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On Absurdism

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Abstract

This project will seek to broaden and elucidate Camus' concept of the absurd as presented in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, with the thesis being that, as given, it is too abstract and cursory to adequately rest on the conclusions that Camus has made. This task will be conducted in three main sections. The first will focus on the initial descent and transition into absurdity by analyzing the phenomena and psychology within Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. The second will focus on the nature of immediacy in absurd aesthetics and ethics, using *Don Juan* as the subject. The third will argue in defense of Sisyphus' heroic status and elaborate more on the motions of revolt and happiness in a fate with little to no possibility.

Introduction

Absurdism in Abstract

Albert Camus begins his definitive work, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, with these bold sentiments: “There is only one really serious philosophical question, and that is suicide. Deciding whether or not life is worth living is to answer the fundamental question in philosophy. All other questions follow from that” (Camus, p. 5). From this philosophical question arises the core subject of this project: philosophical absurdism. The basic formulation for absurdity provided in *Sisyphus* is when man’s natural insistence for meaning in life is confronted with an irrational universe that either has no answer or does not offer one. Predecessors of Camus had already tried to answer this dilemma, as Kierkegaard did with his “leap of faith” and phenomenologists like Husserl did in proposing that meaning could be established through phenomenological hermeneutics. Camus rejected these answers as philosophical “suicide”, or at least as incompatible with the absurdity he envisioned. What he proposed instead was a conscious revolt against a silent universe, lucidity toward one’s own finitude, and a will to experience happiness in a sundry life rather than a secure one. Camus wanted to demonstrate to existential vagabonds facing the shadow of 20th century nihilism that life did not need meaning to be worth living, just something meaningful.

With that said, my thesis is that Camus’ *Sisyphus* ultimately falls short as a satisfactory inquiry into the absurd in two ways. First, while Camus provides a solid foundation in explaining fundamentally what the absurd is and is not, he does not thoroughly enough define and categorize several of its identifiable features in a cohesive manner that adequately bridges them to his claimed resolution. These shortcomings are found most pronounced in three of the work’s key figures: Gregor Samsa (*The Metamorphosis*), discussed in only a few sentences, Don Juan in five pages, and Sisyphus himself in only four pages. The issue is that these figures are introduced but are not illustrated through a narrative lens that demonstrates their absurd progression and experiences. This highlights a second shortcoming, which is the inaccessibility of the absurd to the common man and the undoubtedly shaky resolution of happiness at the work’s end.¹ If the decision of suicide is the paramount philosophical question, and absurdity is indeed the actuality of life, as Camus asserts them both to be, then this decision requires an equally paramount philosophical response. That is, can one proclaim wholeheartedly that life is indeed worth living and suicide is not the answer that man seeks? More importantly, this answer must be one that the common man facing the threat of nihilism, the audience Camus was fundamentally writing to, can grasp and apply to their own lives.

Despite these shortcomings, the mission of this project is *not* to critique Camus' *Sisyphus*. I do not argue that Camus' understanding of the absurd or its conclusion are so much wrong as they are abstract and incomplete. It is also not the mission of this project to somehow complete Camus' work or offer an exhaustive account or understanding of the absurd. It is simply to better categorize and synthesize its concepts, as well as expand upon them with interpretations and concepts that I argue are consistent with Camus' vision. My hopes in doing so are likewise twofold: to encourage richer discourse of the absurd at the academic level and provide a better sense of what it means to live absurdly, if that is possible, at the personal level.

This article is divided into three sections. The first will focus on absurd existence within the narrative of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. It will seek to better illustrate and categorize absurd phenomenology, psychology and, more broadly, what it looks like "to be" in absurdity. It will attempt to wrestle with the unique nature of the absurd itself, the Elusive Unknown, as well as how it operates and evades our understanding. The second will focus on qualities and characteristics of a flourishing absurd man, using Don Juan as the subject. It will discuss various aesthetic features of absurdism, such as immediacy, and tackle the absurd man's integrity-based ethics, contrasting them with that of conventional rational ethics. The purpose of this is to dispel notions of the absurd man somehow being nihilistic, which Camus fiercely opposed. The third section will focus on absurd revolt, discussing the significance of heroism and triumph for Sisyphus. Moreover, it will seek to elucidate what makes achieving happiness and mastering one's fate possible even in such seemingly hopeless circumstances.

