

PHIL 181 - Lecture #7: Camus

Biography

Albert Camus was born in 1913 in French Algeria (North Africa). His father died in WWI when Albert was 1 year old. He studied at the University of Algiers, and did his MA thesis on Plotinus, who was a neo-Platonic philosopher. During his life he was political radical, associating with the Communist Party in the 1930s and then with the Anarchists in the 1940s after he became disenchanted with communism. His writing is sometimes criticized on this front for largely ignoring the political issues with which he seemed to be involved.

Camus joined the French resistance during WWII and became friends with Sartre after the war. They later had a falling out and split over Camus's anti-communism. He rejected the label "Existentialist," as it was meant by Sartre. In 1945 Camus said, "No, I am not an existentialist. Sartre and I are always surprised to see our names linked." Camus opposed what he saw as the tendency towards negativity and nihilism, and rejected the apparent attempts to "escape" the absurd he found in existentialist philosophies.

The Absurd

Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* starts with the line "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide." When one is faced with the absurd, is life worth living?

The Absurd for Camus was the fundamental conflict in the our experience of the universe: we want to find meaning, order, and reasons, but what we find instead is meaninglessness, formless irrationality, and chaos. When we feel at home, this is a result of seeing meaning and purpose in our lives. But eventually there is a realization that perception of meaning is just the force of habit dictating our behavior. This feeling of the absurd creates a feeling of exile, of being "The Outsider" (another way to translate the French word *l'étranger*).

If life is pointless and has no meaning, doesn't that mean its not worth living? This is what led Camus to regard suicide as the fundamental philosophical question. Actually committing suicide is the admission that life was indeed not worth living. What options does this leave someone? One option is that advocated by Kierkegaard: a leap of faith. This is to admit the appearance of absurdity, yet believe that it will all work out if one has faith that it will. If one cannot take the leap and still thinks life is meaningless, is the only option suicide?

Camus thinks that there is a third choice besides a leap of faith and suicide. One can accept the meaninglessness of the world and continue to live in it. One should not try to evade or overcome this conclusion of absurdity. He thought that the leap of faith was an existentialist evasion. This and other such evasions tried to overcome the absurd by negating reason. In doing this, they avoided the conflict between human reason and the unreasonable world by denying the human half of the conflict. Camus referred to this as “philosophical suicide” as they killed reason and the philosophical urge that we have. One should continue to live life in the face of this absurdity.

This Absurd Life that Camus thinks should be led is characterized by 3 qualities: revolt, freedom, and passion. *Revolt* is never accepting, overcoming, or giving in to the absurd; never reaching reconciliation, but always revolting against the absurd. Neither to escape by suicide or hope, we live in the state of conflict between human reason and the unreasonable world. By *Freedom* Camus meant that we are free to think and behave as we choose. We need not be dictated to by custom, habit, and we are no longer bound to a better future or a higher purpose. In this way it was a practical, rather than a metaphysical, freedom, much like the notions of freedom in the other philosophers that we have studied. He denied that people have to fulfill some role or another in their lives. As for *Passion*, Camus said that we must seek rich and diverse experiences, we must embrace everything the world has to offer. There is no standard of value, no judgment of quality to our experiences, only the standard of quantity. This does not mean a longer life is better, but a more passionately aware life. People must live in the present and be fully involved in their experiences.

Camus does present examples of people that he thinks are living the Absurd Life. One of these people is familiar from Kierkegaard, that of the character of Don Juan. Camus rejects the idea that Don Juan is in despair, that he cannot commit, and that he exemplifies a bad life. Don Juan is living for quantity and living in the moment. He has found an experience he likes and seeks to repeat it. The second example is that of the Stage Actor. The actor lives many lives on the stage, and unlike an author or film actor, he is free from the illusion that his fame will live on after he dies. He is also not caught up in inner life, rather putting everything out for the audience to see. A third example is that of the Conqueror. Camus thought that rebellion and conquest draw out humanity's potential as they are focused on human needs and dignity, clear goals, active. The Conqueror lives completely in the present world. The Conqueror knows that there is no lasting conquest, that nothing he does will be of lasting consequence or value, but nonetheless he is enthusiastically engaged in the struggles politics, war, rebellion, etc.

