

Metaphysical Pessimism and Samuel Beckett

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HAMM:

Imagine if a rational being came back to earth,
wouldn't he be liable to get ideas into his head
if he observed us long enough.

(Voice of rational being.)

Ah, good, now I see what it is, yes, now I understand what they're at!¹

Samuel Beckett once said that the way to understand his plays is to talk, not about philosophy, but about situations.² While agreeing fervently that no amount of philosophical talk could ever by itself constitute an understanding of his plays, it will be my contention that the rational being which Hamm imagines as returning to earth would achieve a good deal of understanding of where Beckett's characters are at by considering them in the light of the conceptual framework emerging from recent discussions of the meaning of life question by writers such as Paul Edwards, Thomas Nagel, Kurt Baier, and others.³ More specifically, I shall contend that, in the light of this framework, the characters and action in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* give expression to what I shall identify as a kind of metaphysical pessimism. At the same time, I shall contend that consideration of this conceptual framework contributes to our interpretation of the literary structure as ironic and, therefore, to strong recommendations as to how these plays are to be viewed and read. The first part

of my paper will be devoted to a discussion of this framework. In the second part I shall apply this discussion to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*.

To prevent utter misunderstanding of my intentions, some strong disclaimers are necessary. By no means do I suggest that the conceptual framework which I shall explore as a background for discussion of Beckett is the only one which might throw light on his plays. Also, although the framework I explore may contribute towards an understanding of other works by Beckett, I shall restrict the scope of my examination to Beckett's two best known plays, *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. Finally, as regards the author's intentions, I doubt very much that Beckett was consciously and intentionally writing within this conceptual framework.

Questions concerning the meaning of life are notoriously ambiguous. It must therefore be emphasized that the questions which are central to my discussion are not those which concern the various purposes which a person has and his attempts to find an overall meaningfulness in his life. Instead the questions which concern me are those which arise in response to claims that our serious human concerns are ultimately meaningless, pointless, and even absurd. I want to sketch briefly some features of the general framework for such claims which has been developed in recent discussions of the meaning of life question. In his well-known article "The Absurd," Thomas Nagel maintains that our sense of the absurd arises out of the discrepancy between our serious aspirations and those broader perspectives which are available to us in imagination and from which these aspirations are seen as meaningless, pointless, and coming to nothing. At first glance, the broader perspectives in question would appear to be rather diverse in character. Nagel refers to them at various times as including a capacity to view life *sub specie aeternitatis*, to feign a nebula's-eye view, to view ourselves from a distant time and place, and to view ourselves and our presuppositions as arbitrary and idiosyncratic. However, behind this apparent diversity, these perspectives have in common that they are all generated by a sense of limitations and, most important, they are perspectives from which, since they disclose no standards, we have no reason to believe that anything matters. And since nothing matters from these perspectives, it is easy to see why Nagel maintains that the sense of the absurd which arises out of the discrepancy between our serious aspirations and these broader perspectives need in itself have no practical significance. He concludes: "If a sense of the absurd is a way of perceiving our true situation, then what reason can we have to resent or escape it?"⁴ Our absurd lives may therefore, he believes, be approached with irony and resignation.

As regards the foregoing account, it seems undeniable that there are clashing perspectives of the sort described by Nagel which generate a sense of absurdity

and which may well be viewed with a detached attitude of irony. However, the most striking weakness of this account is that it fails to do justice to the actual responses of most persons to the absurdity of life. Readers of such works as *Ecclesiastes*, Tolstoy's *My Confession*, Chekov's *Uncle Vanya*, Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again*, and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* will surely insist that in their treatments of the absurdity and meaninglessness of life the authors in question have considered aspects of the human condition which are of momentous import and which, as a matter of fact, are deeply disturbing. At the same time, readers are likely to have felt that these works serve as guides for the perplexed, and have implications for how we ought to live. Nagel's account, intent upon explaining why the perception of absurdity need not matter, contributes little towards an explanation of why this perception does in fact matter, so much to us.