The Metamorphosis: An Absurd Existence

Absurd Phenomena

In congruence with *Sisyphus*, I have deduced three fundamental modes of absurd phenomena in *The Metamorphosis*: exile, strangeness, and tranquility. Exile is the immediate loss of or distancing from one's familiarity, rationality, and harmony with the world. This exile breeds strangeness, the pervading mood of bewilderment and existential dizziness caused by one's sense of

¹ "I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain...He, too, concludes that all is well...The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." (Camus, p. 89)

self and belonging conflicting with an alien world.² If people manage to endure strangeness and acknowledge the futility of their circumstance, what follows is tranquility, that which fosters spiritual stillness and functionality. Though I have found these phenomena tend to manifest linearly in stages, this is not always necessarily always the case.

The story opens with Gregor Samsa awaking to discover that he has transformed into a giant insect with no rational explanation. Before today, Gregor projected himself into the world as a diligent businessman and devoted son and brother, a state that he and others could acknowledge harmonized and belonged with theirs. Gregor does not immediately bemoan his freakish condition but rather the prospect of being late for work. This initial response represents Gregor's resistance to his predicament. He desperately tries to apply reason to this irrational anomaly because arriving promptly for work is not only what Gregor *must* do, but all that he knows *how* to do. This obliviousness or clinging to the familiar is the first manifestation of Gregor's exile.

Gregor becomes bemused by the awkward legs and jaws he has acquired. They resemble nothing of the skin and quadrupedal frame he has always known and grown in, yet that still move under his human will. Gregor's mother asks if he is well at the door, and though the words forming his response are his own, the voice that utters these words is like that of a stranger.³ This surreal, alienating inability to project his familiar self is the second manifestation of Gregor's exile. His thoughts up to this point could be surmised as, "I have these ideas of how I belong and project this belonging into the world for others to acknowledge. My former understanding of what this means no longer aligns with the world around me and thus my attachment to it falls into ambiguity." This initiates a transition from exile to strangeness, wherein Gregor becomes not only a stranger to his kin but also to himself.

The thought that Gregor could ever be sick is inconceivable to his family. Gregor's father announces that "there must be something wrong with him" while his mother remarks that his voice is like "that of an animal." His sister cries in her room while one of Gregor's coworkers arrives and suggests that Gregor is trying to "make fools of them." His family's objections here are not presented normatively but descriptively. It is not that "Gregor ought to go to work", but rather, "Our Gregor could not *not* go to work." However, their Gregor has become projectionally imprisoned while this new, "not-Gregor" materializes and assumes the former's place. Even before the family sees the monster, their irrational hysteria already conveys an awareness that something has assailed their idea of Gregor. This functions as the first

manifestation of the transition from exile to strangeness that involves other parties.

Gregor finally struggles to open the door and is not met with concern for his wellbeing by his family, as one would expect, but only terror. An existential struggle arises between both parties. The family must figure out how they are to acknowledge this revolting creature dwelling in Gregor's room, which in no way matches their Gregor's existential frequency. His family is not ultimately distressed because they believe Gregor *is* a giant roach, but rather that a giant roach has assumed Gregor's *place* in the world, sending their Gregor off into the ether. Likewise, Gregor must discover how he is to acknowledge himself and address the hostile strangers before him, who now only appear like his once-loving family.

Gregor's sister, Grete, leaves a bowl of sweetened milk inside Gregor's room, remembering it was his favorite drink. Gregor is initially thrilled, but upon drinking it exclaims that the milk "did not taste at all nice" and turns away from the dish "almost against his own will." Grete's kindly gesture is much akin to one who brings something warm and familiar to a sick loved one. It is with great hope and confidence that one believes such a personal gesture will help "bring them back to their old selves." This signifies the family's subsequent resistance to the exile and strangeness pervading their home. They treat the matter as if Gregor were still present and simply lost in the strange ether waiting to be found again. This is evident when Gregor's mother hesitates in helping Grete when the latter proposes to move all the furniture out of Gregor's room.⁴

² "...in a universe suddenly divested with illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of the absurdity." (Camus, p. 7)

³ "The discomfort in the face of man's own inhumanity, this incalculable rumble before the image of what we are, this 'nausea,' as a writer calls it, is also the absurd. Likewise the stranger who at certain seconds comes to meet us in a mirror, the familiar and yet alarming brother we encounter in our own photos is also the absurd." (Camus, p. 13)