The Myth of Sisyphus

The best example of the Absurd Life for Camus is that of Sisyphus in Greek myth, so much so that he titles a book after it. The basic story is that Sisyphus defied the gods: he chained Death so no one could die for a while, he escaped Hades and ignored all demands that he return, etc. When he was finally caught by Hermes and returned to

Hades, his punishment was waiting for him: he was to roll a rock up and down a mountain for the rest of eternity.

Camus thought that the plight of Sisyphus was very common to people living in his time. The workman who does the same thing every day is engaged in no less of an absurd task as is Sisyphus. For Sisyphus and for the workmen, it is the moment of consciousness of the absurdity which makes it tragic. While Sisyphus has this feeling every time the rock rolls back down the mountain, many workmen are not tragic because they fail to realize the absurdity of their situation.

Clearly Camus views Sisyphus as the absurd hero. Sisyphus defies the gods at every turn, he hates death, and has a passion for life. He is constantly in revolt at his fate, even though he knows it is inescapable, he has nothing but scorn for his condition. But he also owns his fate. The rock is *his* fate, he did this to himself with his passion for life. Being punished this way was a fate he chose, even though he revolts against it. Camus also thinks that Sisyphus is happy. He feels absurdity and happiness are intertwined. Just as Oedipus can conclude after all he has done and suffered that "all is well," so too Sisyphus can carry out his fruitless task with joy, by abandoning hope and acknowledging the futility and eternity of his fate.

The Stranger

The Stranger was published in the same year as *The Myth of Sisyphus*. It takes place in the French Algiers, the place of Camus' childhood. It tells the story of Meursault, a French-Algerian man who lives life with a strange indifference and honesty. It deals sequentially with the funeral of his mother and its aftermath, the development of a relationship with Marie, the befriending of Raymond, a questionable figure, the incident of killing an Arab, and his trial and imprisonment following the killing.

Camus employs an "American" writing style. It is simple and straightforward using short and precise sentences (reminiscent of Hemingway). It uses "thin" and direct descriptions of Meursault's thoughts and actions, with little description of rumination or psychological activity on Meursault's part.

What is the purpose of employing this style? It was traditional in French literature of having lots of thick psychological descriptions and ruminations on the part of the narrator and/or characters. Camus could be stating that it is in actions where psychology is, where we find out who people are. This echoes the thoughts of Kierkegaard and Heidegger, who suggest that rather than looking inward for some "mental states" as what determines one's psychology or one's being, we should look instead at one's actions, the fundamental projects that determine one's identity. Thus, Camus exhibits the nature of Meursault by presenting simply what he does and thinks without recourse to ultimately misleading "psychological" ruminations.

Discussion

There will not be as much notes on the discussion this time, but the passages and general topics will be noted.

Passage: where Meursault rants to the priest, pages 120-1: "Then, I don't know why ... for the first light of this dawn to be vindicated." (although in discussion the rest of this passage was also discussed.

Passage: about the personal nature of death, page 114: "I would always begin by assuming the worst ... I had to accept the rejection of my appeal."

Passage: The last passage of the book, concerning absurdity and the indifference of the world, why he didn't cry at Maman's funeral, why he wanted people to hate him, pages 122-3: "For the first time in a long time I thought about Maman ... and that they greet me with cries of hate."

Passages: on chance and freedom, the need for people to create stories about events and not accept chance and the absurdity of life, not to acknowledge that any explanation was as good as another: page 95: "Raymond responded that it was just by chance. The prosecutor retorted that chance already had a lot of misdeeds on its conscience in this case." page 97: " as if familiar paths traced in summer skies could lead as easily to prison as to the sleep of the innocent." page 99: "I thought his [the prosecutor's] way of viewing the events had a certain consistency. What he was saying was plausible." page 102-3: "I stood up, and since I did wish to speak ... I blurted out that it was because of the sun. People laughed."

Passage: the end of part 1 on pages 58-9. Things discussed included why he seemed to act in a way that he knew would lead to at least some unhappiness, whether he is even in control of his actions, and the triviality of the decisions that led to the killing.

As for the general discussion, people discussed their general feelings about Meursault, and what they thought of him. The discussion also discussed what M. seems to be passionate about and what he is indifferent about. The former included comfort, sex, and physical sensation while the latter included morality, social norms, religion, emotion (esp. regret or remorse). His relationship with his mother was also discussed, and how important she was to him. How while he seemed indifferent to her death, he goes to the funeral, he used the child's term of Maman, and he seemed to bring her up at least once per chapter. The comment about a son's sensibility and his mother in the translator's introduction was discussed in this context as well.