

IN DEFENSE OF THE ABSURD: ALBERT CAMUS' NEGATION OF THOUGHT

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Abstract

Existential absurdity, refers to the idea that existence is both meaningless and purposeless, and that there is no rationality for which life, as it currently is, should be lived. Albert Camus, is the single philosopher in the 20th century who distinctively discoursed this theme, making it so vivid to the point that it became almost synonymous with his name. Faced with the problem of futile human struggles in a meaningless world, Camus in want of a solution proposed revolt with which he meant a deviant attitude towards the meaningless life. My concern here would thus be to demonstrate Camus' betrayal of logical reasoning in his solution to the absurd existence. I argue that Camus, while trying to demonstrate the obvious meaninglessness of human existence, failed to maintain a logical consistency in his flow of thought. Thus, showing deviance for the fundamental logical principle of non-contradiction—the principle that nothing can both be and not be at the same time. I conclude that, Camus' proposed solution to the absurd life is infact a negation of logical necessity as evident in his simultaneous assertion of two contradictory propositions of the categorical forms A and O which are never both true at the same time.

Keywords: Existentialism, existential absurdity, Logic, principle of non-contradiction, Albert Camus, classical logic.

Introduction

The entire history of human existence has always been an attempt to fathom and seek meaning to his existence as well as those of other entities and phenomena around him. It was in this quest to know, and understanding the meaning for which the universe, as currently perceived, is apparently the way it is and not another way, that Western philosophy itself was birthed in Greece with the likes of Thales, Anaximenes, Anaximander among others. Hence, man has always, not just in the contemporary time, concerned himself with puzzles and problems solving. He had always wanted to know why life is the way it is and not another way; why he is born and will have to die after sometime; why he finds himself in a world he never chose of his own will, for which if he had had the opportunity he probably could have chosen differently; of whether or not he is free or bound, if free, should he be held responsible for all he does? These and more, humans have had to grapple with in their history of enquiry, and the central movement in philosophy which offered him the opportunity to formally reflect in-depth on this issues, especially as it directly relates to the human person, is existentialism.

Existentialism has been construed unanimously, by most philosophers as rather a movement than a school of thought in the history of philosophy. It's majorly a contemporary reaction to traditional philosophy that is rather conceived, by the existentialists, as too removed from man, and concerning itself with too much of speculation and abstractness and failing to pay attention to the perils and situation of the human person. There is no univocal definition to what constitutes or should constitute the meaning of existentialism. However, existentialism is usually described based on the generic concerns of its subscribers—existentialists. Hence, according to Agidigbi;

...existentialism is not a homogeneous school or coherent system of philosophy. The existentialist writers are regarded as belonging to a single Philosophical movement partly because they all make human existence the focal point of philosophy and partly

because they, are all opposed to “rational” philosophy... (Agidigbi, 2015; 2).

By the above, the movement of existentialism in philosophy is anthropocentric. The thematic focus peculiar with this movement are existence, freedom and responsibility, authenticity, intersubjectivity, man, the theme of absurdity amongst others. Thus, the concept of absurdity, with which I am here concerned, is one of the frequently discussed central themes in existentialist philosophy and philosophy generically.

The prominent existentialist with whom this theme is primarily associated with in contemporary philosophy is Albert Camus. Though the concept had featured in earlier existentialist works of the likes of Heidegger and Soren Kierkegaard who made emphasis on the despair, anxiety and anguish inherent in existence (or life), but the single existentialist who made this theme a focal point in philosophy (especially in the 20th century), remains Camus. He alone made a profound pictorial representation of this theme in human life, especially in his ingenious use of Greek fiction and mythological elements to portray this inherent meaninglessness or purposelessness of human existence.

Existential absurdism, generally has to do with the idea that existence is meaningless and purposeless, and that there is no rationality for which life, as it currently is, should be lived. It represents the futility of all human endeavours, as well as the endless regress and anguish of human fate, and of course how we should confront them. The absurd is a philosophy which refers to the conflict between the human tendency to seek inherent meaning in life and the silent answers of the universe in which a harsh truth arises that is, there is no inherent meaning in life (Winter, 2019).

The precept of this philosophy is that the anguish and suffering of man is fated and that there is no logical or reasonable basis for justifying this obvious meaninglessness of human life which only ends in weariness and death. Infact, it is an “existential predicament” in the words of Moore and Bruder, that we make choices and (often) decide how to act in a valueless and absurd world (Agidigbi, 2015). So, the absurd is more like the question, what point is there for one to live and not commit suicide instead?