⁴ "...and by taking the furniture away, won't it seem like we're abandoning him to cope for himself? I think it'd be best to leave the room exactly the way it was before so that when Gregor comes back to us again he'll find everything unchanged and he'll be able to forget the time in between all the easier." (Kafka, p. 27)

Grete brings Gregor various foods to try, of which only the half-rotten leftovers from family dinners bring him delight. This is the first manifestation of Gregor's transition into tranquility which, while strange, is done effortlessly, as Camus puts it.⁵ Gregor contemplates that people do not eat rotten food, which is a human thought, and yet is eating and enjoying rotten food anyway, as if he were something not human. He realizes that if he is to have any self-actualization at all, he must live in a way that is natural to him, namely in accord with his newfound beastly thoughts and desires. However, it should be noted that a new familiarity does not replace the old, as the absurd does not allow for one to reclaim this old mode of rationality. It is simply spiritual stillness and functionality, the two main components to tranquility as previously mentioned.

Absurd phenomena affect not only people, but places and things. Even after a month, Gregor notes that Grete's expressions are still of those of one entering the room of "someone seriously ill or even of a stranger" who would "bite her." This creates a dramatic shift in how both sides engage with and are conscious of one another. Adopting a new self-awareness as being burdensome and monstrous, Gregor hides under the furniture in his room to spare his sister from his appearance. This tension permeates into the rest of the household as well, with Gregor perceiving that their once warm and lively home has debased into a cold and silent house. Family dinners, in which Gregor can no longer participate, are filled only with gossip and frustrations about Gregor. These utterances mellow in the atmosphere and push Gregor, literally and metaphorically, deeper into his shell. While Gregor's room and all its contents are just as they were before, they now make him feel "uneasy." He can no longer use his writing desk for work or his bed to sleep as he always did, but now prefers to stick and scurry around on the ceiling, remarking that it feels more natural and easier to breathe. These former artifacts of order, purpose and familiarity now only further estrange Gregor in his current state. Inching closer toward a complete tranquility, the physical and mental death of old Gregor has been sealed, leaving only the idea tethering the Gregor of old to actuality.

Over time, the abstract hopes and memories of Gregor are soon absorbed by his sister Grete, who adopts an existential duality of a sort for the family. Meanwhile, Gregor's room is soon cleared of all its contents, which initially delights his now-animalized mind. With the taking of his prized possession, a painting of a woman in a fur coat, one last spark of his humanity is lit in protest. Gregor escapes from his room to retrieve the painting and inadvertently sends his mother into shock. This prompts Grete to address Gregor by name for the first and only time since his transformation. It is as if in uttering this aloud, the family can finally acknowledge what has long

been repressed: there is no hope of their Gregor returning. Gregor's family can no longer project their memories "brother and son" onto him but only their scorn as "beast and burden."⁶ The idea of Gregor dies, and the idea of the monster has been fully realized in the former's place.

The Elusive Unknown and the Nature of the Universe

To better grasp the Elusive Unknown, the name I have given to the absurd's peculiar nature, two potential misunderstandings must first be dispelled. The first is that the absurd is an inversion of order, in which acts of chaos are favored. The second is simply that the absurd is entirely random. To assert that the absurd is a bizarre world, wherein living destructively is rewarded while living properly is punished, still establishes a degree of understanding and familiarity.⁷ If the absurd man were able to recognize some universal law that dictated that chaos necessarily produced an enriching life, this would still offer a rationale for him to follow that Camus would not allow. This is not to say Camus would advise against pragmatic thinking. It simply means that no rationale can be fully rested upon by anyone because the Elusive Unknown always escapes human understanding without prejudice.

On the other hand, to suggest that the absurd is simply random is to reduce the great feeling of bewilderment and estrangement to the knowable that it brings, equally misrepresenting Camus' vision. If the absurd man were able to learn the universe was merely the product of a series of chances and accidents, there would be nothing else to evade his understanding. One can come to terms with randomness and make the most of it. This is not to say that there is a universal order, or chaos, or even that God does or does not exist, just that it is unknowable. Camus notes that the absurd almost

⁵ "Metamorphosis, in turn, certainly represents the horrible imagery of an ethic lucidity. But it is also the product of that incalculable amazement man feels at being conscious of the beast he becomes effortlessly." (Camus, p. 91-92)

⁶ "It's got to go," shouted his sister, "that's the only way, Father. You've got to get rid of the idea that that's Gregor. We've only harmed ourselves for believing it so long. How can that be Gregor? If it were Gregor he would have seen long ago that it's not possible for human beings to live with an animal like that and he would have gone of his own free will... As it is this animal is persecuting us, it's driven out our tenants, it obviously wants to take over the whole flat and force us to sleep on the streets." (Kafka, p. 40)

⁷ "A world that can be explained even with bad reason is a familiar world." (Camus, p. 7)

demands with it a certain agnosticism that is difficult to pinpoint.⁸ What we are left with is an incomprehensible phantom, an outline of something constantly evading the absurd man's hunger for truth and clarity. The Elusive Unknown need not be a literal force or entity,⁹ as even in being symbolic of our alienation from the universe it manifests the same way to us all the same.

