness, and ordinary life; something kids do; something we do in our “time off.” In his words, Huizinga is here concerned with “the nature and significance of play as a cultural phenomenon.”<sup>51</sup>

Huizinga, however, states explicitly that “[t]he great archetypal activities of human society are all permeated with play from the start.”<sup>52</sup> He proceeds to give the highly relevant

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<sup>47</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 28.

<sup>48</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, foreword.

<sup>49</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 2.

<sup>50</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 2.

<sup>51</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 1.

<sup>52</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 4.

example of myth, alongside a discussion of language, as well as abstraction necessitating metaphor, which is a “play upon words.”<sup>53</sup> Myth, too, utilizes elaborate imaginings, and in these imaginings is an element of play. Myth, alongside ritual, he explains, contains the origin of “civilized life”: “law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom and science.”<sup>54</sup> All of these examples, he argues, therefore are “rooted” in play.<sup>55</sup> What is interesting here is not only that the author, who is opposed to the Joker’s sort of metaphysical assumption, finds play at the root of so much. What is also interesting is the way in which Watts may agree with Huizinga’s point about myth to an extent. Earlier we made it abundantly clear that the Games View of the world is a sort of myth or analogy. Naturally it is the case that in the construction of Watts’ myth is an element of play, since everything is a game. Huizinga writes, “[i]n all the wild imaginings of mythology a fanciful spirit is playing on the border-line between jest and earnest.”<sup>56</sup> The Joker, with his own myth of the world, is likely in complete agreement here. But where the Joker lives his myth, Huizinga still wants to separate out games from what are not games.

Huizinga continues his analysis with the notion that, “[t]o our way of thinking, play is the direct opposite of seriousness.”<sup>57</sup> Watts, too, recognizes this common notion, and we will consider his discussion in 2.3. In addition to the fact that this notion gives us no positive qualities of play, Huizinga argues that some play is actually serious.<sup>58</sup> Trying to pin down play, he takes laughter as an opposite of seriousness, and gives examples such as football and chess, noting that these games are played in seriousness and the players “have not the slightest inclination to

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<sup>53</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 4.

<sup>54</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 5.

<sup>55</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 5.

<sup>56</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 5.

<sup>57</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 5.

<sup>58</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 5.

laugh.”<sup>59</sup> Continuing his search for the roots of play by what it seems in opposition to, the permeating nature of play makes the task difficult, and he argues that the rationale behind play must be in “a very deep layer of our mental being.”<sup>60</sup> From the Joker’s point of view, the rationale goes all the way down, or rather infinitely down, since the play that the real you (“It”) is doing has no rationale at all beyond itself. But I leave this tangential line of thought aside. What is of more interest here is one of Huizinga’s conclusions in trying to find plays opposite. He writes: “Play lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly, and equally outside those of truth and falsehood, good and evil. Although it is a non-material activity it has no moral function. The valuations of vice and virtue do not apply here.”<sup>61</sup> We will discuss the problem of morality directly, later, but Watts and the Joker agree with this statement. Play, in its essence, is aligned with none of these, nor their antitheses. A game may have its objective around some of these things, but that is a second order phenomenon. The playing itself has no function or meaning other than itself. The difference between Huizinga and Watts here is that Watts is willing to apply it to everything. Huizinga intends to limit his discussion to what he thinks can properly be called “play” as opposed to what is not. Acknowledging the reality of “primitive play,” but restricting his theme to the “relation of play to culture,” he analyses play as belonging to a list of activities such as these: contests, races, performances, exhibitions, dancing, music, pageants, masquerades, and tournaments.<sup>62</sup> With this list it should now be abundantly clear—if it was not already when I said it was the more usual sense of the term—what sort of intuition about what play is that Huizinga is working with. Let us now briefly consider what qualities he takes play to have.

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<sup>59</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 6.

<sup>60</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 6.

<sup>61</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 6.

<sup>62</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 7.



First, for Huizinga, “play is a voluntary activity.”<sup>63</sup> Forced play is not play. Next, he argues that play is “superfluous,” because it is not something that the “responsible” adult needs to do, except to whatever degree the joy of play means it is a need.<sup>64</sup> “Play can be deferred or suspended at any time.”<sup>65</sup> Again, he is arguing that play is not necessary, either by duty or biological sustainment, or otherwise. Rather, it is done during “free time.”<sup>66</sup> Next, he argues that “play is not ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ life.”<sup>67</sup> He takes this to be successfully defended with an example of child who plays and “knows perfectly well that he is ‘only pretending.’”<sup>68</sup> Our Joker’s response to this particular point goes along the lines is that just because “pretending” is part of the child’s particular game does not mean that things that do not involve pretending cannot be play. Huizinga, however, is focussed on what this knowledge of *only* pretending means. He argues that this feeling of *only* pretending implies a recognition that play is inferior compared to serious life. Without getting too deep into a hypothetical dialogue between Huizinga and Watts, since it is not our primary concern, I will just suggest that from Watts point of view, this “only” and what it supposedly implies is a bogus concept, and that children, even better than we, can see the continuity in all human activity, that adults and children alike are “getting up to” whatever games they happen to be playing, whether perhaps more complex in the adult case and simpler in the case of the child. Whatever notion of division between play and serious conduct that a child has is due to adults that have taught them this sense of division. Huizinga, though still holding to this fundamental division, argues not that play is found in the serious conduct of life, but that seriousness is found in play. By serious in play he means that play is sometimes conducted with an “absorption, a devotion that passes into rapture and, temporarily at least, completely abolishes

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<sup>63</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 7.

<sup>64</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 8.

<sup>65</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 8.

<sup>66</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 8.

<sup>67</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 8.

<sup>68</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 8.

that troublesome ‘only’ feeling.”<sup>69</sup> He concludes from this that play and seriousness have a “fluid” relationship, and that “[p]lay turns into seriousness and seriousness turns into play.”<sup>70</sup> We will consider how Watts differently approaches the problem of seriousness and play in the next section. For now, though, let us briefly consider a few more qualities that Huizinga associates with play.

Play, or a game, argues Huizinga, has “limits of time and place.”<sup>71</sup> It is a bounded thing with a beginning and end. Play also, he argues, “creates order.”<sup>72</sup> It creates a bounded world unto itself and for itself, with an ideal of following itself—its rules, its intent, its particular style of fun—to a sort of perfection. The idea is to be totally bound up with the game. Because of this, Huizinga argues that play lies in the field of aesthetics.<sup>73</sup> The Joker’s metaphysics would have no qualm with this. He would only apply it to everything: “It,” Big Joker, is conducting what is essentially an aesthetic ordering, and furthermore we, in all our various activities, are doing the same. Lastly (for our purposes at least—Huizinga’s discussion is long and thorough), Huizinga discusses the fact that play has rules.<sup>74</sup> He explains that the rules are absolute, and if transgressed, the game ends. For him this means that real life resumes, but for the Joker it only means that one game has ended and a different one has begun (or begun again). To explain, say a player has transgressed the rules of our game, say football, for familiarities sake. The football game ends, or pauses, and the game of the trial of the accused transgressor begins. When that game ends perhaps we return to football.

Concluding his analysis of the characteristics of play, Huizinga spends the rest of the book on an attempt to find where play resides throughout culture and society. We will very

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<sup>69</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 8.

<sup>70</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 8.

<sup>71</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 9.

<sup>72</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 10.

<sup>73</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 10.

<sup>74</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 11.

briefly summarize his findings. He begins with law, and finds an element of play in it because of the way court is like an arena and contest.<sup>75</sup> War is like play when it has rules that limit the violence.<sup>76</sup> Most of his other conclusions on where play is found he kindly sums up himself, so, since we are not primarily challenging him, but rather using his analysis contextually, as an example of someone who, with the utmost seriousness and attitude of work about him, tries to find where and what play is while adhering to that intuition that play is this thing we feel as outside ordinary life, we will take his own summary for our purposes:

Ritual grew up in sacred play; poetry was born in play and nourished on play; music and dancing were pure play. Wisdom and philosophy found expression in words and forms derived from religious contests. The rules of warfare, the conventions of noble living were built up on play-patterns. We have to conclude, therefore, that civilization is, in its earliest phases, played. It does not come *from* play like a babe detaching itself from the womb: it arises *in* and *as* play, and never leaves.<sup>77</sup>

What we see, then, is a conclusion not far off from one Huizinga wanted to avoid, that all human activity is play. Huizinga, though, stands firm, and will not take this step. Being unable to logically derive the separation between what is play and what is not, he concludes his book with an appeal to ethics. This is where the separation, he argues, is to be found. Play is outside morality. He argues, therefore, that our moral conscience will be our “touchstone” as to what is a “serious duty” and what is play.<sup>78</sup> He writes that when “truth and justice, compassion and forgiveness have part in our resolve to act, our anxious question [of what is play] loses all meaning. One drop of pity is enough to lift our doing beyond intellectual distinctions.”<sup>79</sup> He therefore appeals to our intuition for knowing what and when we can play, as opposed to what we are, or ought to be, serious and not playful about. The Joker, however, has no such intuition.

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<sup>75</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 79.

<sup>76</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 89.