The question that readily comes to mind at this point is, is life really meaningless? If yes, what is the solution to this supposed meaninglessness or absurdity? To these questions, Albert Camus answers in the affirmative, proffering a solution to outlive or cope with the meaninglessness of life. Subsequently, my concern in this paper would be, to critically examine absurdism as championed by Camus, and demonstrate how his proffered solution to the absurd life proves to be logically inconsistent. The work is divided into three sections, in addition to this introductory section which clarifies the concepts of both existentialism and absurdity in existentialist philosophy. The first “Albert Camus' notion of absurdity”, makes a succinct expository analysis of the idea of absurdity in Camus' existentialism. The second section “Critique of Camus' Notion of Absurdity” reveals the pitfall in Camus' project of revolting against the absurd existence which constitutes my critique of him from a logical standpoint. However, it should be noted here that the critique here made is basically on a logical ground, and does not therefore imply a discredit the sincere intentions of Camus towards humanity. The last part of the work therefore reinstates my concern and submission in the entire discourse.

Albert Camus' notion of absurdity

Albert Camus was an Algerian born French philosopher who lived between the years 1913-1960. An erudite scholar, philosopher, journalist and a literary icon who received the *Nobel prize for*

Literature in 1957 for his copious and ingenious contributions to the advance of scholarship. A major figure, and the proponent of the theme of absurdity in existentialism (and philosophy generally). His major book works include *The Rebel*, *The Stranger*, *The Fall*, *The Plague*, and most importantly the major encapsulation of his philosophical absurdism, his *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus, did a thorough expository analysis of the idea of an absurd reality or what a meaningless life and existence is. Strategically in the beginning of this book Camus, raised a very fundamental question in the history of philosophy and about the value of human life, especially as it relates to suicide, or as to why one must not reasonably commit suicide! To him, the only and most urgent of all questions to be asked (in philosophy) is, what meaning is there to life? Or more explicitly, why must I not commit suicide? This is made obvious in the caption below;

There is but one truly philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest...comes afterwards.... I have never seen anyone die for the ontological argument.... Whether [or not] the Earth or the Sun revolves around the other...to tell the truth, it is a futile question. I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions (Camus; 1995, 4).

Camus, haven observed the pain, suffering and death orchestrated by human life (or existence), concluded that life as a matter of fact, is meaningless or absurd. This means that there is no ultimate reason that things are the way they are...life is unjust and frustrates human needs (Agidigbi, 2015). Furthermore, he argued that the absurd derives its strength from human birth, and culminates significantly in that void emptiness of silence which men most times pretends as though there's "nothing" [wrong], though his heart bleeds on the inside. According to Camus;

The absurd world more than others derives it's nobility from that abject birth. In certain situations, replying "nothing" when asked what one is thinking about may be pretense in a man.... But if that reply is sincere, if it symbolizes that odd state of soul in which the void becomes eloquent...in which the heart vainly seeks the link that will connect it again, then it is as it were the first sign of absurdity (Camus; 1995,10).

Again, Camus pointed out that the mechanical process of human life—[from] hours at office or work, to meal, sleep, wakes up, back to office..., the routine is repeated daily—all ends in weariness which provokes an awakened consciousness 'the why', the consequence of which in the end is suicide or recovery (Camus, 1995). Melissa Payne, further explained this in this manner. According to Payne;

He (Camus) believes that man recognizes the Absurd when he becomes conscious of his meaningless existence in the world and of the unimportance of his daily actions. Once a man becomes tired of all the mental and physical routines in his life, he begins to notice the Absurdities in his existence; those "flashes of reality" come to him in the oddest places and at the oddest times... Man also recognizes the Absurd when he feels that the world becomes strange and inhuman. He no longer recognizes the beauty in nature; he views the world for what it is - strange and incoherent (Payne; 1992, 7).

But as Camus would usually ask, does the reality of the absurd dictate death? To this still, Camus would answer in the negative, "no"! This now leads us to his illustrations of the "absurd hero".

Camus summed up the entire ideas of life's meaninglessness in a short fiction about Sisyphus, his absurd hero. Sisyphus had offended the gods and they chose to punish him by giving him a very

heavy stone to roll up the top of a hill, only for him to watch the same stone roll back down the base of the hill, just about the same time he had succeeded in reaching the hill top. Sisyphus would repeatedly go down to roll the stone to the top, and it would yet again still roll down to the base...and down Sisyphus goes again for his stone..., and the process to and fro the hill goes on and on forever, while he endures this anguish in good faith. As Camus, puts it that “the struggle itself towards the height is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus [ever] happy.” (Camus 1995, 78).