To illustrate this, let us return to *the Metamorphosis* and ask this underlying question: Why does Gregor Samsa wake up a giant bug? To us, Gregor's transformation is undoubtedly a hyperbolic, preposterous event, even within its fictitious framework. Yet the strange and surreal feelings that accompany the story mirror our own feelings when life sends a devastating, albeit much less bizarre, misfortune our way. The absurd man experiencing such feelings will always be barraged with the same burning questions: What is happening? Why is it happening? Who is doing this, how are they doing it? Gregor could forever contemplate whether his misfortune was a mathematically inconceivable mutation or rearrangement of molecules, part of a simulation that he has unknowingly been living, or even a cosmic trick played by Loki, the Norse god of trickery. But it ultimately makes no difference which of these scenarios is the case because they are all equally out of Gregor's reach. Gregor will never know if there was any greater significance to his awaking as a beetle, or if he could have awoken as anything just as grotesque and debilitating while reaching the same outcome.

We are likewise given no indication that Gregor has committed some great atrocity to warrant this twisted fate, as he selflessly devoted himself to his work and family. Though it is often the case that an upright person, through their naïveté or poor timing, can end up in horrible circumstances, there is no textual indication for this scenario either. As we are creatures dispositioned and cultivated to demand meaning and order, the absurd man is left saying, "there must be a why." But in the absurd, order and meaning can appear to be whatever the Elusive Unknown allows. Genuine love and earnestness can manifest as vileness and aggression, such as is the case with Gregor to his family.¹⁰ In the span of just a few months, Gregor has gone from son to alien to animal to monster and finally to scapegoat for all the Samsa family's sins and angst. He is a martyr but of something he will never know.

When Gregor dies, all is well again with the Samsa family and his memory fades into obscurity, leaving no one to tell his side of the story. It is not ultimately the events that transpired that utterly unsettle us, but the manner in which they concluded when we expected some sense of resolve to appear. This is the proper feeling of the absurd. What then is to be said of the nature of the Elusive Unknown, be it God or some phantom idea manifesting solely in our thoughts and emotions? All that can be said is that

it is utterly creative. It is creative in its seemingly infinite ways of tricking human understanding. It plays the role of the performer that, just when we believed we've figured out how the last act will play out, rewrites the ending to include yet another final act.

Don Juan: The Absurd Man

Absurd Aesthetics

The absurd may be void of attainable order and meaning, but it is far from being void of attainable gratification. Should those seeds of tranquility take root and endure the absurd's initial, cruel strangeness, they blossom into a new mode of experiencing beauty. The absurd man is controlled by the absurd insofar as he holds onto the nostalgia for his previous existence. But if he can manage to kill his nostalgia, the world becomes his. As is the case with Don Juan, an ideal of an absurd character that very few people could realistically attain, while also being the quintessential aesthetic subject. Just as with the Elusive Unknown, absurd aesthetics do not manifest as any one thing. What is significant of Don Juan is not so much what he does or why he does it (this just so happens to be seducing), but rather *how* he does so.

Arguably the most important feature of absurd aesthetics is immediacy. Immediacy interests itself with neither the past nor the future, only the present. The past can be regarded as nostalgic harmony or binding regret that the absurd man has since abandoned, while the future can be regarded as hope or fear that the absurd man has likewise rebuked. Each present life contains within it a myriad of possible experiences for new thoughts, moods and sensations that kindle the flame of human desire and sensuality. Every present life inevitably becomes past and is discarded to never be reflected

⁸ "I did not say 'excludes God', which would still amount to asserting."
(Camus, p. 31)

⁹ "...it is an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity. Understanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human, stamping it with his seal...If man realized that the universe like him can love and suffer, he would be reconciled." (Camus, p. 15)

¹⁰ "'Father, Mother,' said his sister, hitting the table with her hand as introduction, 'we can't carry on like this. Maybe you can't see it, but I can. I don't want to call this monster my brother, all I can say is: we have to try and get rid of it. We've done all that's humanly possible to look after it and be patient, I don't think anyone could accuse us of doing anything wrong.'" (Kafka, p. 39)

upon again. Likewise, the future present life is not considered because it only becomes of interest when it enters the immediate.