<sup>77</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 173.

<sup>78</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 213.

<sup>79</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 213.

From his point of view, truth, justice, compassion, forgiveness, pity, even “serious duty” are all games. Morality, too, he takes a game. But in no way does the Joker say that you should not play any of these games. By all means go ahead. The Joker only makes no claims as to there being some sort of serious human business that we really ought to be concerned with, always aware of, and must *get right down to work on* when push comes to shove. Not even the survival of the human race is something that grounds our activity with a permanent reference of necessary seriousness. And pity?—as some sort of revelatory force that drives the intuitive separation that Huizinga is aiming at. We may take a point from Nietzsche here that parallels the realization of the Joker. Pity is Zarathustra’s final sin to overcome. Zarathustra says: “Well then, *that* [pity] has had its time! My suffering and my pity for suffering—what does it matter? Am I concerned with *happiness*? I am concerned with my *work*.”<sup>80</sup> Zarathustra’s “work” is the work of a creator, a task beyond morality, *beyond good and evil*. We noted earlier that Nietzsche’s use of the term “game” in “the game of creation” may have deeper connections to Watts, and this alludes to them. Zarathustra would have himself take a point of view that frees himself from the limits of morality as an absolute reference, as some *serious* human business that we must concern ourselves with, so he can then play what game he will. The Joker, too, as we have said, will play whatever game he will. The only right or wrong to conduct will be relative to the game rules. We will discuss this in more depth later. Coming back to the point, however, in relation to Huizinga, the Joker is not necessarily concerned with morality and pity in the way Huizinga associates it with intuition. The Joker is free to see no separation between play and what is not play.

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<sup>80</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, §4, 20.

### 2.2.1 Finite and Infinite Games

Where Huizinga finds play everywhere, cannot find a logical distinction between play and not play, yet will not content himself with the step to calling all human activity play, another author is willing to take this step while identifying many of the same qualities of play as Huizinga while not requiring Watts' subscription to non-dualism and the idea of "It." This author is James P. Carse, in his book *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility*. His book does not come in the form of arguments, proving his point of view, but rather he illustrates the whole "vision of life" in an aphoristic style.

Carse makes a distinction between "finite" games and "infinite" games. We will not concern ourselves deeply with Carse's infinite games, for as he notes, there is only one infinite game, it has no beginning or end, and its purpose is only to keep everyone playing.<sup>81</sup> The "infinite player" plays whatever finite games he will, may win and lose in those, but those games are only sub-games within living life as a whole as play.<sup>82</sup> Thus the point of view of the infinite player is already similar to that of the Joker, but the primary difference is that Carse does include a sense of morality in the view. Carse defines evil as "the termination of infinite play."<sup>83</sup> He elaborates that evil is "not the inclusion of finite games in an infinite game, but the restriction of all play to one or another finite game."<sup>84</sup> Evil, for example, is something like world domination, or any attempt at it: everyone must play by my rules and my rules alone. However, as Carse notes, similarly to Huizinga, play must be voluntary in order to be play: "Whoever must play, cannot play."<sup>85</sup> This is why forced play is evil—because it ends play for most if not all; it reduces

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<sup>81</sup> James P. Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 6–7 & 149.

<sup>82</sup> Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games*, *ibid.*, 7.

<sup>83</sup> Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games*, *ibid.*, 32.

<sup>84</sup> Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games*, *ibid.*, 33.

<sup>85</sup> Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games*, *ibid.*, 4.

the number of players and the amount of play. The Joker, however, does not take any such utilitarian stance on games and play. The Joker would certainly recognize Carse's infinite game as an option of game to play, with this notion of evil and all, but it is of course just another sort of game. The Joker takes an even broader view of games than the infinite player.

Infinite play aside, Carse's discussion of finite games and play presents a picture of all human activity as play, both while acknowledging some of the same characteristics of play as Huizinga, but without the difficulty of trying to pin down a separation between what is play and not play. Finite play, Carse explains, is bounded in space and time.<sup>86</sup> It has limits, and these establish the rules.<sup>87</sup> The rules, the winners and losers, furthermore, are all agreed to, for everyone to be playing the same game, and for the game to have a decisive outcome.

Carse, too, acknowledges a place for seriousness not unlike the fluid relationship that Huizinga describes. Games are played freely, as both authors note, and so we know that we can always stop playing. However, Carse argues that when a finite player assumes a role, he must "suspend" his freedom "with a proper seriousness in order to act as the role requires."<sup>88</sup> Seriousness, as Carse has it, has a role to play in the game. He contrasts this with the infinite player who substitutes seriousness with playfulness, and this is interesting in connection to Watts' substitution of sincerity in place of seriousness, which we will discuss in the next section.

Carse goes on to explain that what one wins in a finite game is a title, which is public acknowledgment of the winner.<sup>89</sup> It is opportune here to take the discussion away from the abstract for a moment, and give some examples as to how we can see our activity as finite games. The leader of a country, president, prime minister, whatever, is a public recognition of a

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<sup>86</sup> Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games*, *ibid.*, 4–5.

<sup>87</sup> Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games*, *ibid.*, 8.

<sup>88</sup> Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games*, *ibid.*, 13.

<sup>89</sup> Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games*, *ibid.*, 19.

winner (of an election, for example), and is bound in space in time by rules (voting, term length, etc.). A promotion at a workplace, or obtaining the job in the first place, has recognized titles and victory over, for example, an interview procedure. Or take something less obvious like, say, returning a defective item to the store. Both parties assume their roles as returner and receiver. The receiver may be acting cooperatively (trying to allow the return), or antagonistically (trying to disallow), and the title won may be something as simple as “successful returner of the item” or something like this.

Such a conversion of language—to that of games—can successfully be applied everywhere, and the important point to be shown here, in contrast to Huizinga, is just that. It is beyond my current scope to give a full comparison between Carse’s “vision” of play and games with that of the Joker. They are not identical. But what is a central connection between Carse and Watts is this willingness to adopt a rigorous point of view of life and the world through the lens of games and play, and furthermore, that this is a point of view, a story, a myth, and not a necessary one. As Carse writes, “[t]he myth of Jesus is exemplary, but not necessary. No myth is necessary. There is no story that must be told. Stories do not have a truth that someone needs to reveal, or someone needs to hear.”<sup>90</sup> You do not *need* to take on the point of view of Carse’s infinite player, nor do you need to take on that of the Joker. Neither Carse or Watts demand this. They only offer points of view of the world that express something we may find interesting and resonant.

### *2.3 Seriousness and Sincerity*

We have touched on seriousness a great deal already, so it is overdue that we see what Watts has to say about it in relation to games and the Joker. Harkening back to when we noted

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<sup>90</sup> Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games*, *ibid.*, 148.

that we typically do not like for our social institutions suggested to not be serious, Watts takes society to be playing a “very, very weird game. The first rule of which is this game is not a game. This game is serious.”<sup>91</sup> We have inherited this attitude from, or developed it in, Watts argues, places like the church and court, for example. In church we stand in judgment before “the most serious God, the Father, who really is in earnest and no fooling.”<sup>92</sup> In court, procedure and behaviour must be treated with the utmost seriousness and is “no joking matter.”<sup>93</sup> And so we adopt a great deal of this sort of attitude in society. Watts argues, however, that this is not unreasonable because part of the fun of games is “to get involved and forget that they are games.”<sup>94</sup> This is not unlike Huizinga’s analysis of seriousness and getting “absorbed” in play. However, this is where Watts thinks that we need a better understanding of the usage of our word “serious.” He argues that in many cases “sincere” is more appropriate, and that realizing the distinction between “serious” and “sincere” is extremely important, because our lack of understanding the difference causes much confusion.<sup>95</sup> Watts gives the following example. If someone tells me she loves me, I may very well ask, “are you serious?” She may say, “no, “I’m sincere.” Love, Watts says, “isn’t necessarily serious.”<sup>96</sup> His point is that just because we really do mean something with the utmost conviction does not make it serious, and that this is a misuse of the word. What Watts wants us to take away from this is that play can be done sincerely, in just the same way that there is a variety of laughter that is totally sincere, felt, and meant.<sup>97</sup> You can play your role—in society, if you like—sincerely, without needing to take it seriously.

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<sup>91</sup> Watts, “The Joker,” *ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Watts, “The Joker,” *ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Watts, “The Joker,” *ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Watts, “The Joker,” *ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Watts, “The Joker,” *ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Watts, “The Joker,” *ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Watts, “The Joker,” *ibid.*



Watts argues that, crucial, however, in our feeling that what we do is serious, is an anxiety, a feeling that what we do matters deeply, because the consequences matter deeply. This anxiety, he says, comes when we cannot decide what to do. Since we think it matters very much, we get anxious.<sup>98</sup> Once what you do is seen as the game it is, you see that what you do only matters “superficially” (as part of the game), but does not matter absolutely.<sup>99</sup> This, Watts argues, is because of reasons we have already discussed surrounding the fundamental nature of opposites: with every negative comes a positive (and vice versa). So, the argument goes, in summary form, that we need not be serious, because nothing really matters. We may calm down, because it’s all a show. That does not mean, however, that we cannot get completely absorbed by our games and become sincerely wrapped up in our roles, just as when watching a movie, whether it be drama, horror, or whatever, we know it is a show, but we allow it to play on our emotions, and we allow the outcome to matter superficially to us. And so the point is that life may be seen like this.

