

In Search of the Meaning of Life: An Ethical Evaluation of Albert Camus' Philosophy of Revolt

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Abstract

This contemporary age has been described as one characterized by a wave of revolts. Every part of the world, every segment of society is dotted with one form of revolt or another. The resultant turbulence and anomie have caused thinkers to raise fundamental questions concerning the meaning of life. What sense does it make for man to exist in a world as turbulent as this? If this seeming irrational life of revolt is what human existence is all about, wouldn't it have been better not to be born at all? Though, philosophically, these questions form part of the perennial inquiry about existence, today's global social order makes those questions most pertinent. It is in response to these fundamental questions of the meaning of human life that this paper proposes to examine Albert Camus's philosophy of revolt. Life for Camus is absurd without meaning. In order to restore meaning, dignity and value to human life, three options present themselves to Camus for consideration. The first is suicide; the second is to take the leap of faith in God and the third is revolt. Camus rejects the first two options as not constituting the appropriate solutions. The first option he calls literal suicide and the second option he calls philosophical suicide. The third option which he calls revolt implies a rebellion against the monstrous absurdity and meaninglessness that have characterized human existence. This for Camus is the most authentic response to the absurdity of human life.

Keywords: Revolt; Human Life; Absurd; Suicide; Rebellion.

Introduction

Albert Camus, a versatile writer and fighter for human dignity was obsessed by the meaninglessness of the world and of human history.¹

His philosophy of revolt confronts us with a picture of man and man's lot. Man is divorced from the world, yet is paradoxically thrust into it. The world as we find it – given our hopes and expectations, our ideals – is intractable. It is incommensurate with our moral and intellectual demands. Life is fragmented; we seek to discover some rational unity amidst this diversity and chaos. We discover instead that we can only impose arbitrary unity upon it.² Cognizing clearly, the relatively and flux of human commitment and the ultimate purposelessness of life, man still has a blind but overpowering attachment of life as something more powerful than any of world's ill. But for Camus, the world is ultimately unintelligible and irrational, and man's lot in the world is absurd. "The world has no ultimate meaning; something in it has meaning, namely man because he is the only creature to insist on having one".³

At times, in our unrelenting efforts to survive the world, the social, intellectual, philosophical and religious constructs that we have, which give the world meaning and coherence fall away and we are plunged into confusion. As Camus poetically describes it:

It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, 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.⁴

We are faced with the real possibility that life is meaningless. If this sense of meaninglessness persists, we are forced to ask whether life is worth living at all. Camus makes this fundamental point:

There is only but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental questions of philosophy. All the rest – whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories – comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer.⁵

Camus characterizes the existential conditions of man as absurd. Man is caught in a paradox. On the one hand, all empirical evidence shows that the world is unpredictable and chaotic. Lives come into existence and pass. Ideas are proven to be true then determined to be false. One belief is held than another. Even our own moods are constantly shifting. On the other hand, man has a persistent nostalgia for unity, a need to make sense of the world. This is the human condition, Camus suggests, a constant attempt to derive meaning from meaninglessness. And it is absurd, but then, what constitutes the absurdity of human life.

Absurdity of Human Life

In existentialism, the absurd is “a term used for the pointless or meaningless nature of human life and action”.⁶ It refers to the conflict between the human tendency to seek value and meaning in life and the human inability to find any. In this understanding, absurd does not mean “logically impossible”, but rather “humanly impossible”.⁷ Absurdism, therefore is a philosophical school of thought stating that the efforts of humanity to find inherent meaning in life will ultimately fail because the sheer amount of information, including the vast unknown, makes certainty impossible.⁸

Although the notion of the absurd is pervasive in all of the literatures of Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* is his chief work on the subject. *The Myth of Sisyphus* is a short essay in which Camus examines “the absurd hero”, the person condemned to endless, meaningless toil: It is a haunting picture that Camus paints, and it becomes even more so when we realize that Sisyphus is a symbol for all mankind; all human efforts, according to Camus, is equally devoid of meaning. Is life worth living, then, in such a nihilistic world? Yes, replies Camus, for human beings are conscious of their fate, and by this consciousness, they rise above it.⁹