Another crucial aspect of immediacy and absurd aesthetics is that it prioritizes quantity and novelty of experiences rather than security and sentiment. Don Juan has seduced over a thousand women across Europe, but he does not do this to fill an emotional void or to reach some arbitrary milestone.¹¹ The number itself is not tracked to serve any higher purpose. Don Juan seduces because to do otherwise would not be in accord with his absurd nature. The girls he seduces are not ultimately what excites him, but the act of seduction itself. This is why he never loves the same woman twice.¹² Each motion of the seduction falling effortlessly into place is like that of an improvised melody, following certain intuitions but never with total predictability. Whether he moves this way or says that, he is certain of his success. This is because Don Juan overflows with an essence analogous to the ancient Greek understanding of charisma, wherein one is blessed by the gods with all their charms, attractiveness and creativity. In this, he possesses a sense of wholeness in himself that is divine and renders him irresistible to any woman in his path. The absurd man likewise becomes an expeditious artist with his particular craft, creating fine piece after fine piece but never pausing to reflect on or revisit one. To return to something of old implies nostalgic longing which the absurd man must give up in order to aesthetically thrive. Moreover, to premeditatively craft something for the future implies a hope for something which is outside the absurd man: his immediate world.

One useful method of understanding absurd aesthetics is by contrasting them with those of the absurd man's opposite, the rational and nostalgic man of old. The nostalgic man tends to build up big experiences and preserve them sentimentally. They are precious, one of a kind and part of his internal makeup. The absurd man, in contrast, breaks down experiences and indulges them to the finest sensual detail. To him, nothing is so precious that one ought to immortalize it, instead preferring to experience something new and thrilling. The fatal toxin for the absurd aesthete is boredom, caused by the same safe and sentimental repetitions that the nostalgic man both lives and dies by. Yet one such as Don Juan also lives by repetition, seducing women as if it were like breathing for him. There is an almost paradoxical nature to his seduction: even before he finishes loving one woman, his spirit has already fled to the next he can seduce. Each new woman is a particular, and while the art of his seduction may be unique each time, it is always drawn toward the universal feminine. The absurd man may have his preferences, but his tastes must never impede him from trying new flavors, so long as they be pleasing to him.

The nostalgic man desires “one of many” while the absurd man desires “many ones.”¹³ The nostalgic man fundamentally seeks stability. When he meets the woman he wishes to love, he is crippled by uncertainty of whether or not that wish will be reciprocated. If it is not, he is heartbroken because he had already hoped for a future with her in his heart. If it is, he is still crippled by fear of losing that one precious love, so he fights restlessly to preserve it. She is the whole of all her dear sums and never narrowed down into any one feature. She has all the potential to be a synthesis of friend, partner, mother, etc. which such a man longs for with a meaningful union. He seeks the right thing, at the right place, at the right time in accordance to his rationale and virtues. For Don Juan, the right place and time is always in the present. He is crippled by nothing because he places his bets not on any one person or thing but on life as a whole. It is that very uncertainty that strikes fear into the heart of the nostalgic man that fuels the appetite for experience in Don Juan and the absurd man alike.

¹¹ “It is not through lack of love that Don Juan goes from woman to woman. It is ridiculous to represent him as mystic in a quest of total love. But it is indeed because he loves them with the same passion and each time with his whole self that he must repeat his gift and his profound quest. Whence each woman hopes to give him what no one has ever given him. Each time they are utterly wrong and merely manage to make him feel the need of that repetition... Why should it be essential to love rarely in order to love much.” (Camus, p. 51)

¹² “As for satiety, Don Juan insists upon it, on the contrary. If he leaves a woman it is not because he has ceased to desire her. A beautiful woman is always desirable. But he desires another, and no, this is not the same thing.” (Camus, p. 52)

¹³ “What Don Juan realizes in action is an ethic of quantity, whereas the saint on the contrary tends towards quality. Not to believe in the profound meaning of things belongs to the absurd man.” (Camus, p. 53)

