The Myth of Sisyphus – Albert Camus

*The relation between the absurd and suicide and the degree to which suicide is a solution to the absurd*

An Absurd Reasoning

*Absurdity and Suicide*

Camus calls suicide the “one truly serious philosophical problem” (p.3) and concludes therefore that “the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions” (p.4) since the act of suicide usually follows from finding life to be without meaning.

Suicide is a recognition that life is “not worth the trouble.” (p.5) It implies that you have seen through to the ridiculous nature of the habits of life, “the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of all suffering.” (p.6) Being able to explain the world (even with bad reasons) makes it a familiar, friendly place but without any such explanations the world becomes hostile and “man feels an alien, a stranger.” (p.6) It is this feeling, the feeling that the world (and therefore human life) is meaningless that Camus calls the *absurd*.

Camus notes that the answer to the problem of suicide seems simple; either yes or no. But in actual fact the majority continue to ask the question without ever daring to draw a conclusion. There are also a number of people who answer “no” but act as if they thought “yes”, and vice versa (those who commit suicide but seem to have been assured of the meaning of life). So there is no direct, straight-forward connection between one’s opinions about life and the act of suicide.

There is another factor to consider; the body, in particular, the way “the body shrinks from annihilation.” (p.8) The habit of living (our attachment to life through the body) is always ahead of the habit of thinking (through the mind) and results in what Camus calls *eluding*, which is essentially avoiding honestly answering the question of the meaning of life by means of diversion. The typical form eluding takes is *hope*, by which Camus means the hope of another life, or hope that there is some grand idea which will transcend life and give it meaning.

In light of all the above ambiguities, Camus asserts that there is no necessary link between the refusal to grant a meaning to life and the conclusion that life is not worth living, however there is still the issue that reason faithfully followed to its natural conclusion dictates suicide in the face of the absurd. This is what Camus calls an *absurd reasoning* and leads to the question that lies at the heart of this essay, “Does the Absurd dictate death?” (p.9)

*Absurd Walls*

Camus asserts that all true knowledge is impossible. All we can do is “enumerate” appearances and discern the “climate” from these.

The habits of life are easily followed most of the time but one day the “why” arises in us a *weariness* in which the futility of all those previously cherished habits settles over us, awakening the consciousness to the absurd nature of life. Next, the individual either turns away from this realisation or lets it climax in a “definitive awakening” (p.13) from which there are only two options; recovery or suicide.

Next, Camus outlines several ways the absurd is revealed to us:

1. Time – All our lives we live for the future; making goals, planning, and so on but then one day we reach a certain age when we realise that the future is our enemy for in it lies our death. “That revolt of the flesh is the absurd.” (p.14)
2. The world – We realise that the world we thought we understood, has actually been infused with nothing more than “the images and designs that we had attributed to it beforehand” (p.14). When these illusory meanings fall away, the world becomes something “hostile” and “inhuman” to us and we find we no longer recognise it at all. That “denseness and that strangeness of the world is the absurd.” (p.14)
3. The human – At times we can be struck by the mechanical nature of our actions. We find ourselves face to face with what Camus calls the *inhuman* locked within our own being. This feeling arouses *nausea* within us and is another face of the absurd.
4. Death and our attitude towards it – No one has had the experience of death because no one can live through their death. It is barely even possible to speak of others’ deaths; they appear before us as a weak substitute, an illusion that “never quite convinces us.” (p.15) Our relationship to death is absurd.
5. The intelligence also tells us that the world is absurd:
   1. We first want to discern truth from falsehood but “as soon as thought reflects on itself, what it first discovers is a contradiction.” (p.16) Asserting that all is true or all is false both turn out to be impossible (the contrary in both cases produce contradictions), but so does asserting that only the assertion opposed to ours is false or that solely ours is not false (we end up in fact with *ad infinitum* assertions).
   2. Man’s deepest desire is to understand the world (Camus calls this *nostalgia*), that is, to unify, which means for a man, “reducing it to the human” (p.17) (“All thought is anthropomorphic” p.17)). He calls this the “essential impulse of the human drama” (p.17) but it is destined to remain unsatisfied. Camus calls on Parmenides’ reality of the One which he finds contradictory because a mind asserting total unity is, by this very assertion, demonstrating its difference from that unity.
   3. Even science can only enumerate and seize phenomena, it cannot help us to apprehend the world.