#### *2.4 Parallels in the Ancient West: Stoicism*

Watts bases his philosophy on the philosophy of the Ancient East. The point of view of life as a drama is found in Hinduism. However, the idea of life as a game takes root in the Ancient West, as well. Huizinga includes in his discussion an argument from Plato that “[I]f life must be lived as play.”<sup>100</sup> Stoicism also takes up the idea. So, for the sake of an additional point of view regarding life and play, let us take a brief look at how the Stoics take the idea.

The only Stoic, as far as I know, to explicitly use the game analogy, is Epictetus. The Stoic Panaetius, though, also speaks of fulfilling our roles, our *personae*. Epictetus is one of the

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<sup>98</sup> Watts, “The Joker,” *ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Watts, “The Joker,” *ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, *ibid.*, 19.

central Stoics, and given that the Stoics have a tightly bound systematic philosophy, it should be the case that his game analogy is consistent with Stoicism, though the question is beyond my current scope.

In the *Discourses*, Epictetus repeatedly analogizes life to a game. For example, he will say that just as when a game is no longer amusing, one may leave—again a nod to the voluntary nature of play—so too one may leave life.<sup>101</sup> Epictetus is referring here to suicide. The Stoic opinion on suicide is something that I deal with in full elsewhere,<sup>102</sup> but here it suffices to say that it is one of the reasons that Stoics find no reason for complaint. Basically, if you cannot get with it, you can leave. Elsewhere he uses the analogy to demonstrate a point about freedom from fear in the face of a tyrant.<sup>103</sup> You may adopt an attitude of competition and appreciate the moves of the game, and forgo the fear of loss of life or possession.

Overall, Epictetus’ position on life as a game is to demonstrate a central Stoic point. What matters in the game is only to play the game well. The purpose of life is to play the game well. Consequences outside of this do not matter. For Epictetus, and for Stoicism, this playing the game well means virtue. Virtue, for the Stoics, is the Good (vice being not good or bad). Everything unrelated to virtue or vice is an indifferent. This is what Epictetus expresses in the language of games. The goal is to play the game well, and what is inconsequential to that is indifferent.

In Cicero’s *De Officiis*, he presents the Stoic ‘doctrine of the four personae.’ Philip H. De Lacy presents an excellent discussion of the doctrine in “The Four Stoic *Personae*” (1977). He tells us that Cicero’s source for the doctrine may be Panaetius, and that Cicero may have made

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<sup>101</sup> Epictetus, *Discourses*, I.24.20, trans. Robin Hard, *Epictetus: Discourses, Fragments, Handbook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>102</sup> Maximilian Biezenski, “Fate Leaves the Door Open: Suicide and Stoic Metaphysics” (2022), unpublished.

<sup>103</sup> Epictetus, *Discourses*, IV.7.5, *ibid.*

his own contributions. The debate over the source is not our concern. The doctrine is at least Stoic.

Of the four *personae*, two regard our nature (our nature as human beings and our nature as individuals), one regards our circumstances, and one our choices.<sup>104</sup> Without getting into unnecessary depth, the point is this. It is a permanent part of Stoic doctrine that we ought to act in accordance with Nature, which is the same as Epictetus's "playing the game well," which is the same as acting in accordance with virtue or reason. The doctrine of the four *personae* specifies the goal as that you ought to act in accordance with your *personae*, your roles.

Though much can be said about the *personae*, what is most interesting for our purposes here is the same feature that De Lacy finds most interesting about the usage of *personae* or *persona*. It is for much the same reason that Watts employs the term. It is, as De Lacy writes, the "suggestion of detachment. An actor playing a role remains distinct from the role he plays" (recall that the *persona* is the mouthpiece of the actor).<sup>105</sup> Watts spoke of our *personae*, our persons, as the masks of "It," where "It" is everything. The Stoics are similar to an extent. The Stoics are materialists. The world is matter. Outside this is void. The world, however, is also identical to God or Nature, which is also identical to Reason. The world deterministically orders itself according to a providential reason. Therefore we too are part of the world and divinely ordered, and in this way our *personae* are the masks of God. The fundamental difference between this version and Watts' version is that the Stoics associate an ethic to this that Watts does not. For the Stoics, we ought to play our role (or our four fundamental roles), to the best of our ability, according to this providential reason. This presents an incredibly interesting parallel between Ancient East and West, and it is one that deserves its own dedicated paper.

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<sup>104</sup> Philip H. De Lacy, "The Four Stoic 'Personae,'" *Illinois Classical Studies* 2 (1977), 163.

<sup>105</sup> De Lacy, "The Four Stoic Personae," *ibid.*, 163.

## 2.5 Morality: Game Rules

We have touched on morality in relation to games and the Joker in passing. We have said that play is outside morality; that consequences only matter superficially and not absolutely. Because an intuition like Huizinga's may linger, that justice or the good has some fundamental place in life, we ought to discuss Watts' points about morality directly.

His position is the following. He argues that the universe has nothing special to do with morality. Morality is a part of the universe like anything else. It is a way of playing the human game. The universe, or "It," he says, "is really beyond good and evil."<sup>106</sup> Morality, he is arguing, is a human institution. There is no morality particle or something somewhere that is inherent in the universe. Remember that everything, from this point of view, is a show, a drama, a game. There is no good or evil to the show. Whether we are enjoying the show or not, whether we credit it on aesthetic grounds, is a human matter and not bound up in the fabric of the universe. The only way to be moral, says Watts, is "because you like to do it that way."<sup>107</sup> Forcing morality, doing it for any other motivation, "perverts morality," because you are not really playing the game of morality and sincerely following its rules.

So, there are only games and their rules, and you freely choose which ones to play. There is then morality in two senses. In one sense there is relative morality. I do not mean moral relativism in the usual sense, but relative as rules are relative to the game. Morality may be construed as the rules. What actions are right and wrong, acceptable or not, depend on the game one freely decides to play. In another sense morality, or moral systems, are games in themselves. These games you might play alongside other games. For example you may play the utilitarian game, and play good and bad that way. You may play the game of Kantian ethics, the game of

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<sup>106</sup> Watts, "The Joker," *ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> Watts, "The Joker," *ibid.*

Christian ethics, of egoism—any moral system you like. The first sense of morality remains true: what is acceptable and not acceptable action is relative to the game of whichever moral system that you are playing. But nothing forces you to play.

This does not preclude, however, that we may generally find some moral systems better, in the sense of more conducive to the fun of the game than others. This does not add any absolute moral to the mix, but rather what may be wise *suggestions* of how to play. There is no actual right or wrong to, for example, a home DIY project, say, building a desk. You can sand the wood or not, put the legs anywhere you like, etc., but you appreciate the quality of the finished product more if you follow the advice of a carpenter, engineer, etc. In *The Wisdom of Insecurity* (1951), Watts argues that morality is like this. Defining morality as “the art of living together,”<sup>108</sup> Watts argues that the rules become like techniques. “The moralist,” he says, “is therefore a technician who is consulted on these problems [of living together] as one consults an architect on building a house or an engineer on erecting a bridge.”<sup>109</sup> This does not mean that there is any absolute right and wrong, but rather only that other people, or other moral systems, may know something about living that you might like to incorporate into your life.

## 2.6 Suicide: Is the Game Worth the Candle?

Since everything is a game and there is no absolute good or purpose to the universe, even survival does not present any absolute objective that we must adhere to. Therefore, the question of whether to play at all must be answered. Or, as Watts says in “Game Theory of Ethics,” “is the game worth the candle?”<sup>110</sup> Watts’ take on the question will be important later as we compare his

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<sup>108</sup> Alan Watts, *The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 119.

<sup>109</sup> Watts, *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, *ibid.*, 119.

<sup>110</sup> Alan Watts, “Game Theory of Ethics,” lecture, unknown location and date, audio transcript, Alan Watts Organization, <https://alanwatts.org/transcripts/game-theory-of-ethics/>.

philosophy to that of Camus, because, as Watts explicitly references in “Game Theory of Ethics,” Camus takes the question of suicide to be the most important question of philosophy.

We will be brief in summarizing Watts’ position. If the answer is yes, the game is worth it, then there is no problem and you can go on living. If the answer is no, then commit suicide. If you are unsure, then you are in a state of anxiety, and so if the anxiety is a problem to you, then you better figure it out. As we have discussed earlier, though, when you know it is all a game, there is no reason to worry or be anxious. The real you (“It”) goes on whether you the human organism offs itself or not. Adopting the games point of view does not necessarily mean you will choose that the game is worth it, but the idea is that you will have nothing to be anxious about, and the choice should become clear. If you do choose to go on, then, Watts says, you do so with a sincere “gamble.”<sup>111</sup> As we have discussed earlier, the whole point of the grand game is that you do not know the outcome, because “It” wants to forget itself and have a surprise, a game for which the fun comes from not knowing what will happen. And so Watts takes the great alternative to be suicide or gamble, and if you gamble you must have faith or trust in the universe (which is you) that it is putting on a good game, otherwise the game does not work—why play if you don’t think its a good game?