Absurd Ethics

The particular set of ethics that accompany the absurd man are rooted in his own intuitions and integrity, rather than any conventional moral conviction or traditions. These are important to establish because they combat the notion that the absurd man is immoral, thus adhering to nihilism. Concerning Don Juan, his seductions are not to be viewed as malicious or reckless because they are done with neither motive nor all-consuming appetite. He follows his absurd instincts to fruition and possesses those whom he loves for a short time but continues no further. It is a sincere love, to be sure, but not one that is given to last. The moral realist, one of the absurd's most tenacious critics, would accuse the absurd man of being a nihilist for adhering to such a capricious lifestyle. I believe it is of great importance to Camus' project that the absurd man be firmly established as a uniquely amoral ideal who can still adhere to integrity without harboring rational moral sentiments.

As the absurd man's art can manifest through a multitude of crafts, the moral realist may ask what would happen if the absurd man's affection was for killing. Firstly, the absurd does not beckon the absurd man to act in whatever manner he pleases. Camus states that he must simply learn to act as if moral convictions were pointless and discern the consequences for which his absurd freedom cannot pay the price.¹⁴ If one were to take up killing as a craft, the act would seem to fall into either one of two archetypes that exist outside of the absurd: the tyrant and the madman. The tyrant seeks to seize power but is afraid of losing if he achieves it. He is often one who has been wounded and seeks to harm others either to exact revenge or absolve pain. The tyrant is lucid to the destruction he creates but does not consider the consequences of his tirades. Returning to Don Juan, he is not a tyrant because he never fears losing what he desires. He does not need to seize his lovers because they desire him, and he only seeks to possess each one for a night. Don Juan has not been harmed and so does not seduce out of emptiness or melancholy; he seduces with joy.¹⁵ Of those whom he seduces, Don Juan does not desire their everything, as to destroy or own them. He simply desires a small piece of them, that being their unique feminine experience in the moment.

The other archetype, the madman, would enjoy killing for killing's sake. He dehumanizes his victims because they are his trophies and seizes what makes their individuality possible at all: that being their freedom to choose. Unlike the tyrant, the madman is not lucid to his actions. He has slipped out of the absurd actuality in favor of his own, either because he can not bear the crushing reality of the actual absurd or because he simply favored his own. For Don Juan, his absurd craft does not amount to "collecting", as Camus

would label it¹⁶. Don Juan *does* love each and every lover he seduces, but he does not leave them in ruin when his sensual spirit calls him to another. Most importantly, Don Juan is lucid of the existence he lives, longing only for the infinite of this life and not the one beyond.¹⁷ The absurd man cannot flourish in killing because, if he were lucid and tyrannical, he would realize enough killing would result in a life of always looking over your shoulder, such a life that offers no room for flourishing. If he were mad and unlucid, then he would have already failed one of Camus' unbreakable doctrines: the absurd man must be aware of the absurd reality at every corner.

¹⁴ "The absurd does not liberate; it binds. It does not authorize all actions. Everything is permitted does not mean that nothing is forbidden... All systems of morality are based on the idea that an action has consequences that legitimize or cancel it. A mind imbued with the absurd merely judges that those consequences must be considered calmly. It is ready to pay up. In other words, there may be responsible persons but there are no guilty ones, in its opinion." (Camus, p. 50)

¹⁵ "Is Don Juan melancholy? This is not likely. That laugh, the conquering insolence, that playfulness and love of the theatre are all clear and joyous. Every healthy creature tends to multiply himself. So it is with Don Juan. But furthermore melancholy people have two reasons for being so: they don't know or they hope. Don Juan knows and does not hope." (Camus, p. 51-52)

¹⁶ "The absurd man is he who is not apart from time. Don Juan does not think of 'collecting' women. He exhausts their number and with them his chances of life. 'Collecting' amounts to being capable of living off one's past. But he rejects regret, that other form of hope. He is incapable of looking at portraits." (Camus, p. 53)

¹⁷ "For nothing is vanity to him except the hope of another life. He proves this because he gambles that other life against heaven itself. Longing for desire killed by satisfaction, that commonplace of the important man, does not belong to him." (Camus, p.52)