Camus stresses that this essay turns around what we *think* we know and what we *really* know. This delusion “allows us to live with ideas which, if we truly put them to the test, ought to upset our whole life.” (p.18) We cling to our hopes and erect a world unified in its nostalgia but this world is a fragile construction and cracks appear at the slightest provocation.

There are only two things we know, “This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. This world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists.” (p.19) Everything else is a made-up construction. He asserts that although I know I exist, I cannot fill that existence with any content; “Forever I shall be a stranger to myself.” (p.19)

The world is not reasonable, it is *irrational*, and it is this gap between an irrational world and the human desire for nostalgia that constitutes the absurd. The *absurd walls* are the irrational barriers that surround and enclose us, preventing us from fulfilling our essential urge towards unity.

Camus now takes a detour through the thoughts of some of his contemporary philosophers:

* Heidegger – brings everything back to “anxiety”. For the being lost in the world, this anxiety manifests only as a brief fear but when the fear becomes conscious of itself, it becomes anguish. He talks of anguish calling out to existence and urging it to return from its loss in the they.
* Jaspers claims that we have lost “naivete”, the result of which being that “the impossibility of knowledge is established” (p.25) and all we can know are appearances. On top of this, he reveals the flaws in every system that tries to save anything certain for humanity.
* Chestov shows that any rational system always comes unstuck when it runs into the irrationality of human thought.
* Kierkegaard finds that no truth is absolute or able to make existence satisfying. “He refuses consolations, ethics, reliable principles” (p.26) and leaves us with an absurd spirit grappling with a reality beyond our comprehension.
* Husserl and the phenomenologists deny the transcendent power of reason and make thinking about “learning all over again to see, to be attentive, to focus consciousness” (p.26), instead of a unifying force.

Camus stresses with his colleagues above that reason is impotent to answer this deepest desire in the human heart. The mind hears the call but “finds nothing but contradictions and nonsense” (p.27)

It is this “confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (p.28) that gives birth to the absurd. There are thus three characters in Camus’ estimation of this problem; the irrational, the human nostalgia, and the absurd born from their encounter.

*Philosophical Suicide*

In absurdity, there are two indispensible terms; the world and man. The absurd only exists in the confrontation between the two and therefore in trying to solve the problem of absurdity, we must not “conjure away one of the terms” or the solution loses meaning because the problem disintegrates. This defines the quest as a “confrontation and an unceasing struggle.” This struggle implies a total absence of hope, a continual rejection and a conscious dissatisfaction. These elements *must* be retained in the solution or there has been no solution, only a meaningless elimination.

Camus now revisits his existential colleagues and finds that although starting from an absurd position they all embrace some form of *leap* that effectively dissolves one term of the absurd equation:

* Jaspers acknowledges his impotence and lack of a satisfactory principle but then without justification, he suddenly *leaps* to the assertion; “Does not the failure reveal, beyond any possible explanation and interpretation, not the absence but the existence of transcendence?” (pp.32-33)
* Chestov, likewise, resorts to paradox; “The only true solution… is precisely where human judgement sees no solution… We turn toward God only to obtain the impossible.” (p.34) Chestov finds the absurd but then denies it, replacing it with God, claiming that his greatness is his incoherence. This definition of the absurd has distorted our original definition. The absurd only makes sense in a human universe, Chestov has *eluded* the struggle inherent in the absurd.
* Kierkegaard also takes the *leap* whereby “antinomy and paradox become criteria of the religious. This, the very thing that led to despair of the meaning and depth of this life now gives it its truth and its clarity.” (p.37) Again, by redefining the absurd, he has attempted to offer a solution or “cure” his ailment. All he has done is given the attributes of the absurd (unjust, incoherent, and incomprehensible) to God. Kierkegaard says, “If man had no eternal consciousness, if, at the bottom of everything, there were merely a wild, seething force producing everything… what would life be but despair?” (p.41) The absurd man must accept that despair, despite its undesirability.
* Husserl uses “the Intention” to avoid the desire to reason or explain the world under a unifying principle. It aims to be a mere description of actual experience. “Consciousness does not form the object of its understanding… it is the act of attention” (p.43) But then Husserl turns from this psychological approach to a metaphysical one and outlines “extra-temporal essences” that remove the irrational quality from the world. Camus takes particular issue with the way Husserl asserts that even if there were no bodies of mass the law of gravitation would still exist (just without application) and leads from here to the idea that there are equivalent laws of psychic processes and even in the absence of minds those laws would still be valid. “Even if the mind were not, its laws would be!” (p.46)

