Absurdism as Self-Help: Resolving an Essential Inconsistency in Camus' Early Philosophy

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Camus' early philosophy[1] has been subject to various kinds of criticism. It has been said to be nihilistic and dangerous; too vague, or naïve, or simple to be taken seriously; to state personally or historically contingent rather than philosophically significant universal truths; to commit the "is/ought fallacy", and so on. Some of these objections may be warranted, others are clearly flawed, or cannot even be said to be objections at all. In this essay I will address a problem that has not been noticed so far[2]. The problem is that Camus' early philosophy appears to be essentially inconsistent.

As I will try to show in section 1, Camus explicitly denies the existence of moral values. This denial is presupposed by what is probably the most central claim of his early philosophy: his postulation of the absurd. As I will try to show in section 2, Camus is also committed to the existence of certain moral values. Both in his literary and philosophical works he is not so much interested in the absurd *per se*, but rather in how we ought to respond to it (see *Myth* 1, 14; *Caligula*; *Stranger*). In justifying his supposed normative conclusions, Camus tacitly, but crucially, relies on evaluative judgements.

If all this is true, then prospects for defenders of absurdism seem bleak. In whichever way the above inconsistency is resolved, they will have to give up or significantly modify central parts of Camus' early philosophy. But things may not stand quite as bad. As I will try to show in section 3, there is a route to consistency that preserves much of Camus' early philosophy, and leaves it *prima facie* plausible. The key is to re-interpret its normative aspects. Stated a bit provocatively, we need to put Camus in the self-help genre.

[1] By "early philosophy" I mean Camus' philosophy before around 1943, as it is mainly expressed in the *Myth of Sisyphus*, but also in literary works such as *The Stranger* and *Caligula*.

[2] I briefly mention the problem at the end of my 2011 article on Camus' early "logic of the absurd", see Pölzler 113-114.

First Commitment: Moral values do not exist

Camus' commitment to the non-existence of moral values is rather obvious. At various occasions we find it expressed explicitly. In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, for example, Camus writes: "Belief in the meaning of life always implies a scale of values, a choice, our preferences. Belief in the absurd, according to our definitions, teaches the contrary … Once and for all, value judgments are discarded here in favour of factual judgments" (*Myth* 58-59). Camus also notes that nobody is guilty (65), and that reasoning cannot be expected to result in ethical rules (66)[3]. Finally, on a more indirect note, he suggests that if they existed, moral values would be closely linked to God (64-65); however, God is an idea that he clearly rejects (65; *Noces*).

As I see it, this nihilism about moral value is entailed by Camus' central postulation of what he calls the absurd. In order to see this, we first have to get clear about what Camus means when he speaks of the absurd. His explanations in the *Myth* tend to be rather vague and diverse; however, we can note at least three basic features that appear to be well-supported by what he says, and upon which most commentators agree[4]. First, Camus sees the absurd as a relation, rather than an object or one-place property. *Two* things must be present in order for it to exist. "The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared …" (*Myth* 28-29). Second, the relation is supposed to be one of disproportion, contradiction or – as the above quote states – divorce. It arises from a conflict between what we want and what we can realistically hope to achieve. In this sense, Camus believes his notion to be true to our ordinary usage of the term "absurd". "'It's absurd' means 'It's impossible' but also 'It's contradictory.' If I see a man armed only with a sword attack a group of machine guns, I shall consider his act to be absurd. But it is so solely by virtue of the disproportion between his intention and the reality he will encounter, of the contradiction I notice between his true strength and the aim he has in view" (*Myth* 28). And third, the parts of the specific relation of disproportion that Camus is postulating are the subject's quest for meaning on the one hand, and the objective world on the other. Humans essentially strive for unity, intellectual clarity and purpose. But the world is "indifferent" (26), or even "hostile" (13) towards our calls and does not answer them. "At this point of his effort man stands face

[3] The non-existence of moral values is a central theme of Camus' early literary work too. Caligula believes that "everything's on an equal footing" (43). According to Mersault, the protagonist of *The Stranger*, nothing makes any difference (41).

[4] For a more detailed explanation of how I understand Camus' conception of the absurd see Pölzler 100-104.

to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world." (*Myth* 26)

Understood in the above way, Camus' postulation of the absurd clearly excludes the existence of meaning. It is not so clear, however, that it also excludes the existence of moral values. Whether it does so depends on what one thinks can confer meaning on our lives. In the *Myth*, and especially in his earliest philosophical essays (*Noces*; *L'Envers*), Camus seems to hold a very ambitious conception of meaning. The only way our "wild longing" could be satisfied, he seems to assume, would be for us to reach perfect and continuous unity (in the sense of being "one" with the world around us, *i.e.*, of losing our subjectivity or the world's losing its objectivity) and perfect and continuous intellectual clarity (in the sense of being able to reduce the world's diverse phenomena to one single explanatory principle). The existence of goodness and badness clearly would not bring about these "impossible"[5] states. Nothing, except from God, could bring them about. Thus, if Camus really held the above conception of meaning, the absurd would appear to be compatible with the existence of moral values.