I want therefore to present an alternative account which will do justice to the datum that a sense of human absurdity is a very deeply disturbing part of the human condition and which will provide a plausible explanation of why this is the case. Whereas Nagel's account is deeply imbued with features which draw upon Hume, I shall present arguments which, as so often happens, find in Kant an alternative to Hume. However, in what follows my procedure will not be to explicate Kant, but only to sketch an argument whose beginning outlines derive from Kant.⁵

The Kantian argument, not unlike Nagel's in this respect, is much concerned with the fact that as we attempt to extend our knowledge, we cannot but be aware of the limited and conditional character of our explanations. They are limited and conditional, first of all, because the general laws to which we appeal in our explanations do not have the kind of necessity characterizing mathematical or logical systems, but are concerned with what in fact occurs. Second, they are limited and conditional in that the objects or occurrences to be explained are explained in terms of earlier objects or occurrences which are in the very same need of explanation. But since our everyday explanations tend to be directed towards limited and specific problems, the fact that our explanations are limited does not in itself render them unsatisfactory.

At this point the Kantian argument gives much emphasis to a feature of the situation in question which plays little or no role in Nagel's account. In the situation in which we attempt to extend our knowledge and yet become aware of the limited character of our explanations, Kant maintains that human reason has a natural inclination to overstep these limits and to set before itself the ideal of completeness, finality and systematic unity in our explanations. He defends the

worth of this ideal as providing an important incentive and guide to our continuing attempts to achieve understanding of the world. But, at the same time, this ideal is quite empty in that there is no object of knowledge answering to it. It should be emphasized that the propensity to frame such an ideal is not the result of the sophistries of misguided philosophers but is, Kant insisted, a natural propensity of human reason. He warns repeatedly against the "deceptive illusion" produced by mistaking this purely regulative ideal for a claim to the kind of constitutive principles of transcendent knowledge which would provide us with unconditional explanations. Such an error, for example, is at the root of our framing an ideal of unconditional necessity leading to mistaken claims to have knowledge of the existence of God as an unconditionally necessary being. In a passage whose mood might be that of a contemporary existentialist Kant writes:

That unconditioned necessity, which we require as the last support of all things, is the true abyss of human reason. We cannot put off the thought, nor can we support it, that a Being, which we represent to ourselves as the highest among possible beings, should say to himself, I am from eternity to eternity, there is nothing beside me, except that which is something through my will, — but whence am I?⁶

Let me present an overview, therefore, of the way in which my account supplements that of Nagel. Nagel gives insufficient attention to the question why a sense of human absurdity should be so deeply disturbing to great writers like Tolstoy, the author of *Ecclesiastes*, and Beckett and indeed to all thoughtful persons. On his account, there was no reason for absurdity to matter since the somewhat exotic nebula's-eye perspective from which we may view our ultimate concerns discloses no reasons or standards. On my account, on the other hand, human absurdity may matter very much to us if we proceed from the perspective from which we ordinarily make action guiding judgements. This perspective, if entirely clearheaded and rational, would agree with Nagel in perceiving our human situation as one in which the justification for our ultimate judgments simply is limited, conditional, and arbitrary and in which no further standards are disclosed to which we appeal. But we are not possessed of such godlike clearheadedness and rationality. Instead, our action guiding judgments are made from the ordinary here and now perspective from which, though capable of recognizing our human limitations, we are torn by irrational propensities to seek for more than is available to us. Thus, although considered judgments concerning our human limitations will act as a constraint upon our wayward propensities and beliefs, it is unlikely that they will ever suppress entirely those tendencies to frame spurious ideals, so well described by Kant, which lead

us to be concerned, however irrationally, with the absurdity and meaninglessness of life. Unhappily, such irrational concerns are greatly magnified by the fact that they tend to operate in conjunction with various neurotic states characterized by anxiety, perfectionism, and abulia as well as with the agonies that attend the making of hard or tragic choices. Hence, they may lead to a great deal of serious conflict in the character and conduct of most thoughtful persons.