Camus accuses Jaspers, Chestov, and Kierkegaard of deifying the irrational to conjure away one of the terms of the absurd and thereby elude it. He calls this a *levelling process*. Husserl denies that the world is irrational at all.

These attitudes to man’s absurd existence constitute what Camus calls *philosophical suicide*. It is a method whereby thought negates, and thereby transcends, itself. Camus is not interested in this kind of suicide; his concern is with “plain suicide.”

*Absurd Freedom*

In opposition to the thinkers in the last section, Camus stresses that any meaning to life must be non-transcendental. As humans, we can only understand in human terms; any meaning outside our conditions can ultimately have no meaning to us.

On the other hand, meaning would cease to be a problem for us if we were trees or cats since they “belong to this world.” (p.51) The absurd man finds himself opposed to nature in his “insistence upon familiarity” (p.51) and his refusal to console himself with lies.

The search for meaning was important because Camus was wondering whether life needed a meaning to be worth living. He now claims that we can live a life better if it has no meaning at all. Living a life just means accepting it fully, so in a life devoid of meaning, that is, overflowing with absurdity, we must retain awareness of this fact and actively revolt; “To abolish conscious revolt is to elude the problem.” (pp.53-54)

For Camus then, “One of the only coherent philosophical positions is thus revolt.” (p.54) Rather than try to “cure” or solve the absurd, we ought to keep it alive by contemplating it, not with a hope that it can ever be reduced but in a way that “challenges the world anew every second.” (p.54) It is a battle we know we can never win, but Camus thinks that we can nevertheless keep up the revolt without letting resignation take hold.

Camus holds that suicide is not the logical outcome of revolt. It is true that suicide, in its own way, settles the absurd. It just does so at the ultimate price. However, this is not the only option. Life may continue in a simultaneous awareness and rejection of death (the ultimate absurd event). It is this revolt that characterises the absurd and gives life its value. The contrary of suicide is not the absurd, but the man who has nothing left to fight for, the man condemned to death.

In light of this, renunciation is the contrary of consciousness and revolt. It is essential to die unreconciled and not of one’s own freewill.

The first consequence then, of the absurd, is that in consciousness and the day-to-day revolt one gives proof of one’s only truth, defiance.

Next, Camus considers metaphysical freedom. He interprets this notion as turning on whether a God exists to whom we are servants. The notions of God and the eternal lose their meaning as soon as they go beyond the frame of reference of individual experience. Our world is absurd and the absurd removes eternal freedom (by removing any kind of controlling deity) but, at the same time therefore, magnifies freedom of action.

However, acting as if everything has a meaning is revealed as a lie by the absurdity of a possible death. Thinking of the future, making plans and goals – all this presupposes a belief in freedom, but the higher liberty, the freedom to *be*, does not exist. Death is the only reality.

Another way of looking at it is to see that the extent to which a person imagines her life to have meaning and arranges her life to prove this ‘fact’, actually ends up restricting her life. In striving for freedom and meaning, we erect barriers around our lives that rob us of that very freedom we proclaim.

However, Camus next turns to one of the absurd truths that certain death has revealed – there is no future – and finds what he calls *absurd freedom*. The realisation that there is no future stops him in his tracks and now “completely turned toward death… the absurd man feels released from everything outside that passionate attention” (p.59).