### *2.7 So What?: Why Adopt the Attitude of the Joker?*

It would feel in poor taste to conclude our discussion without at least saying a word or two on why Watts thinks we should bother at all with the point of view of the Joker, and the realization of “It.” We will summarize it quickly.

Watts says two things that I will draw attention to. One is that when the realization is made, you discover “that you don’t have to stay in ecstasy, that ordinary consciousness is alright,

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<sup>111</sup> Watts, “Game Theory of Ethics,” *ibid.*

too.”<sup>112</sup> Here Watts is referring to the change in consciousness spoken of in Vedanta philosophy and the *Bhagavad Gita*, where the goal of enlightenment is a reflective, higher conscious recognition of non-dualism, and the sage, able to reflect on everything’s unity, is able to feel joy in all things. From the Joker’s point of view, of course, this is the feeling that everything is a game, and his ecstasy is that he can laugh at it all. However, he does not deride anyone for not taking the same point of view. Afterall, they are playing their games, too, and there is no necessary morality associated with what point of view one takes. So, if you would rather forget this point of view, and return to some serious attitude, you are welcome to.

The other answer from Watts is that when you take this point of view, you will not ask, “so what?” If it is a game, if it is like music, done for its own sake and none other, asking what the use of taking the point of view in the first place would be contradictory. The only thing to *get* out of this, Watts says, is “to become capable of enjoyment, of living in the present, and of the discipline which this involves.”<sup>113</sup> Basically, the only point is to be able to get on with playing the game without worrying about it.

## **Chapter 3 The Absurd**

### *3.1 Facing Absurdity*

Albert Camus offers us the philosophy of the absurd. In this section we will define and explain the absurd and the feeling of it. Firstly, Camus is explicit in a note at the beginning of *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), which contains his primary exposition of the absurd, that the absurd is taken as a “starting-point.”<sup>114</sup> It is an assumption. As I noted in the introduction, the

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<sup>112</sup> Watts, “The Joker,” *ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> Watts, *The Book*, *ibid.*, 116.

<sup>114</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *ibid.*, 2

purpose here is not a defence or proof of the absurd. We will explain it and discuss some of its aspects for the purposes of synthesizing it with Watts' philosophy in Chapter 4.

In one of his most summarizing statements, Camus writes that the absurd is “that denseness and that strangeness of the world.”<sup>115</sup> But what does this mean? To some extent it is enigmatic. Camus is expressing the feeling of the absurd, and it may be that you either get it or you don't, but likely most of us get the sense of it sometime or other. Camus argues that the feeling comes when a “weariness” dawns on us during the “habit of living.”<sup>116</sup> The body, “it's judgment as good as the mind's,”<sup>117</sup> is compelled to survive, but when this “weariness” reaches us, it “awakens consciousness” and “provokes” the feeling of the absurd.<sup>118</sup>

The world feels weird to us. We feel estranged and as if we can never quite pin down what the hell this thing is that we are face to face with all the time. It's the feeling that we will never be able to pin it down. The weirdness is impenetrable. There the world is, and who the hell put it there, and what the hell for? And why am I in it? What's my relation to all this? I, in my limited being, cannot seem to ever get into the heart of what is going on and why any of it is the way it is or why it is at all. And so there is an anxiety associated with the feeling,<sup>119</sup> and this division between our rational understanding and the world is an essential part of the absurd. Camus puts it this way: “This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.”<sup>120</sup>

It is not the case that the world is absurd in itself: “The absurd depends as much on man as on the world.”<sup>121</sup> Camus argues that the world can only be said to be “unreasonable,” not

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<sup>115</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *ibid.*, 14

<sup>116</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *ibid.*, 8 & 13

<sup>117</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *ibid.*, 8

<sup>118</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *ibid.*, 13

<sup>119</sup> Camus quotes Heidegger, noting the existential tradition of the feeling, for anxiety being “at the source of everything. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *ibid.*, 13

<sup>120</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *ibid.*, 6

<sup>121</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *ibid.*, 21



absurd.<sup>122</sup> The world is not our rationality. The world does not follow and conform to our rationality. We may associate with it certain “laws” of physics, for example, but those are of course only predictions that what we have observed to be the case thus far will continue. Science, though, is an attempt to understand the world, and as Camus writes, “[u]nderstanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human, stamping it with his seal.”<sup>123</sup> Our “appetite for clarity” is the “mind’s deepest desire,” he argues.<sup>124</sup> Our observations may give us functional and pragmatic understanding, and Camus does not deride this in any way, but our observations of the way the world appears to us, and that it seems likely to continue in similar fashion, ultimately fails to satisfy our “appetite for clarity” as to the why and wherefore of the world. The world is not such a thing that reduces to our rationality, whether it is because we are limited, or whether the world is simply not that sort of thing that has any one-to-one relationship with thought. I suppose if the idealists are right, and the world is thought or consciousness or what have you, then it would be the former, that because we are limited we can not have any ultimate clarity that we desire. Regardless of why, we are left with the real feeling of “divorce” between our understanding and the world. As Camus puts it, the “absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.”<sup>125</sup> And so this is why—that we cannot reduce the world to the human—that the absurd point of view brings with it the recognition that there is no meaning to the world. Or at least, since there is no knowable meaning, the confrontation between us and the world brings with it the feeling, which becomes an inescapable reality, that there is no meaning.

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<sup>122</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *ibid.*, 21

<sup>123</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *ibid.*, 17

<sup>124</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *ibid.*, 17

<sup>125</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *ibid.*, 28

Two of Camus' novels elucidate the absurd and the sense of meaninglessness, *The Stranger* (1942) and *The Plague* (1947). As to not be overly redundant, we will only spend a little bit of time discussing *The Stranger*. I choose it over *The Plague* because it focuses more on the individual face to face with the absurd. Luckily, however, Camus, in his *Notebooks* (1942-1951), tells us the point of each: "*The Stranger* describes the nakedness of man facing the absurd. *The Plague*, the basic equivalence of individual points of view facing the same absurd [...] *The Plague* shows that the absurd *teaches nothing*."<sup>126</sup> *The Plague* is a story of one town and its struggle against, of course, the plague. It expresses the feeling that regardless of what we do—all our efforts to stave off death, find meaning, purpose, etc.—all consequences are of equivalent value, no matter who you are and how you look at things. We all die sooner or later.

*The Stranger* hones in on the individual experience of the absurd through the story of a man called Meursault. The story begins with the fact that Meursault's mother has died.<sup>127</sup> Meursault is essentially indifferent to this and agrees with the sentiment that it "was bound to happen sooner or later."<sup>128</sup> His indifference is a recurring theme, as we see again in Meursault's indifference to marriage and belief that love does not mean anything.<sup>129</sup> Camus' point with Meursault's attitude culminates when Meursault rather accidentally shoots someone on the beach.<sup>130</sup> Meursault remains indifferent to this. He merely makes the factual judgment that it happens, and he predicts the consequences to his life in that shooting (four times) was like "knocking four quick times on the door of unhappiness."<sup>131</sup> A point about the absurd here is apt following what Camus writes in *The Notebooks*: "The whole problem of the absurd ought to be

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<sup>126</sup> Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1942–1951*, translated by Justin O'Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 24.

<sup>127</sup> Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, translated by Matthew Ward (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 3

<sup>128</sup> Camus, *The Stranger*, *ibid.*, 33.

<sup>129</sup> Camus, *The Stranger*, *ibid.*, 41.

<sup>130</sup> Camus, *The Stranger*, *ibid.*, 59.

<sup>131</sup> Camus, *The Stranger*, *ibid.*, 59.

able to be centered on a critique of the value judgment and the factual judgment.”<sup>132</sup> Meursault makes no value judgment about the death. It is more of a killing than a murder in the sense that it *just sort of happens*, in the same way that everything else just sort of happens to him (the world is not reasonable). No intent or value motivates the action, and Meursault associates no value to the consequence. The ensuing trial Meursault faces makes the point clear, for from Meursault’s point of view, it also just sort of happens. I employ this phrase to denote an attitude of division between the factual (what happens) and the feeling of strangeness and inappropriateness that the “absurd man” has with regard to the value judgment.

Meursault’s trial becomes more of a trial of his indifference and lack of emotion than a trial about the shooting. Meursault’s “insensitivity” to his mother’s death becomes a point for his guilt.<sup>133</sup> Meursault, however, does not share the feeling, and he does not take the court proceeding with any seriousness. To him, the whole procedure seems like a game.<sup>134</sup> Meursault’s indifference and lack of value judgments comes out even more when, in conversation with his lawyer, he responds to accusations of being “taciturn” and “withdrawn” that “[i]t’s just that I don’t have much to say.”<sup>135</sup> And again, when asked if he feels sorry for the shooting, he responds that he feels more annoyed than sorry.<sup>136</sup> All of this describes the sincere feeling of the absurd. It recalls that “denseness and strangeness” Camus refers to. Why is everyone so serious? What the hell does any of it matter? Things just sort of happen in the world and what is there really to meaningfully say about what happens? Meursault does not have much to say because he is not interested in making baseless value judgments.