However, although unity and intellectual clarity are undoubtedly central to his account, it is unlikely that they exhaust it. At various points Camus suggests that the meaninglessness of our lives also arises from our action's lacking a "final purpose" (Pieper 65; Tesak-Gutmannsbauer 10). Consider the following description of the "absurd feeling" of weariness: "Rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, according to the same rhythm – this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement" (*Myth* 11). Here the source of our existence's meaninglessness (or at least our feelings of meaninglessness) is supposed to be that we do things for other things' sake, and that we do so on and on and on – but that there isn't anything that would be worth pursuing for itself, and that would thus give our "chain[s] of daily gestures" (*Myth* 11) direction and coherence. Intrinsic moral values could fill this gap. They would be things that are desirable in and of themselves, not just as a means to an end, and would thereby give our lives meaning. Thus, if one believes in the absurd and

[5] In *Caligula* our search for meaning appears to be illustrated by Caligula's quest for the moon. This marks it as a "desire for the impossible" (*Caligula* 40).

the meaninglessness by which it is constituted, I think one is committed to the non-existence of moral values after all[6].

That the absurd excludes the existence of moral values is also suggested by some of Camus' explicit remarks about their relation. Recall our above quote from the *Myth*: "Belief in the meaning of life always implies a scale of values, a choice, our preferences. Belief in the absurd, according to our definitions, teaches the contrary." Here Camus explicitly maintains that the absurd is incompatible with any system of values. Moreover, when he states that nobody is guilty and that there are no ethical rules, he does not just assert so. Rather, he claims that these things *follow from the absurd*: for "a mind imbued with the absurd" nobody is guilty, and reasoning will not result in ethical rules (*Myth* 65, 66).

Second Commitment: Moral values exist

Camus' early philosophy seems to be based not only on the denial, but also on the affirmation of moral values. Only few commentators have noticed this second commitment[7]. This is no wonder, given that Camus nowhere explicitly acknowledges that things can be morally better or worse; however, on closer consideration his essays contain lots of evaluative judgements[8]. The things I take Camus to regard as good or praiseworthy are mainly character traits. At various points in the *Myth* he stresses the importance of being lucid, sincere, authentic, courageous and mentally strong, and expresses contempt towards those who lack these virtues. For example, he maintains: "If I become thoroughly imbued with that sentiment that seizes me in face of the world's scenes, with that lucidity imposed on me by the pursuit of a science, I must sacrifice everything to these certainties and I must see them squarely … Above all, I must adapt my behaviour to them and pursue them in all their consequences" (*Myth* 20). In another noteworthy passage Camus tells us that the discipline, will and clear-

[6] One might worry that this argument only shows the absurd to be incompatible with intrinsic moral value, leaving open the existence of extrinsic such value. However, things can only be valuable because of their contribution to some valuable goal if there actually is any valuable goal. In other words, if nothing is intrinsically valuable, nothing can be extrinsically valuable either.

[7] None of these commentators, to my knowledge, has noted the inconsistency to which this gives rise.

[8] One possible objection against my argument in this section would be to claim that making evaluative judgements does not commit one to the existence of moral values. Such judgements are only expressions of emotions, or attitudes, or other conative states. I take this non-cognitivist interpretation of moral language to be generally implausible. Moreover, there is evidence that Camus himself intended his evaluative judgements to actually refer to moral values (see, for example, his commitment to what appears to be some sort a theological voluntarist moral semantics, *Myth*, 64-65, and my remarks at the beginning of section 1).

sighted struggle exemplified by certain actions "have something exceptional about them" (*Myth* 53)[9].

I also take it that one of the main points of Camus' descriptions of absurd ways of living is to illustrate and further establish the above virtues. Consider Sisyphus, Camus' most famous example. Sisyphus' condition is supposed to reflect our own absurd fate. Just as humans are "sentenced" to long for meaning without ever being able to achieve it, so Sisyphus is sentenced to the futile labor of anchoring his rock on the top of a mountain. According to Camus' interpretation of the myth, Sisyphus is aware of his tragic condition. But neither does he deceive himself into thinking that he will succeed, nor does he give up and fall into despair. He is lucid, authentic and strong. In fact, in certain moments, Camus thinks, he is even "stronger than his rock" (*Myth* 117, similar points apply to Don Juan, the conqueror and the artist, Camus' other examples of "absurd men").