This leads to the second consequence; death and the absurd are the principles of the only reasonable freedom. They grant to the absurd individual a complete disinterestedness with regard to everything except the pure flame of life. Accepting the universe as it is, rejecting any hope or consolation, the absurd individual then frees herself to confront the universe without any bonds.

If life has no other aspect than the absurd and the individual consciousness is in a constant revolt against the world, then what counts is not the best living but the most living. Two people who live the same number of years always receive the same sum of experiences; i.e. two years’ worth. The difference turns on, not who has the ‘best’ experiences (the absurd has stripped us of a scale of values), but on who is *conscious* of those experiences. “Being aware of one’s life, one’s revolt, one’s freedom, and to the maximum, is living, and to the maximum. Where lucidity dominates, the scale of values becomes useless.” (pp.62-63)

However, it still cashes out that a ‘good’ life depends on quantity (a ‘noble’ or ‘honourable’ but short life lived consciously will never trump a longer life also lived consciously) and this is something that in an absurd universe is beyond our control and, in fact, comes down to nothing more than luck. And the absurd individual has no choice but to accept this as truth… and then redouble her futile struggle against it. This passion for the revolt is the third consequence.

The Absurd Man

Camus defines the absurd man as the man who “without negating it, does nothing for the eternal.” (p.66) He lives with courage and reasoning. The first teaches him to live without hope, the second lets him know his limits.

Morality must simply be dictated for there is no ‘higher source’ we can derive or receive a code of ethics from. Besides, Camus feels that a set of rules do not guarantee integrity; indeed many people with ‘high’ morals behave very badly.

The absurd agrees with Ivan Karamazov in saying, “everything is permitted” but it does not recommend immorality. This would be a vulgar and childish interpretation. The absurd recommends nothing because it confers an equivalence on the consequences of all actions. Indeed, in the absurd, duty is as legitimate as any other moral attitude.

All systems of morality are ultimately consequentialist in nature and it is so for the absurd man too. The absurd merely judges those consequences calmly without prejudice and illusion. With this, it accepts that there may be responsible persons, but no guilty ones.

Having said that, the absurd does not provide ethical rules to live by, rather it offers illustrations and examples of lives well-lived. He follows this with a look at some absurd examples of lives prefacing it with the caveat, “an example is not necessarily an example to be followed.” (p.68)

*Don Juanism*

Don Juan embodies the absurd in that he knows and does not hope. One of the things he knows is his own limits. This allows him the freedom to live his life as fully as he can within those limits. Camus even goes so far as to say that genius is “intelligence that knows it frontiers.” (p.70)

Don Juan extracts every ounce of joy he can from this life because he knows there is no other. It is very much a hedonist example. Don Juan knows what he is (a seducer) and his lucidity (his awareness and acceptance of the absurd, his refusal to conceal it from himself) won’t change that. We are what we are. “Only in novels does one change condition or become better.” (p.72)

His life is directed towards quantity, not quality. He doesn’t “collect” (women), he “exhausts” (their number).

Don Juan lives to love, but not the eternal kind of love we read about in books and legends. “Such a love culminates only in the ultimate contradiction of death.” (p.73) Noble (absurd) love must recognise itself as short-lived and exceptional.

*Drama*

The actor embodies the absurd life. She is not content with one single life, but instead desires to experience as many as she can in all their diversity.

The fame of the actor is fleeting (no video in Camus’ days) and ephemeral (a true absurd quality). And indeed, the life lived in the drama itself mirrors this. In the short span from the opening to the closing of the curtain, an entire life must be depicted. “In those three hours he travels the whole course of the dead-end path that the man in the audience takes a lifetime to cover.” (p.80) Camus compares the actor to the traveller (another absurd way of life) in that both drain something and then move on. They don’t grasp and clutch to preserve for eternity.

The actor is also concerned solely with appearance. There are no hidden depths, it is all about creating (and living) the experience. The theatre revels in the present and lives for change. All drama is concerned only with eternal vivacity, not eternal life.