The above captures the situation of humans (man), and Camus, to this end argues that human beings are similarly like Sisyphus condemned to 'futile and endless labour', without reasonable hope to fulfilling their true needs (Agidigbi; 2015). And that the meaninglessness and absurdity of existence (life) ends with death (Agidigbi 2015). He nonetheless praised Sisyphus, as the 'absurd hero' for not being deterred by the meaninglessness and anguish of his endless struggles. Rather, he exuded his energy, took his fate into his own hands, and embraced the absurd in rolling his stone to and fro the hill [repeatedly]. Consequently, he snubbed the gods, caging death, and subsequently won himself the victory, there by teaching the greatest fidelity. According to Camus;

It is during the return...that Sisyphus interests me. A face that toils so close to a stone is already a stone itself! I see that man going back with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end...

If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious.... Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition.... The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time, crown his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn ... Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well (Camus 1995,76-78).

This is the point where Camus rejected suicide and opted instead for revolt [or rebellion] as alternative to the absurd. What mattered most to him was not whether life has to have a meaning to be lived; rather the sermon is that life has to be lived the better if it has no meaning (Agidigbi 2015). This means that Camus, although argued that life is absurd and meaningless, but would not go on to affirm the extreme: the cessation of life [death or suicide]. Rather, he argued that the meaningless life must be lived still. According to him “...it is bad to stop, hard to be satisfied with a single way of seeing..., the point is to live” (Camus 1995, 43). He believes that the absurd must be kept alive and given a meaning, by 'contemplating it'.

It is deducible from this that Camus, obviously condemns the attempt at escaping anguish or evil by the appeal to suicide. His goal was apparently to discourage and counter the tendency of persons to want to give in to suicide when they are entangle about with neck breaking challenges, frustrations, and the oddness of certain difficulties they are faced with in life. He believes that by the knowledge of the deviance of his absurd hero; Sisyphus, that one might be encouraged that there are no situations, no matter how grave, that can not be overcome or surmounted, only if one will refuse to be deterred by the seemingly oddness of them and dare the situation, like Sisyphus had done. Therefore, suicide for him is not an option, for whatever reason, it is unacceptable. This is because, he believes that it “is a kind of weak minded acquiesce to an unjust destiny” (Agidigbi 2015, 63). So, he could only recommend rebellion, as the right attitude to contending with the absurd. It is the only viable means to enforce meaningfulness and value to an absurd and tragic life or destiny. This means that, “it is only through struggle (contention)with the absurd world can an individual achieve fulfilment” (Agidigbi 2015, 63).

Though Camus' position that “the absurd life must be lived still”, no doubt is invitingly acceptable and a viable solution too. But then, it is my argument here that the above claim is a negation of thought, which of course is a logical contradiction. He probably may have known this, to have acknowledged at some point (in his book) that “it is hard to...go without a contradiction...” (Camus 1995, 43). This, therefore, forms the thrust of my analysis in the next section of this paper; proving this contradiction as a way of critiquing Camus and his 'absurdism'.

Critique of Camus' notion of absurdity

The point here is that Camus, in stating that one must live on in an absurd life (existence), was implicitly asserting a 'meaning in meaninglessness'. This is a superimposition and as such, a logical contradiction [or inconsistency], a disregard for the fundamental law of 'non-contradiction' which forbids any one thing to simultaneously both be and not be. Shortly, we shall see how come about this contradiction. This is the point where I think Camus, misses it completely in his thought. The reason (here) being that the fundamental premise of his argument is that 'life [physical] presently lived is meaningless', and that this meaninglessness derives its nobility from that 'object birth'. By extension, life (generally) or birth altogether is meaningless. To this first premise of his argument, we can comfortably ascribe the variable “P” to differentiate it from the assumption in his later premise (proposition).

On the other hand, when Camus went ahead to suppose that 'life must be lived still' irrespective of its inherent meaninglessness, he (Camus) has obviously not asserted anything new other than an implied negation of the (his) previous proposition “P”—that is, a negation “P” ($\sim P$). Perhaps, Camus didn't think it that to say a thing is 'meaningless' is to imply that the same is 'useless' or 'worthless'. Going therefore to infer a 'meaning or use' for same thing, is nothing but a negation of the idea of its aforementioned uselessness or meaninglessness. Logically, this amounts to a contradiction of the sort “P and not P” [$P \cdot \sim P$], because by every logical indication, it is yet meaningless living [or to live] a meaningless life. This is the case with Camus' assertion and reassertion, and whether implicitly or not, it is still a contradiction. In fact, Camus sacrificed logicity for emotional appeal, an absurdist inconsistency on that note.