According to the Greek myth as narrated by Homer, Sisyphus offended the gods, and consequently, he was condemned by the gods to the meaningless and life futile endeavour of rolling a rock to the top of a mountain only to watch the rock roll back to the bottom of the mountain. He then starts all over again to roll it up to the mountain with so much effort and energy. And then he succeeds eventually in rolling it to the top of the mountain, the rock falls back and Sisyphus starts again and the process goes on endlessly.¹⁰

The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labour.¹¹

Camus sees absurdity as a confrontation, an opposition, a conflict or a divorce between two ideals. Specifically, he defines the human condition as absurd, as the confrontation between man's desire for significance, meaning and clarity on the one hand – and the silent, cold universe on the other. Camus begins pointing out the absurdity of our place in the universe by stating that, so long as the mind keeps silent in the motionless world of its hopes, everything is reflected and arranged in the unity of nostalgia. But with its first move, this world cracks and tumbles: an infinite number of shimmering fragments is offered to the understanding. We must despair of ever reconstructing the familiar, calm surface, which would give us peace of heart.¹²

By examining the above statement, it certainly, by itself, seems absurd that the world should be in fine working order until we exercise our mind. But what specifically, is the absurd? For Camus, this world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the moment, it is all that links them together. It binds them, one to the other as only hatred can weld two creatures together.¹³

The absurdity isn't the universe or man. It is their combination together that produces the absurd. If anything has been made abundantly clear in the twenty first century, it is that the universe is irrational. Everyday we go about the routine activities from morning till evening without ever asking ourselves the meaning of the whole life endeavour and the ultimate purpose it is meant to achieve. We only need to pause and reflect and we shall see that the whole life endeavour is no less futile, no less absurd than that of Sisyphus. For there is no meaning to be found, either in the existence of the world itself or in the existence of human life in it. "The world itself is not reasonable, it is absurd."¹⁴ There is therefore a compelling reason for man to seek meaning of this life.

Once the mind has been opened to see the absurdities, it becomes like a burning passion in him to find a solution to the absurdity of human life.

Resolving the Dilemma of the Absurd

The absurd arises out of the fundamental disharmony between the individual's search for meaning and the apparent meaninglessness of the universe. As beings looking for meaning in a meaningless world, humans have three ways of resolving the dilemma namely; suicide, leap of faith and revolt.

Suicide simply means, "intentional self-killing,"¹⁵ a solution in which a person ends his own life. In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus makes the statement that "there is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy".¹⁶ Camus wishes to examine the question whether or not such a view is right. What is the precise relationship between the absurd and the act of suicide? To what degree is suicide indeed a solution to the absurd? Camus sees this question of suicide as a natural response to an underlying premise, namely that life is absurd, in a variety of ways.

For Camus suicide is a confession that life is not worth living and so it offers the most basic way out of absurdity. Camus dismisses the viability of this option stating that it does not counter the absurd but only becomes more absurd to end one's own existence. Suicide is a cowardly escape from a problem; it portrays lack of courage and a refusal to face reality.

In the rendition of Omoregbe, "to say that life is meaningless does not commit one to saying that it is not worth living".¹⁷ As a matter of fact, as Camus puts it, life does not have to have an *a priori* meaning before it can be lived, on the contrary, it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning.¹⁸

Existentialist philosophers like Soren Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel think that the viable solution to the absurdity of human existence is to take the "leap of faith" in God. Camus rejects this solution as "philosophical suicide". This option was rejected on the ground that, to adopt a supernatural solution to the problem of the

absurd is to annihilate reason, which in Camus' view is as fatal and self destructive as physical suicide.

Camus solution to the absurdity of human existence is revolt. It is a solution in which one accepts the "absurd" and continues to live in spite of it. Camus endorsed this solution believing that by accepting the absurd, one can achieve absolute freedom, and by revolting against the absurd while accepting it as unstoppable, one could possibly be content from the personal meaning constructed in the process. However, Kierkegaard regarded this solution as "demoniac madness".²⁰

Revolt: Giving Human Life Meaning and Value

The most fundamental human act and the first decisive revolt against the meaninglessness of life is to choose life and to establish it as the only necessary Good. In other words it is revolt alone which gives a man's life its meaning and value.²¹ In a metaphoric sense, revolt could be seen as Sisyphus spirit of defiance in the face of the absurd, and in a more technical and less metaphoric sense, it is a spirit of opposition against any perceived unfairness, oppression or indignity in the human condition. Camus maintains that, it is by revolting that man gives meaning to his life. "Revolt gives life its value. Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty to that life".²²