Finally, the actor finds the premature death irreparable. “Nothing can make up for the sum of faces and centuries he would otherwise have traversed.” (p.83)

*Conquest*

The conqueror is a woman of action, although this does not mean she can’t think. On the contrary, she knows more clearly than most what she believes. Although she has chosen action over contemplation (something Camus calls “becoming a man” (p.86)) she is no stranger to the latter.

She is aware of her limits and has embraced them to stand ‘in time’ (that is, deprived of the eternal that blossoms from hope).

She esteems and champions the individual only because “he strikes me as ridiculous and humiliated” (p.86) and she does do even though she knows this is a lost cause because she also knows that there are no victorious causes in an absurd world; “there is but one victory, and it is eternal. That is the one I shall never have.” (p.87)

She knows that action, in itself, is useless as all must ultimately succumb to the absurd death, but it is this struggle that gives her strength. It leads her to the flesh because, “Even humiliated, the flesh is my only certainty. I can live only on it.” (p.87)

The conqueror knows that whatever is human “assumes a more vivid meaning” (p.88) precisely because it is transitory.

These ‘life sketches’ offer no moral codes or judgements and the absurd life is not restricted to choosing one of them; the lover, the actor, or the adventurer. Any life can be absurd; “It is enough to know and to mask nothing.” (pp.90-91)

The absurd individual is not striving to live a better life, only a consistent one.

Absurd Creation

*Philosophy and Fiction*

Camus identifies creation as the “absurd joy par excellence” (p.93) and approvingly quotes Nietzsche who says, “we have art in order not to die of the truth.” (p.93). Camus sees art (creation) as the sole way the absurd individual can maintain consciousness without slipping into despair.

The artist must first become aware of the fact that she is plunged into an absurd universe but then forgoes explanation and solutions in favour of experiencing and describing. “Describing – that is the last ambition of an absurd thought.” (p.94) The only joy in this absurd universe can come from diversity/description (as opposed to depth/explanation) and here Camus again reinforces his quantity over quality refrain. It is only after indifference and discovery (of the absurd) that creation begins. “It marks the point from which absurd passions spring and where the reasoning stops.” (p.95)

We must remember though, that the work of art (and the symbols therein) is not a “refuge” for the absurd. This is not a means of *eluding* the absurd, but is itself an absurd phenomenon.

So what is the absurd work of art?

It must involve thought but only absurd thought, that is, thought that doesn’t “yield to the temptation of adding to what is described a deeper meaning that it knows to be illegitimate.” (p.97) It is what Camus calls “thought in its most lucid form” (p.97), thought that is aware of the limitations of the absurd universe it finds itself in and which refuses to “reason the concrete” (p.97), that is, explain the absurd world in a way that offers consolation and hope. The concrete (the world) is just depicted as what it is, nothing more, no hidden meaning or purpose buried in it somewhere. Another way Camus describes this approach to art is in embracing the absurd attitude which “must remain aware of its gratuitousness… if the work does not illustrate divorce and revolt, if it sacrifices to illusions and arouses hope, it ceases to be gratuitous.” (p.102)

As a result of all this, the “absurd creator does not prize his work” (p.98) for he realises his own work of art is just one more absurd strand in the absurd tapestry that is this universe.

Naturally, “[t]he true work of art is always on the human scale.” (p.98) Camus eschews any divine re-workings of our universe in the absurd work of art.

*Kirilov*

Camus now discusses some of the characters in the writings of Dostoevsky to see how they stack up to his “absurd attitude”.

Camus draws attention to what he calls Dostoevsky’s notion of “logical suicide” in which the individual becomes convinced that “human existence is an utter absurdity for anyone without faith in immortality” (p.105) and reaches these conclusions:

* There cannot be happiness without “harmony with the great all” (p.105) but one will never achieve this
* This life is therefore humiliating and stupid
* In condemning nature this way, the individual commits suicide to annihilate both himself and nature

This is something like taking revenge on the universe, “proving that he “will not be had.”” (p.105) And is embodies in Kirilov of *The Possessed*. The attitude is that “God is necessary and that he must exist. But he knows that he does not and cannot exist.” (p.106) Kirilov is killing himself to assert his freedom in the only way open to us, by rebelling against the absurd universe. In this, Kirilov is an absurd character, but there is a problem with this; Camus has already dismissed suicide as a way of eluding the absurd by getting rid of one of the terms.