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<sup>132</sup> Camus, *Notebooks 1942–1951*, *ibid.*, 57.

<sup>133</sup> Camus, *The Stranger*, *ibid.*, 64.

<sup>134</sup> Camus, *The Stranger*, *ibid.*, 64.

<sup>135</sup> Camus, *The Stranger*, *ibid.*, 66.

<sup>136</sup> Camus, *The Stranger*, *ibid.*, 70.

As Meursault waits in his cell for his sentence, he reflects that his life as a prisoner is not really all that different, and “[o]nce again the main problem was killing time.”<sup>137</sup> He reflects on time passing in day and night, and essentially expresses the feeling that one can get used to anything.<sup>138</sup> Even when Meursault is finally sentenced to death, he still reflects that it does not matter whether he die now or later,<sup>139</sup> and furthermore why should others’ deaths, or a mother’s love matter to him?<sup>140</sup> In the end, now a “condemned man,” Meursault does feel a rage, but it is one of resignation, one that had “washed [him] clean” and “rid [him] of hope.”<sup>141</sup> It is his final acceptance of the absurd, and he reflects: “for the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world”—and he feels happy again.<sup>142</sup> Although, as is true throughout Camus’ work and he addresses explicitly in *The Rebel* (1951), “suffering has no more meaning than happiness”<sup>143</sup> (and vice versa), here at the end of *The Stranger* is expressed an essential feature of his philosophy of the absurd: revolt. The same point is brought out more explicitly philosophically in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where the whole essay revolves around the question of suicide and whether belief in the absurd dictates death. In short, the answer is that the absurd dictates the opposite, and that it must be revolted against. We will now turn to this problem in the *Myth of Sisyphus*, and see how the absurd relates to these themes of suicide, revolt, and happiness.

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<sup>137</sup> Camus, *The Stranger*, *ibid.*, 78.

<sup>138</sup> Camus, *The Stranger*, *ibid.*, 80.

<sup>139</sup> Camus, *The Stranger*, *ibid.*, 114.

<sup>140</sup> Camus, *The Stranger*, *ibid.*, 121.

<sup>141</sup> Camus, *The Stranger*, *ibid.*, 122.

<sup>142</sup> Camus, *The Stranger*, *ibid.*, 122–123.

<sup>143</sup> Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, translated by Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 261.

### 3.2 Suicide: Is Life Worth the Trouble?

In this section I will largely summarize an argument and interpretation on the *Myth of Sisyphus* that I began elsewhere in an unpublished work, “Sisyphus and Happiness: The Heroic Choice” (2021).

*The Myth of Sisyphus* revolves around the question of suicide. To Camus, it is the fundamental question of philosophy. Committing suicide, Camus writes, is confessing that life is “not worth the trouble.”<sup>144</sup> Faced with absurdity and the lack of meaning to the world, it is essential to know whether sincere belief in the absurd “dictates” death. Indeed, this is essentially the entire question that Camus sets out to answer in the essay. It is obvious that the actual Greek myth of Sisyphus, which Camus ends the essay in discussion of, plays a strong part in his answer. Camus uses the myth as an analogy to our human condition. But what is less obvious, and what I argue in my previous paper, is just how direct of an answer the myth is to the question of suicide. The answer is summed up in the final line of the essay: “One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”<sup>145</sup> Let us see how this answers the question of suicide.

To cut the Greek myth short, Sisyphus is condemned by the gods to roll a rock up a hill, over and over for eternity in the underworld. Sisyphus is fully aware of this fate and is resigned to it. The basic interpretation is that Sisyphus presents a paradigmatic illustration of our condition of absurdity: meaningless tasks with equivalently valued consequences forever. Crucially, though, it is also being *aware* of it. Camus is interested in Sisyphus’s moment of consciousness, which he places to be when Sisyphus has a moment of reflection, after finishing pushing his rock to the top of the hill, watching it roll back down, then walking back down

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<sup>144</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *ibid.*, 5.

<sup>145</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *ibid.*, 123.

himself.<sup>146</sup> If Sisyphus were not conscious of his fate, there would be no absurdity, as he would be an automaton merely moving a rock around with no real experience of his condition.

To make short of Camus' answer to whether the absurd dictates death, the answer is no. The absurd actually dictates we live, because the absurd only lives on with our consciousness. To commit suicide is to negate the absurd and so presents a contradiction to our sincere belief in the absurd. Faced with the absurd, all consequences are equivalently meaningless, and "self-destruction" necessitates a value judgment.<sup>147</sup> Therefore killing yourself contradicts belief in the absurd. And so we cannot choose death, faced with absurdity. This philosophical point, which Camus explains in the main body of the essay, is also metaphorically seen—and *meant*—in Camus' use of the myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus is in the underworld. He literally cannot choose death. Since Sisyphus' condition is meant as our condition, we also cannot choose death (metaphorically—obviously we technically can).

What about this business that we "must imagine Sisyphus happy"? The reasoning sums up much of Camus' essay. Sisyphus, it is said, loved life. It is why he received his fate, for he only received his sentence when, after being granted permission to leave the underworld in order to complete a task for the gods, he refused to return and stayed as long as he could in life. Then he received his fate with the rock. It is because of Sisyphus' passion for life that he *revolts* against his absurd fate. Sisyphus hates death. Though she escaped, Sisyphus is said to have put death in chains.<sup>148</sup> So, Sisyphus, with his "passion for life," "scorn of the gods," and "hatred of death," Sisyphus is the absurd *hero*.<sup>149</sup> As Camus writes, "there is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn."<sup>150</sup> For our own condition, we may place the absurd in, where Sisyphus

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<sup>146</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *ibid.*, 121.

<sup>147</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, *ibid.*, 7.

<sup>148</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *ibid.*, 119.

<sup>149</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *ibid.*, 120.

<sup>150</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *ibid.*, 121.

refers to the gods. With Sisyphus' scorn Camus refers to the essential feature of revolt in his philosophy. Sisyphus asserts his passion in spite of his condition, and this choice, for Camus, makes him heroic.

Sisyphus seems like a hero in this way when his fate seems like a tragedy, and it may seem like a tragedy only because he is conscious of his fate. However, as Camus writes, “[i]f [Sisyphus’] descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy.”<sup>151</sup> This is partly why we must imagine him happy. It is not that we cannot imagine him otherwise. Obviously we can imagine him miserable. Camus’ use of “must” does not denote a logical necessity, but an imperative. We must choose to imagine Sisyphus happy in the same way that Sisyphus revolts against his absurd condition. Imagining Sisyphus happy is our heroic choice that parallels his own. It is our assertion of passion for life against the absurd. The alternative to answering this way is tantamount to confessing that life is not worth the trouble. So, it is suicide or imagine Sisyphus happy. But as we discussed, suicide is off the table, so we must imagine Sisyphus happy. We may not be in the underworld, but our condition mirrors Sisyphus’s. Camus’ entire plea is of a humanist nature. It is a plea for passion in life. It is that it is imperative that we make this heroic choice in the face of absurdity.

### 3.3 Morality: *Virtuous on a Whim*

A significant pull away from accepting the truth of absurdity, certainly for many, is the problem of morality. If there is no meaning, or no God, then it may seem, as it does to Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) (a character and point of view that Camus discusses at length in *The Rebel*), that everything is permitted. As Camus notes, in the

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<sup>151</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *ibid.*, 121.

face of the absurd, “[n]o code of ethics [...] [is] justifiable *a priori*.”<sup>152</sup> It may be a tough pill to swallow philosophically for many, but when the absurd is seen and felt “lucidly” (a term Camus employs often) it is an inescapable truth that all consequences are of equivalent value. No actions can be any better or worse than any others, morally speaking. We see this attitude lived out by Meursault in *The Stranger*. He makes no attempts at moralizations when he shoots a man, nor when his mother dies, nor in regard to his own attitude towards either event. There is no guilt. Guilt implies value judgments, where Meursault will not go, which is, again, why he does not have much to say. He will reflect on his feelings in a factual manner, e.g., feeling annoyed at the whole justice proceeding, but he ascribes no better and worse to any consequences. Again, as Camus says, the whole problem of the absurd can be centered around a critique of factual judgments versus value judgments. Value judgments, moralizing, from the absurd point of view, feel completely weird and out of place.

Camus sums up the absurd’s relation to morality, as he writes:

[The absurd] does not recommend crime, for this would be childish, but it restores remorse to its futility. Likewise, if all experiences are indifferent, that of duty is as legitimate as any other. One can be virtuous through a whim. All systems of morality are based on the idea that an action has consequences that legitimize or cancel it. A mind imbued with the absurd merely judges that those consequences must be considered calmly. It is ready to pay up. In other words, there may be responsible persons, but there are no guilty ones, in its opinion.<sup>153</sup>

The absurd therefore makes no claims that we should not have laws, rules, or anything of the sort. We may go ahead with these just as well as we may do anything else. The absurd point of view does not pretend, makes no pretense, has no blind faith (this is the “lucidity”) as to these things having any ultimate, worldly justification or foundation in the “Good” or anything else. As Camus writes, “[t]he absurd world can only receive aesthetic justification.”<sup>154</sup> Some actions

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<sup>152</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *ibid.*, 16.