Such irrational concerns with the absurdity and meaninglessness of life may find their most extreme expression in a kind of pessimism. Among the many kinds of pessimism which might be distinguished, we need to single out two for close examination. The first and more usual is the kind of pessimism which maintains that the unhappiness, pain, and evil in the world overbalance the happiness, pleasure, and good that it affords. A second and more metaphysically inclined pessimism maintains that life is essentially evil, meaningless, or lacking in ultimate worth. It is the latter kind of pessimism, then, which gives expression to the propensity to frame an ideal of justification from the vantage point of which life's ordinary concerns are condemned as lacking significance and ultimate worth. The spurious and unduly stringent character of this ideal will become apparent if we trace the consequences for our actions of adopting the latter kind of pessimism. It is generally agreed that one of the essential functions of our evaluative and moral judgments is to be action guiding. Now the ordinary judgments made by the first kind of pessimist concerning the balance between life's values and disvalues are quite capable of guiding action. Such a pessimist might proceed, with scorn and defiance of the horrors of life, to salvage as much worth as possible. Or he might commit suicide. The metaphysical kind of pessimist, on the other hand, is convinced that our ordinary judgments are undercut by the requirements of his extremely demanding ideal of justification. However, since upon examination his ideal is empty and impossible to attain, the judgments made by this kind of pessimist are utterly incapable of guiding action. In fact, he cannot even commit suicide. Let us suppose that a pessimist of the second kind judges that life is not worth living and that he ought to commit suicide. But now his judgment, like all human judgments, must also be recognized as limited and arbitrary, since upon close examination his ideal of unlimited justification must always be found to be empty and no reasons are ever disclosed beyond those which we in fact employ to support our ultimate principles. Thus if he persists in trying to make judgments according to his vacuous ideal, he will not be able to carry out his decision to commit suicide or indeed to carry out any decision whatsoever, but will instead suffer from complete paralysis of the will. Whereas our ordinary judgments may guide our actions, those made according to the standards of this kind of pessimist do not.

In short, therefore, although we may agree with Nagel that, ultimately, the only appropriate response to a perception of the absurdity and meaninglessness of life is irony, we must recognize, nevertheless, that since our natures are less than ideally rational, we are likely to be more or less disturbed by such a perception.

I turn now to the second part of my paper in which the foregoing materials are applied to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. I want to argue that the content of these plays may be rendered intelligible in the light of what I referred to above as a kind of metaphysical pessimism, the kind which maintains that life is essentially evil, meaningless or lacking in ultimate worth and which, in doing so, gives expression to ideals which are quite spurious. Needless to say, to take metaphysical pessimism as central to these plays is not to attribute such a view to Beckett. Beckett is not treating philosophical materials by explicit statements which say something about philosophical issues, but is treating such materials through *showing* something of the perspective of the metaphysical pessimist and of the way such a perspective affects persons and their actions.

In order to show how these plays may be rendered intelligible in the light of the framework of questions raised by metaphysical pessimism, I propose to single out for discussion three main issues: (1) the kind of ideal of meaningfulness which is presented; (2) how the characters and action relate to metaphysical pessimism; (3) the appropriateness of the literary structure.

We noted earlier that metaphysical pessimism gives expression to a propensity to frame a spurious, unduly strict ideal of explanation and justification. Turning now to *Waiting for Godot*, we find that this play shows to a remarkable extent just what this kind of propensity and this kind of ideal would be like. It seems obvious that Godot is a being who might provide a larger, transcendent purpose for the lives of the two main characters and that waiting for this being is their overriding purpose. But this ideal being is depicted, as was the case with the spurious ideal being is depicted, as was the case with the spurious ideal exhibited by pessimism, in terms which are utterly vague and almost devoid of content. The place and date of the appointment with Godot are vague. Little or no content is given to the notion of whom or what they are waiting for. Nor is there the slightest indication how the larger purpose which Godot might be expected to serve could ever be such as to be understood by the characters themselves and to be such as to make their lives meaningful to them.