Camus resolves this by the attributing the following “absurd logic” to Kirilov, “If God does not exist, Kirilov is god. If God does not exist, Kirilov must kill himself. Kirilov must therefore kill himself to become god.” (p.106) Becoming god just means to be free and not serve an immortal being. It is the same refrain that we have already heard Nietzsche herald.

But still, Camus asks, why kill oneself after one has been liberated?

The answer is that Kirilov kills himself, not out of despair, but out of love for humanity. He sacrifices himself in order to show other people the path to our absurd freedom.

Dostoevsky gives life to the absurd in Kirilov, Stavrogin, and Ivan but then in Alyosha (*The Brothers Karamazov*) he plays his final card. The question raised in *The Possessed* is answered in *The Brothers Karamazov* when Alyosha responds to a child asking if there is an afterlife by saying, “We shall meet again.” In this one line; “Man exchanges his divinity for happiness.” (p.111)

Ultimately, Dostoevsky is not an absurd novelist but another individual who has taken the leap we saw characterised in the earlier philosophers Camus highlighted. Camus calls Dostoevsky an “existential novelist” (p.111). He uses the word “existential” to mean, having a concern with the human condition in this universe, identifying the crucial issues, at the core of which lies the absurd, but then dissolving them by *eluding* or *leaping* into the eternal arms of hope.

*Ephemeral Creation*

Of course, there is still value in “existential” artwork in the sense that it allows us to more clearly perceive the absurd path by showing us the paths that deviate from it. It also shows us how difficult it is to maintain the absurd attitude and the “necessity of unfailing alertness” (p.113) in the course of our lives.

Camus stresses the importance of the absurd creator being able to negate on the one hand (realising her works are ultimately “for nothing” and have no future) and magnify on the other (create works that describe this absurd world in all its absurd glory).

Camus demands from absurd creation what he required from thought – revolt, freedom, and diversity. It is through this that the absurd individual can shape her fate, all the while remembering that none of this has any meaning at all. Success “may well not be” (p.117), all is futile. But it is this very realisation that frees the absurd creator to “plunge into it [their art and life] with every excess.” (p.117)

Lucid thought has realised that death is the single and only certain fate and that in the face of death everything else is negated. But everything until then is liberty.

The Myth of Sisyphus

Sisyphus is the mortal, Greek hero of myth whose scorn of the gods, refusal of death, and passion for life, have led to his being sentenced to the most terrible punishment imaginable; that of fruitless endeavour. He must push a boulder uphill only to have it roll back down as soon as the task is done.

Camus reflects on Sisyphus as he is walking down the hill to retrieve the boulder after it has rolled down. That pause; that is his “hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights… he is superior to his fate.” (p.121) The myth is tragic only because Sisyphus is conscious, he is lucid, in full awareness of his fate. Indeed, there would be no torture if he were to be consoled by hope of success. And it is precisely because of his consciousness of his wretched condition that Sisyphus can conquer his torment. “There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.” (p.121) In realising his absurd plight, he can rise above it; “crushing truths perish from being acknowledged.” (p.122)

But not just this, Camus also suggests that Sisyphus’ descent can even take place in joy. It is true that there is but one destiny awaiting the individual; death “which he concludes is inevitable and despicable. For the rest, he knows himself to be the master of his days.” (p.123) In the face of this absurd universe, perhaps even because of it, Sisyphus’ fate belongs to him, his rock is his thing, and he can conclude that all is well. It is enough for him. “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” (p.123)

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*In this essay, Camus draws three consequences from the absurd; revolt, freedom and passion. Through the activity of the consciousness, he transforms into a rule of life what was an invitation to death – and he refuses suicide.*