<sup>153</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *ibid.*, 67.

<sup>154</sup> Camus, *Notebooks 1942–1951*, *ibid.*, 47.



and consequences may please our aesthetic senses more than others, and that is fine from the absurd point of view, but in the sincerity of the point of view there is no holding out that these aesthetic senses have something deeper which imply an ultimate standard and justification to morality.

### *3.4 Scorn or Irony?: Camus vs Nagel*

Thirty years after Camus, Thomas Nagel attempts to explain the absurd and the feeling of it in his essay “The Absurd.” It is worth exploring his discussion, because, although he acknowledges Camus’ work, and that they are after the same “absurd,” Nagel presents a different analysis and a different prescription.

Nagel explains how the feeling of the absurd often comes about in us in relation to how small we feel in comparison to the rest of the universe, and how it feels as though nothing we do could possibly matter a million years from now and nothing happening a million years from now could matter now. So, because we feel so insignificant in space and time, we get the sense that nothing matters.<sup>155</sup> Nagel does recognize, however, that no chain of justification from these feelings will terminate in a proof of meaninglessness, so, like Camus immediately recognized, the absurd must be taken as an assumption or starting-point.<sup>156</sup>

So we are again left only with explaining the feeling of the absurd, not justifying it. Nagel defines the feeling thus: “In ordinary life a situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality.”<sup>157</sup> He gives examples such as producing an elaborate speech supporting a motion already passed; a criminal made president; declaring your love to a recording on the phone; your pants falling down during your knighting

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<sup>155</sup> Thomas Nagel, “The Absurd,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 20 (1971), 717.

<sup>156</sup> Nagel, “The Absurd,” *ibid.*, 718.

<sup>157</sup> Nagel, “The Absurd,” *ibid.*, 718.

ceremony.<sup>158</sup> This feeling extends to life overall, Nagel argues, when we see “an inflated pretension or aspiration which is inseparable from the continuation of human life and which makes its absurdity inescapable.”<sup>159</sup> This is not all that different from Camus’ “denseness and strangeness.” The “inflated pretension or aspiration” can be seen in Camus’ description of our desire for finding a rationality to the world—which it fails to meet. Nagel, though, describes it differently. He argues that the definition is satisfied not by the confrontation between our rationality and the unreasonable world, but “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.”<sup>160</sup> Two aspects are therefore necessary: seriousness and the possibility of doubt or arbitrariness. Nagel has something to say about both. We will take the latter first.

In that everything is open to doubt Nagel finds a comparison between the absurd and epistemological skepticism.<sup>161</sup> Epistemology faces the ‘infinite regress problem,’ that justification chains for a legitimate claim to an instance of knowledge do not have to end. We only stop asking “why or how do you know that?” when we are satisfied, but one may always press for a further why or how. In the sphere of purpose or meaning to the world or anything that we do, a similar problem arises. Any justification for purpose or meaning can always be pressed for a further link in the chain. Therefore purpose and meaning seem ungrounded and illegitimate. And we may always step back from our busy lives and reflect on this fact. Nagel takes it that we may always step back and look at our lives *sub specie aeternitatis*, and at once we see the arbitrary nature of everything we do.<sup>162</sup> But this is only one half of the absurd. In itself—that all

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<sup>158</sup> Nagel, “The Absurd,” *ibid.*, 718.

<sup>159</sup> Nagel, “The Absurd,” *ibid.*, 718.

<sup>160</sup> Nagel, “The Absurd,” *ibid.*, 718.

<sup>161</sup> Nagel, “The Absurd,” *ibid.*, 722.

<sup>162</sup> Nagel, “The Absurd,” *ibid.*, 720.

is arbitrary—does not make our lives absurd. The absurdity is that regardless of this arbitrariness we take our lives seriously all the same—and for what?

Nagel argues that this seriousness, in spite of our ability to look *sub specie aeternitatis*, is unavoidable.<sup>163</sup> By “seriousness” Nagel has in mind that we “*pursue* our lives.”<sup>164</sup> He refers to our day to day conduct, whether in happiness or misery, poverty or luxury. We are always up to some project or other, though with varying degrees of effort. We are always concerned with something we find terribly important, whether it is how to make money, what we look like, finding the truth, getting sex, drugs, food, or other pleasures, our health and when we are going to die, and so on. And this is the absurdity, that even if we step back and see what we do as arbitrary, meaningless, even perhaps a bit silly sometimes, we step back in and continue all the same. Everyone is going on and doing all this nonsense and what the hell for? We appeal to survival instincts, or say it’s just for pleasure, but then why the hell do we bother with those? And so it’s absurd.

We could discuss in what ways this clash between seriousness and arbitrariness is different from Camus’ clash between a desire for meaning and the “silence of the world,” but it is more or less the same. Arbitrariness implies a meaninglessness, and our serious pursuit of our lives has something of an inherent desire for it to amount to something meaningful. This latter point may be debatable, but we will leave that for future projects and turn to a more significant difference between Nagel and Camus, for regardless of technical differences, they both try to come to grips with the same feeling of absurdity.

As we discussed, Camus prescribes an attitude of scorn and revolt in the face of the absurd. Nagel explicitly recognizes this and interprets some of Camus’ motive behind it. Such

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<sup>163</sup> Nagel, “The Absurd,” *ibid.*, 719.

<sup>164</sup> Nagel, “The Absurd,” *ibid.*, 719.

scorn, he says, “will not make our lives un-absurd, but it will lend them a certain nobility.”<sup>165</sup> Nagel refuses this approach to the absurd: “This seems to me romantic and slightly self-pitying.”<sup>166</sup> Nagel’s argument for his own prescription is simple. If we step back and see the arbitrary nature of everything and that nothing matters, then it also does not matter that nothing matters, and instead of living our absurd lives with Camus’ Sisyphusian-heroism, Nagel suggests that we can live our lives with a sense of irony.<sup>167</sup> The suggestion is essentially that instead of imagining Sisyphus, in his moment of reflection, shaking his fist at the gods, we imagine him having a good laugh.

## Chapter 4 Synthesis

### *4.1 Metaphysical Differences Between Camus and Watts*

In order to see whether or not the points of view of the Joker and the absurd man are compatible, we ought to look first at the foundations of each philosophy. Both Watts and Camus are clear on their assumptions. Watts’ metaphysical assumption is that the world is of a playful or musical nature, in the sense that it is doing whatever it is doing for nothing other than the wonder of doing it. Camus is clear that the absurd is an assumption, a starting-point. The world is silent despite our desire for meaning. Camus’ metaphysics is more like no metaphysics at all. So, are the two different? They are not so different as to be contradictory. Watts recognizes, in Zen Buddhist fashion, that the metaphysical truth is technically best expressed by saying nothing at all. The world simply is. It is doing whatever it is doing and it is not reducible to our limited human understanding and rationality, so the most efficient way to understand the world is to say

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<sup>165</sup> Nagel, “The Absurd,” *ibid.*, 726.

<sup>166</sup> Nagel, “The Absurd,” *ibid.*, 726.

<sup>167</sup> Nagel, “The Absurd,” *ibid.*, 727.

nothing, mirroring the nothing that the world tells us. Watts, however, characterizing himself as a philosophical entertainer, shares with us the myth that goes with the Joker's point of view. Like Carse says, the myth is not at all necessary, but our creating and telling our myth is part of the play that Watts' myth espouses. So, from both the absurd point of view and the games point of view, there is no meaning to the world, and as yet it does not seem that either view would preclude the other. Buying Watts' myth does not miraculously make the world ultimately understandable. It in no way removes the feeling that the world is weird and absurd. If anything it enhances it. You see its weirdness and absurdness more "lucidly," in Camus' terminology. The only thing Watts' myth does for you, in the end, is that you stop asking the why and wherefore of the universe. So, that the metaphysics of the absurd and the point of view of games are contradictory I do not see a reason for.

#### *4.2 Synthesizing Games and the Absurd*

When I say that we are going to synthesize games and the absurd, I mean that, by combining these two philosophies we have looked at, we end up with a point of view in which life and the world are seen as not serious, meaningless, having no inherent morality, and where behaviour can be interpreted through "game rules."