Proving this contradiction alternatively, let us more explicitly take Camus' proposition that 'life is meaningless' to mean that “all aspect (anything one can think of, including birth itself) or all that pertains to life is meaningless” bearing in mind that for something to be meaningless, also implies that the same is useless. Then, when we shorten the above proposition of Camus, we have “All aspect of life is meaningless [useless]”. This obviously is an “A” categorical proposition (or statement) in classical logic!

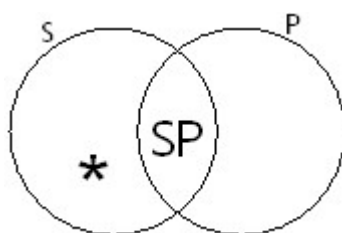
On the other hand, if that 'one can still strive to live-on a meaningless life', correctly implies that “there's something about (or in) life [an aspect of life] that is at least in itself meaningful (useful)”, since it's capable of making a meaningless life meaningful [or giving meaning to a meaningless life]. And that this aspect of life [or something in life] as claimed by Camus, is life or the act of living life then, we cannot be wrong to conclude a rephrase of this second assertion to be a particular negative categorical proposition (statement) of the “O” form in logic, as a negation of his initial assertion that—life is meaningless [All aspect of life is meaningless].

Arising from the above, we would now have “there is at least an aspect of life that is meaningful in itself” to mean that, 'Some aspect of life is not meaningless'. By this, we would have Camus to be asserting two different forms of categorical statements, the “A” [universal affirmative] and the “O” [particular negative] respectively as shown below;

- a. All aspect of life is meaningless

- b. Some aspect of life is not meaningless

The logical interpretation of the above propositions differs, significantly. For the “A” proposition, all the member term in the subject (S) class of “life” is included in the predicate (P) class of “meaningless” without exception. But in the case of the “O” proposition, there is at least a member term in the subject (S) class that is not contained or included as member in the predicate (P) class. Schematically, the “A” proposition is usually written as “All S is P”, while the “O” proposition is usually written as “Some S is not P”, and diagrammatically the “O” is usually represented with the “S” term marked out with an asterisk, as shown below;



Now, the contradiction here committed by Camus, is already easily understood using the 'Aristotelian Square of Opposition', where the “A” and the “O” propositions are referred to as contradictory propositions (or statements). Statements or propositions of this sort are said to be contradictory if, as Irving Copi, says;

...one is the denial or negation of the other, that is, if they cannot both be true and they cannot both be false. It is clear that two standard form categorical propositions having the same subject and predicate terms but differing from each other both in quantity and in quality are contradictories (Copi 1978, 173).

Diagrammatically, the above statements are represented thus;



Hence, if the truth value of “A” [All aspect of life is meaningless] is asserted, then “O” [Some aspect of life is not meaningless] is denied as false automatically, and vice versa. But Camus, here seems to have altogether asserted the truth of “A” at the same time with that of “O”, this is a disregard for logic and it is improper to do so.

Conclusion

The significance of Albert Camus' philosophical position and contributions to contemporary philosophy[existentialism in particular] cannot be overemphasized, especially in regards to his reflections on, and his concerns for the appalling human conditions on Earth which have given rise to the Philosophical concept of “Absurdism” [and the further spread of existentialism generally]. However, it has been my position here that Camus, with regards to the 'absurdist' thesis, is somewhat logically inconsistent in his thoughts as an absurd existentialist scholar.

Consequently, I have critiqued his Absurdism for this inconsistency, showing demonstrably how and where this inconsistency and purported disregard for established logical rule(s) was committed. This point I have been able to establish in his improper assertions of the categorical propositions “A” and “O” [contradictories] simultaneously, as true propositions contrary to true logic. However, while this may be the case from a logical standpoint, it is also import to note that there are several odds in life, and locked in these odd aspects of life is the tendency for us to see life as somewhat meaningless, like Camus did. The truth however is that, living (with the odds) is actually what gives meaning to life [Camus indeed affirmed this later on but with little fidelity, else he would not have thought of the absurd]. To this end, life is only meaningless at death [or to the dead man], otherwise it is meaningful. This means that in so far as a person lives on (breaths) or has a reason (at least one): whether religious or otherwise, for which to live for then life is infact meaningful—there's just no absurdity anywhere!

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