These considerations already begin to indicate why moral values are essential to the normative aspects of Camus' early philosophy. Before going into detail, however, let us briefly consider which normative claims we are talking about. Suppose you agree with Camus that your condition is absurd. Two natural responses to this recognition are physical, and what Camus calls "philosophical" suicide. If I am aware that regardless of how hard I try, I can never reach what I want most, why should I continue to live at all (Physical suicide)? And if I continue to live, why should I go on actively longing for meaning, knowing that I cannot achieve it anyway? Wouldn't it be wiser to stop doing so, and instead set my hope in God, life after death, reason, or some other idea that transcends existence (Philosophical suicide)? Camus rejects both of these conclusions (*Myth* 29, 48). Instead, he urges us to adopt the mental attitude of "revolt". We ought to acknowledge and maintain the absurd as a fact, but at the same time disapprove of it (take it to be unjust, something that ought not be, a scandal). This means the "total absence of hope", "a continual rejection", and "conscious dissatisfaction" (*Myth* 30). "Living is keeping the absurd alive … One of the only coherent philosophical positions is thus revolt. It is a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity. It is an insistence upon an impossible transparency. It challenges the world anew every second. … That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it" (*Myth* 52).

[9] This interpretation is also defended in Pölzler 111-112.

Camus suggests that what justifies these normative claims is that they conform to demands emanating from the absurd. The absurd requires its being maintained (*Myth* 29). Both physical and philosophical suicide, however, destroy it, for they remove one of the parts of its relation. Being dead, I can no longer strive for meaning. Nor can I if I deliberately stop striving for it. The only way to hold on to the absurd and at the same time express one's legitimate protest against it is to revolt. "The first and, after all, the only condition of my inquiry is to preserve the very thing that crushes me" (*Myth* 29). "There can be no question of masking the evidence, of suppressing the absurd by denying one of the terms of its equation" (*Myth* 48).

To many, this "logic of the absurd" has seemed convincing. On closer consideration, however, it is clearly flawed (see Hochberg 92; Müller-Lauter 125). Camus' postulation of the absurd is a descriptive claim. It informs us about what is the case. But as David Hume has taught us, and as is widely accepted nowadays, no such claim can by itself entail any normative conclusion. In order for a normative conclusion to follow, we also have to appeal to some evaluative standard. This is the point, I think, where Camus' above value judgements come into play. What leads many people to consider his argument sound is not his "logic of the absurd", but rather his implicit appraisal of lucidity, authenticity, courage, and so on. Camus manages to make us aware of the value of these traits. This, and only this (not our belief that the absurd tells us so), is responsible for our tending to agree with his normative conclusions.

At some points the real nature of the argument is not hard to see. For example, in dismissing physical and philosophical suicide, Camus characterizes them as "escape" (*Myth* 30, 34, 50, 52), "evasion" (7), "elusion" (34, 52) or "retreat" (48), and links them to a lack of understanding, to anxiety and helplessness (4, 46, 48). "In a sense, and as in melodrama, killing yourself amounts to confessing. It is confessing that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it" (4). Revolting, in contrast, is taken to be "the contrary of renunciation" (53) and to "give life value" (53).

The Self-Help Resolution

Our above considerations suggest that Camus' early philosophy is essentially inconsistent. Camus is committed not only to the claim that moral values do not exist, but also to the claim

that they do. Regardless of how we try to resolve this inconsistency, the theoretical costs will be significant. Giving up the denial of moral values will force us to abandon or modify Camus' central assumption that there is such a thing as the absurd. Giving up the affirmation of moral values will force us to do the same with what Camus mainly argues for in the *Myth*, namely his demands not to commit physical or philosophical suicide, but to revolt. This may lead one to consider absurdism doomed. However, I think there is a way of making Camus' early philosophy consistent that preserves much of its spirit and content, and leaves it *prima facie* plausible.

Camus himself later made the inconsistency disappear by giving up his denial of moral values[10]. In the *Rebel* (13-14) and other essays (in particular *Letters*) he explicitly maintains that human life is worth fighting for, and that we ought to adopt an attitude of solidarity. "The absurd is, in itself, contradiction. It is contradictory in its content because, in wanting to uphold life, it excludes all value judgments, when to live is, in itself, a value judgment" (*Rebel* 16). The emancipation from moral nihilism finds expression in Camus' literary works too. Whereas his earlier novels, plays and literary essays focused on individualistic nihilists such as Meursault or Caligula, he now portrays decent people who put themselves in the service of their community (see in particular *Plague*). Many would say that this makes for a warmer, much more positive philosophy. Defenders of Camus' early views can hardly be satisfied with how he himself resolved his inconsistency, however. Given their close connection to meaning, the affirmation of moral values would force them to concede that our lives might be meaningful after all (which the late Camus indeed seems to acknowledge, *Letters* 28). But this implies that there could be no absurd, or at least not in the sense in which it was originally introduced - and the feeling that there is an absurd in this sense is probably what draws most people to Camus' early philosophy in the first place.