Before discussing some particulars, I want to present the central thrust of the argument metaphorically by using, as Camus does, the myth of sisyphus, as well as Watts' myth of "It," the Self, God, etc. The idea is simple. Camus uses Sisyphus as an analogy to our condition. Sisyphus's fate, however, is also analogous to It's fate, the world's fate as Watts paints the world. The universe is imperishable. It cannot die. This may immediately raise questions such as the inevitable heat death of the universe and such things. I will not debate the point, because it is beyond my considerations, but only relay Watts' perspective, since our discussion concerns his

philosophy. As we have seen, Watts' makes arguments about the fundamental nature of opposites, up implies down, black implies white. As something moves to one extreme, eventually it "flips" into the opposite direction. His perspective has roots in the Eastern philosophical ideas that go into, for example, the Buddhist wheel of Samsara. Samsara is reality, constituted by several realms of existence: the humans, animals, gods, demigods, ghosts, and demons. The translations of the title of each realm aside, the important point is that this represents the cycle of rebirth. One's karma dictates which realm a soul moves to after death. The metaphysical point that this is an example of, for Watts' philosophy, is that once one has reached the extreme in one direction, gone as far as it is possible to go, e.g., the godly realm, and become as good as you can possibly be, the only possible way to out-do that is to flip into the opposite extreme. And so Watts, as we have seen, argues that the world is vibration: it "flips" back and forth.<sup>168</sup> The sternest scientists may have no problem accepting that all sense data comes as do sound and light, in vibratory, wave-like patterns, but they may still push back that the whole thing will come to an end. This is where Watts makes another assumption. To him it seems absolutely basic that if something has happened once, then it can happen again, and so too with the universe.<sup>169</sup> And so the existence-non-existence pair constitutes the whole. The universe turning off implies the universe turning on. That, he argues, is the nature of "It," everything happening, and of course we know that he argues that that is the real us. And so the myth that the Joker adheres to is to say that this "It," which is you, goes on and on forever, playing its hide-and-seek and whatever else, with no escape from itself. In this way "It," too, is just like Sisyphus. It cannot die. There is no meaning to Its tasks or games. There is nothing outside

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<sup>168</sup> Alan Watts, "The Tao of Philosophy," lecture, unknown location and date, audio transcript, Alan Watts Organization, <https://alanwatts.org/transcripts/the-tao-of-philosophy-4/>.

<sup>169</sup> Alan Watts, "World as Play," lecture, unknown location and date, audio transcript, Alan Watts Organization, <https://alanwatts.org/transcripts/world-as-play/>.

everything to constitute any reference for a purpose. Its hide-and-seek, or whatever we wish to call everything that everything does, is no different Sisyphus pushing his rock forever. There is but one problem with this picture: Sisyphus is *conscious* of his fate, and that is a necessary part of his condition being absurd. Does this mean Its condition cannot be said to be absurd? We will dedicate a section in itself to this problem below but continue for now with the harmony between the two philosophies.

#### 4.2.1 Seriousness and Lucidity

Both the point of view of the Joker and the absurd recognize the futility and strangeness of seriousness. The Joker looks at it all as a game, and so may laugh (sincerely, not with contempt or superiority) at the seriousness with which others take their games. The absurd man sees lucidly that all actions are arbitrary—no morality or meaning grounds them absolutely. But one may also, as Camus writes, “be virtuous on a whim” and go ahead acting in accordance with some system of morality or other. From the Joker’s perspective, that there is no meaning or absolute morality does in any sense preclude going ahead and playing, for example, the utilitarian game, or what have you. The Joker only does not take them seriously. The absurd man and the Joker simply see through the game. They see things lucidly for what they are: “games without consequence.”<sup>170</sup> This quote comes from Camus, not Watts, in his *Notebooks*. Camus presents a table in which both absurdity and lucidity lead to the conclusion of “games without consequence.” Elsewhere in the *Notebooks* we can see Camus planning a chapter for some project with the title: “Life as a game.”<sup>171</sup> Here and elsewhere, such as Meursault reflecting that his court proceedings feel like a game, we see Camus using the game analogy and its resonance with his work.

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<sup>170</sup> Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1935–1942*, translated by Philip Thody (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2010), 11.

<sup>171</sup> Camus, *Notebooks 1935–1942*, *ibid.*, 46.

Though the Joker does not take things seriously, Nagel argues that seriousness is unavoidable. Even though we can recognize that our lives are absurd and, standing back and seeing things *sub specie aeternitatis*, that what we do is arbitrary, we nonetheless come back and “pursue” our lives. This may seem to present a contradiction between the two philosophies: the Joker is not serious, but we, facing the absurd, are still serious. What reconciles this problem is Watts’ distinction between seriousness and sincerity that we discussed. Recognizing the arbitrary nature of our actions (or games), we may indeed “pursue” our lives all the same, but we can do this sincerely rather than having a serious and stern attitude about us that what we do really does fundamentally matter and has the utmost importance about it. We can have the same sincere attitude about us that a child has, wrapped up in his games. Or, as Watts argues, we can have the same sincerity about us that is in a “sincere laughter,” one that resolves our anxiety about what we do. We are anxious, he says, when we think it matters terribly what we are going to do, but when we see it does not matter, we can play what games we like without a serious attitude, and with a sincere one. Camus, too, argues that life in fact is lived all the better without meaning.<sup>172</sup> So, even though Nagel is correct that we will pursue our lives, projects, pleasures, etc. all the same when we see lucidly that what we do is arbitrary, we may do it with sincerity rather than seriousness. So the point is this. The Joker may face absurdity, be conscious of the fact that the world does meet our desire for understanding (Camus), see that any meaning is always subject to doubt (Nagel), retain the attitude that it’s all a game, and still sincerely go ahead with his own games. Likewise for the absurd man, he may lucidly see the “denseness and strangeness,” find no meaning, see that what he does is arbitrary, that there is an equivalence to all consequences, *and* seamlessly adopt the point of view that all is games and play. In other words we may take a new point of view, that life is constituted of *absurd games*.

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<sup>172</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *ibid.*, 53.



### 4.3 The Problem: Consciousness and the Self

We now return to the problem with this synthesis mentioned earlier. Watts' philosophy of the Joker and games rests on the position of non-dualism, that the real "you" is everything going on. To combine this with Camus' philosophy, we painted a picture of "It" as in the same condition of Sisyphus. The absurd, however, requires consciousness ("the absurd depends as much on man as on the world"). Sisyphus is only the absurd hero because he is conscious of his fate. Can "It," or the Self (God, Brahman, etc.), be said to be conscious? The answer is both maybe and that it does not matter.

There are philosophical theories, such as "panpsychism," that argue for a unifying consciousness or mind to everything, through and through. Watts himself argues that even minerals present a "rudimentary form of consciousness."<sup>173</sup> Vedanta philosophy, which Watts is rooted in, argues that the world, or space-time-causation—which is what the word *māya*, typically translated as "illusion," refers to—is like a prism through which the underlying reality (*Brahman*) shines through and produces what we experience, and this prism is consciousness.<sup>174</sup> So, while it is a fair question to debate whether underlying reality is conscious, the world, for Watts' philosophy, is consciousness or a function of it. We cannot access underlying reality from our human perspective, even if that is the *real* us. So, can we say that the world, the Self, "It," is self-conscious in the way that Sisyphus is? Maybe. We cannot conclusively say.

The answer, however, does not matter. Watts, remember, is presenting us with a myth of the world as this thing playing a grand game of hide-and-seek with itself, or putting on a great

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<sup>173</sup> Alan Watts, "The Tao of Philosophy," lecture, unknown location and date, audio transcript, Alan Watts Organization, <https://alanwatts.org/transcripts/the-tao-of-philosophy-4/>.

<sup>174</sup> This prism analogy was presented to me in lecture by Queen's University Professor Ram M. M. Ram Murty, "Vedanta and Vivekananda," Philosophy 810: How the Mind Works According to Indian Philosophy (class lecture, Queen's University, Kingston, ON, March 14, 2023). I present a full discussion of this in my paper, "Snakes, Ropes, and Waves: Connecting Rāja Yoga and Advaita Vedānta (2023), unpublished.

show—and it's all for the fun of it. The world is *like* this, he argues. Recall his explanation that if you dream all the dreams you want, you eventually dream what you are doing now. So the myth, at least, does take this “It,” which is us, to be at least analogically conscious in the way we are. My argument that this “It” is in Sisyphus’s same condition is no different, that doing everything in the universe is *like* rolling a rock over and over for eternity with the resignation that this is the way it will be forever and ever to no ultimate point—and it’s absurd, but let’s play on anyway, because we’ve got nothing else to do. And this is the way the whole works of us and the rest of the universe can feel to us. At rock bottom both Watts and Camus are philosophers of the human experience. Their projects are existential in this way. That we can experience and resonate with both points of view simultaneously is the point.

#### *4.4 Comparing Prescriptions*

The compatibility of the two points of view established, it is worth briefly comparing what each philosopher prescribes for us. Two questions have been fundamental: whether to go on living at all, and how to live if we do. Let us take these in turn.

##### 4.4.1 Suicide: Do I Go On?

Watts and Camus’ answers to the question of suicide differ. Camus is clear that suicide is not permissible when faced with the absurd because it negates the absurd. However, that does not make my life any less absurd right up to the point of death, if I do commit suicide. If I do, the absurd simply dies with me. We are still technically free to do this. That Sisyphus’s undying condition is our condition, along with that we must imagine him happy, is a metaphorical plea from Camus to allow the possibility for us to seek passion and say Yes to the world. That our committing suicide would imply an insincere and inconsistent belief in the absurd also does not

mean that our lives are not absurd if we decide to commit suicide. If we are not sure whether any perspective on the absurd must involve Camus' position of revolting against the absurd and keeping it going, we can look to Nagel, who recognizes the absurd perspective but suggests a sense of irony rather than revolt. To Nagel, it is not that the absurd means we cannot commit suicide, but that if we do truly recognize the unimportance of the situation, "then what reason can we have to resent or escape it?"<sup>175</sup> I am partial to Nagel here as, in true absurdist fashion, there is no importance to any consequence. You may go ahead and commit suicide. It is only that you will have no justified reason in doing so. Camus attempts both to express, and to instill in readers, a humanist love for the world, but it is not one that the absurd necessitates.