Because Lucky's speech might well be regarded as an exhibition of the kind of spurious, incoherent ideal which is under consideration, it deserves to be treated as central to the play. Here, then, is what the metaphysical pessimist's propensity to impose unduly stringent ideals of meaningfulness and justification

really amounts to. Here, Kant might say, is what comes of those attempts to appeal to unduly strong senses of explanation and justification which take the form of the traditional arguments for the existence of God and which are known as the Cosmological, Teleological and Ontological Arguments. Here, Nagel might say, is what comes of giving undue importance to the perception of the meaninglessness and absurdity of life.

Lucky's speech exhibits a progressive deterioration into the utterly incoherent. But behind the babbling incoherence one can discern the outline of an argument which, like the meaning of life question with which we have been concerned, addresses the problem of the nature of the transcendent ideals which we frame as related to our ordinary human concerns and the limitations of our knowledge. The literal content lurking behind what is sometimes incoherent is something like the following. Given the existence of a loving personal God it is nevertheless established beyond doubt that in spite of sports, science, and medicine man wastes and pines. The phrase "for reasons unknown" forms an obsessive accompaniment to what is said to be established. The "quaquaqua" sounds like a parody of the constant harping of the scholastic philosophers on the notion of man *qua* man as opposed to man *qua* carpenter, and so on. Appropriately, the four characters react to Lucky's tirade with protestations and agitated groaning. Pozzo describes Lucky as having acquainted him with the ideal, transcendent world of beautiful things. "But for him", says Pozzo, "all my thoughts, all my feelings, would have been of common things".⁷ The name Lucky, one may surely suggest, is highly ironic.

Even minor episodes of the play may be viewed as consistent with this central importance of a spurious, incoherent ideal. For example, Didi and Gogo argue about the disagreement which occurs in accounts given by the four evangelists. One evangelist writes of a thief being saved, two of the other evangelists don't mention any thieves at all, and the fourth says that both thieves abused the Saviour. This is an instance, therefore, of the incoherence and conflict that characterizes those ultimate ideals which are to provide a purpose for life.

Turning to *Endgame*, we find again that much that is central to this play may be viewed in the light of issues raised by metaphysical pessimism and the expression it gives to our propensity to frame unduly stringent ideals of explanation and justification. But whereas in *Waiting for Godot* the main characters continue to wait hopefully for an ideal event, however vague or incoherent, to occur, in *Endgame* there is the crushing sense that without a larger transcendent ideal there is no meaning or purpose to life together with the perception that no such ideal is forthcoming. The result, as in the case of metaphysical pessimism, is that all

of our ordinary purposes are undercut and of no significance. The characters, appropriately, submit to an "old endgame lost of old." The natural world is depicted as "corpsed." Thermometers stand at zero. Whereas the Biblical creation myth in *Genesis* depicts God as seeing that His creation was good, *Endgame* presents an inversion of these materials in its depiction of, and sometimes even recommendation of, the extinction of life. Clov pours insecticide on the flea in his trousers lest, as Hamm says, "humanity might start from this all over again." And towards the end of the play, Clov takes a last look at the world and says: "Nothing nothing good nothing goo---Bad luck to it!"⁸ Everywhere in the play are shards of what had meaning---old stories of Lake Como, discarded toy dogs, etc. Also, just as the metaphysical pessimist tends to argue that the various purposes in life can never add up to a worthwhile purpose of life, so Hamm complains: "Moment upon moment, pattering down, like the millet grains of (he hesitates) .. that old Greek, and all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life."⁹

