Bara Zraik

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Camus and the Absurd

Before identifying Sisyphus as the absurd hero, I will define absurdity and the various ways in which, according to Camus, it presents itself in the human condition. I will then discuss Camus’s notion of absurd freedom and how such a freedom is achievable through one’s habitual consciousness. I will also determine the ways in which this absurd freedom constitutes an absurd hero, and Sisyphus. Finally, my conclusion will point out the absurd reasoning used by Camus to arrive at the consequences of the absurd. Thereby making their implications altogether more coherent.

The absurd is the antinomy of the human condition. Camus first alludes to the meaning of the absurd in relation to the act of suicide. “Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation. (443)” Since life dictates that one continuously makes gestures, the absurd lies in the fundamental lack of meaning in any gesture one might make. And since the act of suicide itself can be taken as a gesture, before it is committed and just as with any other action, one must first transcend a meaning into the act itself. Suicide implies that the only solution to the absurdity of the human condition lies in the act of ending one’s life altogether.

Camus then uses the metaphor of confinement to further characterize the absurd. Our everyday existence is such that “absurd walls” enclose us within ourselves. From which we spring into fear and eventually anguish upon realizing our confinement to ourselves. Those same walls can also be taken to constitute the barrier between our thinking self and our acting self. Such walls act as barriers dividing us from the world that surround us, and from ourselves. Camus writes, “to an absurd mind reason is useless and there is nothing beyond reason (467)” This constant consciousness of walls that contain nothing which can be contained is what gives birth to the Absurd man. As a result of this, the absurd man is the creature in which this realization of the essence of his self-negating self is ever present. Camus clarifies this point when he writes of the absurd man, “he recognizes the struggle, does not absolutely scorn reason, and admits the irrational… he knows simply that in that alert awareness there is no further place for hope” (467). The struggle of having to constantly transcend value into actions committed by one or another. The knowledge that all meaning or value that goes into any action must stem from the irrational, even when the action is of a repetitive nature, such as the stone’s rolling in the case of Sisyphus. Camus is not suggesting that one ignores this fundamental mechanism of transcendence in order to carry on one’s actions without such a struggle. Nor is he attempting to transcend any value into the act of recognizing this relationship between the irrational and the world. But the absurd man is precisely one that recognizes this relationship, knows the limit to his conscious thought, and he can only choose to hope where hope itself is a mode of transcendence.

Camus’s main aim in writing this myth is to encourage his readers to cultivate their own absurd freedom. This most importantly involves ridding them of the seemingly natural, yet naturally fraud misconception that the world can simply be explained through reason. Camus argues that reason itself is a deficient tool; it simply lacks the ability to meaningfully explain the world. He does so by referring to his own reasoning; “the reasoning developed in this essay leaves out altogether the most widespread spiritual attitude of our enlightened age: the one, based on the principle that all is reason, which aims to explain the world. It is natural to give a clear view of the world after accepting the idea that it must be clear. (470)” He makes it clear that one must first accept that the world is the sort of thing which could be explained through reason before one sets about to incorrectly do so. These two statement profoundly exemplify his aim in writing the myth. That the mind, just like any natural object, has a process under which it operates. But what we have failed to consider is that such a process might lack the tools necessary to positively explain the world as something other than absurd or irrational. He later writes, “In fact, our aim is to shed light upon the step taken by the mind when, starting from a philosophy of the world’s lack of meaning, it ends up by finding a meaning and depth in it.” While life itself starts off as meaningless, this meaninglessness is what drives one to constantly interpret actions and give meaning to life. By giving a meaning to one’s actions, they recognize their failure in deconstructing the absurd. The grasp of such a failure is what results in absurd freedom.

Sisyphus is the absurd hero because he realizes the absurdity of his rolling the rock up and down the slope, yet he cannot do anything to change his fate. If he had not been conscious of this, rolling the rock as a machine that was programmed to do that specific task, then he wouldn’t have been the absurd hero that he is. His situation demonstrates that the absurd necessarily springs from happiness rather neatly. If Sisyphus was merely programmed to endlessly roll the rock, that would have encompassed everything that his life consisted of, and therefore everything that he is able to transcend value into. But with a world full of possibilities, and a character built to do more than one thing, he recognizes the infinitude of his possibilities. All that we need to consider for Sisyphus is that he could be rolling any other rock on any other hill. But his confinement to a rock and hill gives birth to his absurdity. For he must have first been happy with his effort before realizing that it is pointless. If he were to choose, I think he would have picked the rock and hill which held the greatest likeness for his commitment. But his realization following his happiness is what makes him an absurd yet tragic hero. He transcends a lack of value into something he used to transcend positively. Most importantly that upon coming to this realization, he also recognizes that no matter what he chose to value afterwards would hold to the same principle. If he could have choosen to continue rolling his rock, or to move on to something else, he wouldn’t escape his haunting realization. The realization that whatever he valued as worthy or not, would ultimately be an irrational transcendence.

“Thus I draw from the absurd three consequences, which are my revolt, my freedom, and my passion. (487)” The revolt against death is given once proper reflection on the absurdity of suicide is made. Absurdity also urges one to pursue a greater quality in any experience one might choose to engage in. This leads Sisyphus to utilize an ever increasing amount of attention to detail while rolling his rock. In pursuit of his passion, he would be committed to rolling his rock with more stability and control, increasingly feeling the rock, and becoming more one with it. But assuming that “the conditions of modern life impose on the majority of men the same quantity of experiences and consequently the same profound experience (485),” contradicts Camus’s notion of freedom. If the absurd dictates that all men are given the same quantity of experiences, doesn’t this rob Camus of the freedom of choosing additional experiences? I would say so; for a “free man” isn’t fully free unless he possesses the ability to take up another quantity of experiences, even if his doing so was for no purposes other than asserting his freedom. Furthermore, if Camus is implying that the absurd urges one to take up a greater quality of experiences rather than an increase in the quantity of one’s experiences, isn’t this tantamount to transcending a value into whatever actions one is already engaged in? The implication that the absurd urges towards the pursuit of a greater quality experience from one’s actions itself implies a scale of values. That which belief in the absurd robs from one (484).