Sisyphus: An Absurd Revolt

Of Heroes and Happiness

By the end of his four-page chapter on Sisyphus, Camus has already given us his rationale for what makes Sisyphus the absurd hero¹⁸ and the beneficiary of happiness he allegedly is. It is from these passages where a plethora of questions arise. Indeed, we are given visuals of what Sisyphus' happiness *is*, but not told how it is possible that he *could* be happy? What *makes* him victorious, when by all appearances he seems to have lost as badly as one could lose? It requires little deliberation for us to find ourselves wrestling with the puzzling logic of these notions. If the absurd is truly a prescriptive philosophy these kinds of details are imperative. What does it look like to be a hero? Is this label truly of any higher significance, or is it truly different from being simply an absurd man? Finally, what does this all mean for, not the conceptual absurd man, but the absurd man of reality? As stated during the introduction, I have neither intentions nor expectations of exhaustively answering such questions to the level of satisfaction that I had hoped from Camus. I merely wish to build off the very special foundation that he laid for existential vagabonds to try and find their way.

I will begin the inquiry with this notion of "hero." Disciplines ranging from mythology and psychology to literature and even pop culture each seem to possess their own distinct conception of how a hero is defined. As I do not wish to belabor this point and divert the focus of this section, I will offer a general definition of heroism that should comfortably fit within virtually any preexisting one: An individual who is elevated into the extraordinary in order to combat an adversary toward some goal, and who inspires a sense of awe and wonder in the ordinary majority. Thus, one might define the absurd hero as, "one who embraces the absurd to combat the Elusive Unknown toward the goal of flourishing, which mystifies and inspires the rational and nostalgic majority." Concerning the distinction between the absurd man and the absurd hero, I would say that it is simply a matter of having fully realized the extent of one's absurdity and having reached absurd self-actualization. Thus, Don Juan, in addition to Sisyphus, are both absurd heroes because they have embraced the absurd in its entirety, becoming new and whole beings as a result thereof. Camus later notes in the appendix that Gregor Samsa falls just short of this accomplishment in the underlying hopeful sentiments of Kafka's writing. Finally, concerning what makes the "hero" label of higher significance is illustrated through the absurd hero's victory and happiness.

Before the feasibility of absurd victory can be established, we must first explore the ridiculous nature of Sisyphus' existence. This presence of ridiculousness in the absurd life is not something that Camus rejects, but

instead embraces.¹⁹ Sisyphus defies the will of Zeus, outwits Hades, and overcomes Death by binding him in chains. He defies those Olympians who were never to be defied. Zeus, King of the Olympians, judged that no mortal should be allowed to conquer fate as Sisyphus had, for that right belonged only to the sovereigns. Thus, Sisyphus was sentenced to a fate much worse than bodily death — a vicious cycle of death to his spirit and expression.²⁰ In order for Sisyphus to achieve an absolute ridiculous victory; however, which absurd heroism calls for, an absolute ridiculous punishment must precede it. The reason for this is that, in finding something meaningful in a meaningless existence, Sisyphus has secured the last laugh which heralds the gods' defeat.

The underlying violence of Zeus' punishment is not aimed at seizing all of Sisyphus' experiences or even the possibilities thereof. It is ultimately aimed at the joy that those experiences and possibilities bring him. A proud and lucid acceptance of his condition allows Sisyphus to seize back that sense of ownership, of *mineness*, that the gods proudly believed could be taken from him. Sisyphus is a hero in that he disarms the gods' capacity to exercise their will over him, striking fear into these oppressors. Sisyphus' victory is not that he resigns himself from the game of absurd life, but rather that he scoffs at the impotent sovereigns who can no longer or touch his sprit or take from him.²¹ In this, Sisyphus becomes his own sovereign, the master of his fate.

¹⁸ "You have already grasped that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passions for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted towards accomplishing nothing." (Camus, p. 87)

¹⁹ "All great deeds and all great thoughts have a ridiculous beginning. Great works are often born on a street-corner or in a restaurant's revolving door. So it is with absurdity. The absurd world more than others derives its nobility from that abject birth." (Camus, p. 10)

²⁰ "They had thought that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labour." (Camus, p. 86)

²¹ "Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition; it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn." (Camus, 87-88)

There are two motions through which mastering one's fate is realized: revolt and the happiness therein. Camus characterizes revolt as a relentless demanding for the universe to cease its elusive tendencies, while so remaining conscious as to not slip into hope.²² The way this revolt is fully realized is through happiness, which Camus characterizes as not only a product of the absurd but a facilitator of it too.²³ How true, unadulterated happiness is possible for the absurd man boils down to removing his conditioned necessity for some constant or channel to achieve it. Concerning this, I believe Camus' emphasized attacks on nostalgia were for good reason. When musing over the past, one easily falls into the snare of seeking to recreate that which can no longer be. But nostalgia need not be in the past or to have actually happened. One can long for an ideal life that could have been or would be had events occurred differently. The desire to have a home, career, family, health, passions and all other goods are rational wants. They each satisfy a unique role that makes their respective hardships worth pursuing. To achieve the greatest of happiness, the absurd man must tear out those rational coils from his brain. He must not be influenced by his surroundings or his circumstances but create them.