The more attractive option for defenders of absurdism seems to be to give up the claim that certain things are valuable. At first sight, this has unacceptable implications too. If one lets go of the idea that it is good to be lucid, authentic, and so on, then Camus' demands not to commit physical or philosophical suicide, but to revolt, seem to have to be regarded as lacking proper support. However, I think there is a way for defenders of absurdism to

[10] Note that Camus' change of mind was not due to worries about consistency, but rather to moral reasons. In the face of, and after World War II, Camus started to feel more and more unease with the radical views expressed in the *Myth*. In his diary he writes, "Consider a thinker who declares: 'Now, I know that this is true. But in the end the consequences repel, and I back off from them.' The truth is unacceptable even for him, who finds it. Thus, we have the absurd thinker with his perpetual anxiety" (1935-1942, own translation).

maintain these claims. They just need to ascribe to them a different (somewhat weaker) status.

Despite his official skepticism about reason, objective truth and philosophy, Camus presents his normative claims in a very strong way. Most naturally, he is read as taking them to hold universally and categorically, *i.e.*, as taking them to be true for all people at all times and places, and regardless of whether they want to conform to them or not. Understood in this way, Camus' demands clearly must be backed up by moral values. But they need not be conceived of in this strong sense. Suppose we read Camus' claims as mere prudential advice. As he sees it, and as many of his readers would agree, the human condition excludes our finding any real meaning. Awareness of this fact can have devastating effects on one's spirits. It can lead to apathy, depression and suicidal tendencies. The point of Camus' early philosophy, on our alternative reading, is to give us self-help style instructions as to how to best cope with our (as it initially seems) tragic condition. Accept the absurd as a fact, defy it as a norm! Exercise the freedom that this change of attitude brings about! Live for the moment, and do nothing for the future! If this is how you live, you will see that there is simply no need to commit suicide or fall into despair. You will still be unable to achieve meaning. But you will yet live a happy and fulfilled life.

On this re-interpretation Camus' demands do not purport to apply to all people at all times and regardless of what they want. They only apply to those who have certain interests. *If* you want to be happy, *then* you ought to revolt, and there is no need for you to commit physical or philosophical suicide. Norms of this hypothetical kind need not be justified by appeal to moral values. That is, the self-help reading allows us to hold on to Camus' demands while at the same time denying the existence of all moral values (even the value of authenticity, lucidity, integrity, and so on).

Of course, this way of resolving Camus' essential inconsistency would only be satisfying if it did not come at the price of making his early philosophy implausible. But I do not think it does. Camus repeatedly stresses that adopting an attitude of revolt allows one to be happy despite the absurd. Remember, for example, the final words of his interpretation of the ancient myth of Sisyphus: "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (*Myth* 119). Some of us might be able to confirm this from personal experience. But much more importantly, there is also systematically gathered interpersonal evidence suggesting that self-help absurdism might work. According to logotherapy, the deep psychologist school founded by Victor Frankl,

consciously choosing an attitude towards things they cannot change helps people to cope with them. It gives them a sense of freedom and superiority (see Frankl). Revolting in the sense of Camus appears to be an exercise of this "defiant power of the human spirit". It may thus indeed be able to help people in general: provide them with a cognitive tool by which they can cope with their absurd destiny, and increase their satisfaction and happiness.

Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to show that Camus' early philosophy is essentially inconsistent. Central parts of his thought presuppose the non-existence of moral values, other central parts their existence. Furthermore, I have tried to show that the best way of resolving this inconsistency is to give up on the existence of moral values altogether, and to re-interpret Camus' demands not to commit physical or philosophical suicide, but to revolt: to read them as self-help rather than as universal and categorical normative judgements.

Some may be dissatisfied with this solution. It might seem to them that reducing them to self-help strips Camus' ideas of the value had by true philosophy. But I do not share this worry. It is certainly not the business of philosophers to provide practical advice on specific matters (such as how to stop smoking in 30 days, or how to lose a certain amount of weight). But there are also problems that concern all of us, regardless of where, when, and how we live. Philosophers have always tried to guide us in our dealings with these problems. I agree with Camus that the absurd is such a problem, and I think that even if interpreted in the suggested way, his advice on how to cope with it is of great philosophical value.

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