We have begun by discussing how both plays may be considered in the light of the kind of stringent ideals required by metaphysical pessimism. We may proceed next to consider in detail how the characters and action may be viewed in this framework. Earlier, it was argued that if our ordinary concerns and our action guiding judgments are made to depend logically upon the kind of spurious and stringent ideals of justification defended by the metaphysical pessimist, then such concerns and judgments will be undercut and, in the extreme, we will be incapable of acting. This is precisely the state of affairs depicted in *Waiting for Godot*. The characters are made to depict what are only minimally persons. Understandably, therefore, their actions are only minimally actions. The notion of personhood includes being conscious of oneself as an agent who is capable of framing policies and assessing his achievements in terms of them. The two main characters in *Waiting for Godot* are chronically indecisive, incapable of more than fairly trivial actions, and incapable, as we found real metaphysical pessimists to be even of carrying out plans to commit suicide. Each act ends with the injunction "let's go" followed by the stage direction "*They do not move.*" As to the rights which are characteristic of persons, Vladimir says: "We got rid of them."¹⁰

One of the most notable facts concerning the characters is that they suffer from forgetfulness and general disorientation. They cannot connect the ill-remembered past with what is presently at hand. They are unable to recognize places they have been or even to identify boots as their own. That the main characters should be troubled by forgetfulness might be attributed simply to their having faulty memories. One critic, A. Alvarez, comments that Estragon "behaves more or less as though suffering brain damage."¹¹ A more interesting possibility is to

view the forgetfulness and disorientation of the characters as relating to the perspective of metaphysical pessimism. The latter perspective is characterized by its unduly stringent ideals of justification and explanation. Thus the forgetfulness and disorientation of the characters may be seen to result from the doubt which is cast by metaphysical pessimism upon our ordinary standards governing the evidence gained from memory. Further, scepticism about memory tends to be indistinguishable from scepticism about knowledge in general. All of this is well illustrated by *Waiting for Godot*. When one of the characters is pressed regarding his knowledge of some past event, his anxiety results, not so much from a mere loss of memory, as from an ultimate doubt regarding the trustworthiness of the evidence gained from memory and, indeed, regarding what he knows in general. When pressed, the judgments of such a character tend to pass from assertions to expressions of opinion and from expressions of opinion to consternation. At one point Vladimir, under ceaseless questioning, says of their appointment with Godot: "He said Saturday." After a pause he adds: "I think." But, being questioned again, he resumes, fumbling in his pockets and saying: "I must have made a note of it." As he says angrily in response to the relentless questions and doubts expressed by Estragon, "nothing is certain when you're about."¹²

Critics have expressed a very great variety of conflicting opinions as to the interpretation of the characters Lucky and Pozzo and of their relationship to Didi and Gogo. They seem unlike Didi and Gogo in that they are not waiting for and have no appointment with Godot. However, what concerns them may be viewed profitably from the general framework I have been discussing. Many of the audience are likely to remember Pozzo's lines as being among the highlights of the play when he says: "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more."¹³ What is the point of birth," asks the metaphysical pessimist, "if we must, all too soon, die?" Again, as noted earlier, Lucky's speech is absolutely central to the play in that it exhibits what is at the heart of the spurious ideals of the metaphysical pessimist.

In *Endgame*, as we have noted, all hope and expectation are extinguished. In this case a strict metaphysical pessimism would imply that we could no longer function as persons who are capable of acting, of relying to some degree on our memories, and of making claims to knowledge. However, plays cannot be made out of the stuff of total paralysis of the will and intellect. What does occur is that whereas in *Waiting for Godot* Didi and Gogo are depicted as at least minimally persons, in *Endgame* the characters often appear to be just characters or players in a chess game. To Clov's question "What is to keep me here?" Hamm answers: "The dialogue"¹⁴