But there remains the question of happiness. The Stoics believed happiness was contentment within life's bare necessities, while the Buddhists believe a sort of happiness can be achieved through liberating the self from attachment to worldly pleasures. Others like Thomas Aquinas and Saint Augustine of Hippo believed that only unity with God and crafting one's self in his image brought the ultimate happiness. The happiness of Sisyphus and the absurd rejects these claims, embodying instead something malleable and unique. Sisyphus is not content with his circumstances, as if he is simply making the best of them. The absurd always demands more experience, prompting individuals to create it if they cannot find it. Sisyphus does not detach himself from his circumstances, but instead embraces them because he is altogether passionate for existence and existence alone. Sisyphus does not look to the absolute for his happiness, for he is absolute in himself, and his scoffing of the "sovereign absolutes" is what fuels his rebel spirit.

What makes absurd happiness possible is that it only requires a will that wills. Happiness is not achieved in freedom from being harmed, thus experiencing nothing. Nor is happiness achieved by living a narrow life, thus experiencing a single thing. Absurd happiness is found in any and all things at both their broadest and most minute levels. No experience is reliant on the past just as no experience determines the future. Sisyphus, a former king, does not regret his actions because in losing all that could be taken, he gains that which cannot. Sisyphus does not see a dreadful climb to a mountaintop,

but rather another opportunity for a complete and inspiring view, a view where he belongs to himself. We are not to regard our lives as one uniform life, where past and future intertwine, but rather as a series of momentary, isolated lives that each offer something new but equally meaningful.²⁴ If one can only regard life as worth living in a particular manner or in having certain attributes, existence is not whole *in itself*. Whatever matters is that which is real. That which is real is whatever exists in the pure and immediate. Sisyphus exists as one who rolls a boulder up a mountain, and he is happy because he does so in a way that even a god cannot understand.

The final matter in need of discussion is what this means for the absurd man of reality, specifically the 20th century man facing nihilism. Camus' purpose in making Sisyphus the face of his absurd venture was this: if one could conceive of someone absolutely void of possibility finding meaningfulness in a life what was meaningless, then the absurd of us with limited possibilities could do just the same. Fundamentally, *Sisyphus* is about coming to grips with the futility of life, the sovereignty of death, and man's response to those in either submission or revolt. The deeper, existential realization that we are finite and what we do in our lives might not ultimately matter is crushing. Hope and faith is philosophical suicide, it is in itself a

²² "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...It is not aspiration, for it is devoid of hope. That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it." (Camus, 39)

²³ "Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable. It would be a mistake to say that happiness necessarily springs from absurd discovery. It happens as well that the feeling of the absurd springs from happiness." (Camus, 88).

²⁴ "Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that mountain filled with darkness, in its singularity constitutes a world." (Camus, 89)

death, because it is contingent on something higher and beyond our control, forging a back door away from our human condition. Sisyphus is not a hero who can save us from our inevitable death, but he is one that we can model ourselves after to master our fate.

Conclusion

Absurdism in Progress

What makes absurdism a rare and special philosophy is that it cannot be fully understood through scholarly endeavors alone. It is a philosophy that is intimately tied to the individual, manifesting differently in each person, and thus must be lived out in order to be mastered. What likewise makes absurdism so rare and special is that it is a philosophy which can be learned through the eyes of others. What does the absurd man learn from Gregor Samsa? He learns the motions involved in progressively losing the entirety of his world and himself. What does the absurd man learn from Don Juan? He learns that life is not fearfully narrow and contingent on anything but his immediate passion for newness. What does the absurd man learn from Sisyphus? He learns that happiness and victory go to the man who has everything, yet nothing can be taken from him. Absurdism is a philosophy forever in progress, growing from the insights and experiences of those who feel they experience the very same absurdity which inspired Camus to write his absurd treatise. A wider appreciation, understanding, and calling of the absurd should be fostered in the hearts of people carrying their rock and become as elucidated as that Elusive Unknown, which everyone has at some point in their life wrestled with, will allow.

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