Watts' answer to the question is essentially an indifference. As we saw, he takes the alternative to life to be "suicide or gamble." You either go on playing, gambling that it might be of some fun, or, if you do not want to play, you may go ahead and leave the game. It makes no difference because it is all "It" in disguise. The world is putting on the show of all these people, and so the real you never really dies anyway. What Watts wants to get across is only the resolution of our anxiety about life, death, and everything in between. Since it is all a show, there is no reason to be afraid. But even then, just as when we suspend our disbelief so that we may allow a movie to play on our emotions, Watts would have us go ahead and be afraid, if we like. The thing is only not to "wobble" between alternatives.<sup>176</sup> Wobbling is anxiety. So go ahead with life, or death, if you like, and don't worry about it. But even further, says Watts, if you cannot help but worry, then go ahead and worry and don't worry about worrying.<sup>177</sup> So, from the Joker's point of view, suicide is also not taken seriously, and the objective to the game that Watts is

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<sup>175</sup> Nagel, "The Absurd," *ibid.*, 727.

<sup>176</sup> Watts, "Game Theory of Ethics," *ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> Alan Watts, "Still the Mind," lecture, unknown location and date, audio transcript, Alan Watts Organization, <https://alanwatts.org/transcripts/still-the-mind/>.

playing is merely to help resolve us of our anxiety, if our game is to try and resolve it in ourselves.

Furthermore as regards Watts' position on suicide is the Indian philosophical perspective on which Watts' position is based. We have touched on the idea of Samsara, the eternal wheel of life, death, and reincarnation, as well as the enlightenment or liberation that is the escape from Samsara. For Buddhism, this enlightenment is the transition to nirvana. It is also precisely the same thing as the discovery of who one really is. As Watts puts it in *The Book*, it is the discovery that "you're It." As we have discussed, it is the goal, the endgame, in the great game of hide-and-seek that It, the world, plays. This enlightenment, the realization that you're It, that Watts argues for in the *The Book* is precisely the same realization of non-dualism that is forwarded by Indian philosophy's *advaita vedanta*, as discussed earlier. Therefore, inherent in Watts' philosophy generally, as well as that of the Joker, is the fact that suicide only delays the endgame of the great hide-and-seek game that the real you is playing. Until enlightenment, until one discovers who he really is (It), he is confined to eternal reincarnation of Samsara. He may kill himself as many times as he likes, but inevitably, in the eternal game of hide-and-seek, he will successfully discover who he really is, which is, following non-dualism, all that there is. Suicide, therefore, in Watts' framework, merely delays enlightenment; it delays the finding of the seeking and perpetuates, or is a part of, the hiding portion of It's great game.

#### 4.4.2 I Go On: Morality and How to Live

Saying we do choose to go, what does each point of view have to say about this? We have discussed the fact that neither point of view recognizes any absolute morality, so we will find no "oughts" and "shoulds" in either, but each view still has something to say.

Camus recommends scorn. But what comes from this? Camus' answer to this lies in *The Rebel*, but a full discussion of its connection here is beyond our current scope. Suffice it to say, however, that Camus argues for living on with a dissatisfied Yes to the world. Furthermore, the absurd does not reject living "morally." Though ungrounded, one may go ahead with what we think to be virtuous living. A life of duty is as legitimate as any other.

Nagel, in opposition to Camus, recommends irony. In the face of the absurd and the arbitrary nature of whatever we do, he suggests to us that, though we will go ahead with our lives and projects in full earnest, we may have the reflective capability and self awareness to see our situation for what it is: pointless. Reflecting, whenever we so choose, on this contrast between pointlessness and our stubbornness to go ahead with it anyway, we may appreciate a sense of humility, perhaps a silly character to it all, and take the grand joke of life with humour rather than spite.

Watts' prescription is closer to Nagel's but even less so positively recommends anything. Indeed, the Joker's attitude laughs at the whole situation, and he wants to instill this possibility for laughter and humility in the rest of us, or at least that's his game. He recommends no game, or even that you should play at all. The question is, however, how do you go on playing when you know it is a game? Watts does not give a direct answer to this question. Partly, this is because the whole point is that you go on playing however you like. Not knowing how to play, or what game to play, is the anxiety we discussed above that Watts wants to help us remove. Watts' answer comes itself in the form of a question. This, to him, is the most important question for one to answer for himself: "what do I desire?"<sup>178</sup> Once we answer this question, forgetting things like money, health, etc., Watts recommends that we do that. You may as well, he says, live a

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<sup>178</sup> The lecture that contains this quote has been recorded but, to my knowledge, has not been archived by the Alan Watts Organization. It is, however, likely his most famous speech and can be found in various uploads and re-uploads on the internet.

short life, doing things you like, than live a long, miserable life.<sup>179</sup> This is not a moral command, however. If what you desire is to live a long and miserable life, then by all means go ahead. Whatever game you choose to play, that game has rules, and that is as far as morality, what you should do, goes. If you want to play the game of a miserable life like, for example, working a job you hate in order to get money in order to eat and continue on with the job you hate, then those are the rules. If you want to play such as to be spiteful at the whole process, then that can be part of your game, too. Or perhaps you want to worry about the whole thing. Well then play that way. But what game you play, however, is up to you. It is true that you may fail. The human condition is obviously such that we cannot do everything. Perhaps you want to play the “flying game” and jump off a building with just your arms and legs to give you flight. You are playing alright, but you are not flying.

#### *4.5 So What?: What to do With this New Point of View*

In conclusion to this discussion it is desirable to say something about why we should care or be interested in this point of view that combines games and the absurd. A “so what?” may be lingering. Some utility may be desired. As I said at the beginning, some secret meaning to the world is not to be found in this synthesis. The world and all our projects and endeavours remain as meaningless as this philosophical project. Some things can be said, however, about what this does as a point of view of the world, even if we cannot say that one should adopt it.

Everything is absurd and a game. Everything is meaningless and we need not take it seriously. What this attitude can do for our mental health is one way to take this argument, I suppose—part of Watts’ game is to rid us of metaphysical anxiety—but that is not what we will

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<sup>179</sup> This is from the same speech the previous footnote refers to.

consider here. What I want to suggest is how this point of view can allow us to analyze what those around us and what we ourselves do.

Facing the absurd, we recognize that there is no ultimate reason to the world, no rationale for what goes on. What we can do, however, is adopt the lens of the rationale of game rules. I will explain this with an example, but what this allows us to do, fundamentally, is take value judgments out of the equation. We do not interpret what goes on in terms of better and worse, oughts and shoulds—except in relation to what games are being played, that is, in relation to the rules. We do not condemn the hypocrite who does not obey the rules of his supposed game, but we can point him out. There is a point of explanation here. He is only a hypocrite if he is playing the game we think he is—lies and deception may be part of his game. But if he is sincerely trying to play, for example, the game of kind and courteous dinner party host, and then he intentionally insults his guest, he is a hypocrite.

If we can interpret what games people are playing, then we can attempt to discern what rules they play by. That people can be hypocritical is true, yes, but this means that they are lying not only to us about what game they are playing, but also to themselves. The trick is to figure out what game they are really sincerely playing, which they may not admit to you or themselves. For example, our dinner party host may say and believe that he is playing that game, but he is actually playing, for example, the social status game, where perhaps he thinks (even if unconsciously) that hosting the party and even hurling insults may win him the superiority his game is after. We can apply this analysis to other people, but we can use it just as well with ourselves. For one, we can try to figure out where we are being hypocritical—am I following my own games' rules? But whether we care about not being hypocritical or not, we can take the analysis further self-reflectively and attempt to discover what games we are really playing.

Perhaps I am the would-be courteous dinner party host not knowing that I am really in it for social status (this is not a real example—I have not been playing the dinner party host game). To know what game I am really playing—the social status game—I can understand the goal and rules all the better and thus play better. Furthermore, discovering what games I am actually up to, I can reflect better on whether I actually want to be playing these games at all.

There is a further complicating factor to this. We play multiple games simultaneously. Some games will have a higher priority than others. Some rules may conflict with those of other games. Some games may be nested inside of other games. For example, the dinner party game may be a game played within the social status game. Likely, this is easier to untangle and understand with one's own games rather than those of others, but in any case trying to understand behaviour in terms of games presents an interesting game in itself and is one that may help us determine just what we, as well others, really want—and want to play. Doing so without seriousness, and without moralizing, allows us to see more lucidly what is going on and allows us to simply get on with our games.

If this appears to some to have drifted into psychology, then that probably could not be avoided. It may be objected, then, that other psychological methods already present better ways for understanding human behaviour. A few things may be said in response. For one, those methods present games themselves, and I do not claim that this one is better at understanding human behaviour. Your choice depends on what sort of understanding you want. This game, this whole point of view that I am arguing for, comes with it a rich philosophical background that may be found interesting. Still, one may see this entire synthesis a rather pointless and silly project. If that is the case, good—you've got the point.



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