The characters in *Endgame* spend a good deal of time telling stories all of which are remarkably illustrative of the framework of metaphysical pessimism which we have been considering. The first of these stories is that which is told by Nagg about the man who goes to his tailor to have a pair of striped trousers made. Angered by continued delays, the customer complains that God after all made the world in six days whereas the tailor has not completed the trousers in three months. The tailor answers, scandalized: "But my dear Sir, my dear Sir, look—(*disdainful gesture, disgustedly* --at the world--(*pause*) and look—(*loving gesture, proudly*)—at my TROUSERS!"¹⁵ In a play which obviously has much to do with meaning of life questions, this story suggests that ours is a world which is imperfect and lacking in design and hence that any teleological argument for the existence of God as a supreme designer is unsound. This story fits perfectly, therefore, with the notion that the metaphysical pessimist requires spurious ideals which transcend our human limitations. The second story—which needs no comment—is that told by Hamm about the madman who, being confronted with a lovely landscape, sees only ashes. To which Hamm adds that the case was not so unusual.¹⁶

Finally, we come to Hamm's long story about the father who, on Christmas eve, comes to Hamm to beg food for his child. But instead of the usual Christmas stories about good will towards men. Hamm's story, like metaphysical pessimism, argues the pointlessness even of such basic human concerns as the feeding of a starving child. Hamm exclaims to the father: "you ought to know what the earth is like, nowadays." And, Hamm adds: "Oh, I put him before his responsibilities."¹⁷

In the foregoing sections, we have seen how the materials of *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* are capable of being rendered intelligible if seen within the framework of issues raised by metaphysical pessimism. Let us proceed next to an examination of the relationship of the literary structure of these plays to this framework. We might begin by recalling Nagel's claim that the appropriate responsive attitude for us to take towards our perception of the absurdity and meaninglessness of life is irony, an appreciative attitude in which we view with some detachment the incongruity between our serious concerns and our human limitations. In the light of the philosophical analysis given by Nagel, it is remarkably appropriate to find that although the materials of the plays under consideration explore the perspective of a metaphysical pessimism in which life is seen as worthless and absurd, Beckett's literary structure is ironic and his treatment of these materials is often characterized by the playfulness of a vaudeville routine. In this respect Beckett's plays are in marked contrast to those of a writer like Sartre whose portrayals of the absurdity and meaninglessness of life are presented in a correspondingly serious literary structure. Further comparisons between Nagel and Beckett suggest themselves.

Nagel argues convincingly that the perception of the absurd, although a most interesting part of our human makeup, should not lead us to immolate ourselves in this perception--as the metaphysical pessimists tend to do--to the exclusion of our ordinary serious concerns. Similarly, since metaphysical pessimism involves spurious standards and is quite untenable, we may insist that *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* should be read, not as glorifying the superior truth of perspectives from which we see life as meaningless and absurd, but as expressing a responsive attitude of irony towards the meaninglessness and absurdity of life.

Our coming to the above conclusion supports the overview, therefore, that *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* through the magic of Beckett's theater, explore a large number of the issues which arise within the conceptual framework of recent discussions of the meaning of life question.

Notes and References

1. Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (Grove Press, 1958), p.33.
2. Eugene Webb, *The Plays of Samuel Beckett* (University of Washington Press, 1972) p. 132.
3. See Paul Edwards, "The Meaning and Value of life", *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards, vol. 4 (The Macmillan Company, 1967), pp. 467-76; Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," *Journal of Philosophy*, 68 (1971), pp 716-27; Kurt Baier, *The Meaning of Life*. (Cambera, 1957).
4. Nagel, "The Absurd," p. 727.
5. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, especially Book II, Chapter III of the Transcendental Dialectic, which is entitled "The Ideal of Pure Reason."
6. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. F. Max Muller, second edition, revised (The Macmillan Company, 1949), p 493.
7. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (Grove Press, 1954), p.22
8. Beckett. *Endgame*, p. 78.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
10. Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, p. 13.
11. A. Alvarez, *Samuel Beckett* (Viking Press, 1973), p.78
12. Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, p. 10.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
14. Beckett, *Endgame*, p.58.
15. *Ibid.*, p.23.
16. *Ibid.*, p.44.
17. *Ibid.*, p.83.

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