The attitude of revolt is a refusal to remain passive in the face of evil, injustice, oppression. It is the determination to fight against absurdity since the absurd is an unavoidable characteristic of the human condition. It is therefore by revolt that man creates value, not only for himself but for all men with whom he is in solidarity. Revolt involves self commitment to a course in solidarity with the suffering humanity.²³

Ethical Implication of Camus Philosophy of Revolt

Albert Camus in his philosophy of revolt articulated a moral view, which can be called the ethics of the absurd. His philosophy of revolt radiates passion and conviction in defence of human freedom, human dignity and intelligence. His advocacy for revolt as a refusal to remain passive in the face of injustice and oppression lends credence to the relevance of freedom as a dominant concept in contemporary existentialism. For Sartre the foundation of freedom is nothingness,

hence freedom is bounded by nothing.²⁴ Freedom for Sartre is the capacity for self determination, of negating, of annihilating ... from material things and situation.²⁵ Camus philosophy of revolt negates absurdities and in essence affirms the being of man.

A number of ethical issues are associated with the question of suicide raised by Camus. The recurring questions according to Ndubuisi are: if one has a right to life, does he also have a right to destroy it? Does man actually has control over his life? If he has, can he use it the way he desires?²⁶ In the analysis of Ndubuisi, some cultures see suicide as a welcome relief to the anguish of human existence. In some environments, it is seen more as a genetic affliction than a crime, while in some others, it is an ignominious death at the hands of his opponents.²⁷ The right a man has over his property is quite different from the right he has over his life. John Locke supported the right a man has over his property but he stated that “he (man) may not destroy himself, for he is God’s creature”.²⁸ Some philosophers are opposed to suicide. They maintained that since death is an end of life, “dying is not only seen as awful and harpy but also a negative and uncanny phenomenon”.²⁹

However, some philosophers are not opposed to suicide. To this set of thinkers, suicide could be permitted on a number of reasons. Plato, for example, prohibited suicide but gave a number of exceptions. To him, suicide could be practiced in a situation of extreme distress, shame, poverty or affliction that caused extraordinary sorrow for the individual. Epicurus on the other hand, maintained that if life ceases to be a pleasure, the remedy for a free man was to end it.³⁰

In traditional African society suicide is considered as an act of abomination. It is a sacrilege in traditional African society; such would not deserve a befitting burial. “It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clans men. His body is evil and only strangers may touch it.”³¹

The case of meaninglessness of human life is not enough an excuse to terminate one’s life. As the existentialists reason, man should be able to put up resistance against evil and revolt against the perfidious nature that weighs him down.³²

Camu's philosophy of revolt nurtures altruism. True revolt for him is performed not just for himself but also in solidarity with and out of compassion for others. Revolt for Camus involves recognition of human community and a common human dignity. Camus' revolt imposes existential values and meaning upon human lives.

Conclusion

Albert Camus' philosophy of revolt from our analysis seems to be advocating a life of tension in which contradictions may live and thrive. In the universe of total negation and absurdity, human life is meaningless. The world itself is unreasonable; it is absurd. The solution lies neither in suicide nor in religion but in revolt. That is, the determination not to remain passive but to resist and fight against absurdity.

Caution must however be taken in the application of Camus philosophy of revolt, as freedom in any form whatsoever requires skillful moderation. Like the moral virtues in Aristotle's Ethics, it is a mean between two extremes. Undue emphasis and over exaggeration of it must be avoided. Revolt for Camus, presupposes values. In a revolt, cosmic absurdity tends to retreat into the background; and a moral idealism comes to the fore, a moral idealism, which did not call for the production of an elite or an aristocrat at the expense of others but insisted on freedom and justice for all, real freedom and justice, not oppression or enslavement masquerading under those honoured names.³³

Perhaps, one of the greatest inspirations provided by Camus philosophy of revolt is that, it is possible for a thinker to face the modern world (with a full understanding of its contradictions, injustices, brutal flaws and absurdities) with a grain of hope yet utterly without cynicism.

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