

Camus' Early "Logic of the Absurd"

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Camus' Early "Logic of the Absurd": Conception and Challenges

Camus did not conceive of himself as a philosopher. One finds him saying things such as that he had "not sufficient faith in reason" for believing in a system (*Essais* 1427, own translation) or, very explicitly, "I am not a philosopher and I never claimed to be one." (qtd. in Judt 90) Looking at Camus from a purely philosophical perspective might, thus, be considered inappropriate.

Suppose one nevertheless decides to look at Camus from a purely philosophical perspective. In this case, it seems obvious that the appropriate framework, or paradigm, or tradition for approaching his thought is the framework, or paradigm, or tradition of continental (as opposed to analytic) philosophy. Looking at Camus from the perspective of analytic philosophy might, thus, be considered inappropriate.

In this article I will do what might seem less promising and look at Camus not only from a purely philosophical perspective, but from the perspective of analytic philosophy. Obviously, such an approach will yield a somewhat biased picture. It will bring about, e.g., a loss of much of the literary-emotional dimension of Camus' thought, a disregard for the context of discovery and the historical context more broadly as well as a subsequent imposition of some degree of systematicity. Probably the analytic approach does not do full justice to Camus. I am confident, however, that it can contribute to illuminating at least specific aspects of his thought, yielding insights that may be considered valuable even by those who are sceptical towards it.

The subject of this article is Camus' idea of a "logic of the absurd" (Pieper 92; Tesak-Gutmansbauer 18). The idea of a logic of the absurd occupied Camus' mind throughout his life. Most extensively and explicitly it was addressed in his earlier works, such as *Caligula* (1938), *The Stranger* (1942) and *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). It also played an important role in his later cycles of revolt and love, however. Thoughts about the absurd continue to figure in Camus' diaries, in interviews and in both his fictional and non-fictional publications (e.g., in *The Plague* (1947) and *The Rebel* (1951)).

Many commentators (e.g., Tesak-Gutmannsbauer; Pieper) consider Camus' earlier and later thoughts on the logic of the absurd to form a consistent whole. They assume that there is a „unity, a continuity” in his thinking (Schlette 181, own translation), that his early and late philosophy are linked by an “intellectual continuum” (Foley 4). I believe that this is wrong. I believe that, instead, there is a straightforward logical gap between Camus' early and his late conception of the logic of the absurd¹ (Maierhofer “Hang” 89-98 and “Würde” 7). The issue with respect to which Camus seems to change his mind most obviously is the reality of values. Before approximately 1943 Camus claims that the absurd is essentially tied to the view that there are no values, that “everything's on an equal footing” (*Caligula* 43). “Belief in the meaning of life always implies a scale of values, a choice, our preferences. Belief in the absurd, according to our definitions, teaches the contrary ... Once and for all, value judgments are discarded here in favour of factual judgments.” (*Myth* 58-59)

Beginning with approximately 1943 Camus starts to depart from this view. He now believes that even in the face of the absurd some things in life have value, most notably man: “The absurd is, in itself, contradiction. It is contradictory in its content because, in wanting to uphold life, it excludes all value judgments, when to live is, in itself, a value judgment.” (*Rebel* 16) “I continue to believe that this world has no ultimate meaning. But I know that something in it has a meaning and that is man ...” (*Letters* 28).

Camus' change of mind regarding values (however it is ultimately interpreted, see “Is-Ought Challenge”) brings along differing views about the normative implications of the absurd as well. From the view that the absurd is indifferent towards murder (*Myth* 65) Camus converts to the view that it forbids murder (*Rebel* 13-14). From the conception of the revolt as a lonely heroic struggle (*Myth*) he converts to the view that revolting leads to the insight of every man's facing the absurd, to a sense of solidarity, and that it is thus a collective struggle (*Rebel*, *Plague*). To my mind, these contrasts suffice to conclude that what one finds in Camus is not only one logic of the absurd, but two: a logic of the absurd prior to approximately 1943 and a logic of the absurd after approximately 1943.

¹ Camus himself, in some sense, acknowledges this gap when he repeatedly speaks of his earlier conception of absurdism as a “blind alley” (e.g., “Rebel” 16, Camus and Grenier 89) and expresses unease about it: “Consider a thinker who declares: ‘Now, I know that this is true. But in the end the consequences repel, and I back off from them.’ The truth is unacceptable even for him, who finds it. Thus, we have the absurd thinker with his perpetual anxiety.” (1935-1942, own translation).

In this article, I focus on Camus' early conception of the logic of the absurd. The article will consist of two parts. In the first part I will outline what I take to be the most adequate interpretation of the logic of the absurd, that is, what Camus meant by the "absurd" and what he considered its normative implications to be. In the second part I will discuss three challenges that defenders of the "logic of the absurd" may be said to face (given that my interpretation in the first part is correct).

Part 1: Conception

Camus' early logic of the absurd finds its clearest expression in what he once referred to as the "three absurds" (1935–1942): *Caligula*, *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Philosophically, the latter of these works is, of course, the most informative (as it is the only non-fictional one). Not even the *Myth*, however, manages to shed clear light on what Camus took the absurd and its normative implications to be. This is due to its very literary style. Camus' actual hypotheses are overrun with a thick undergrowth of metaphors, comparisons, anecdotes, appeals to emotions, repetitions, and a structure that can be called all but logical.

It is no wonder, thus, that the logic of the absurd has been interpreted differently, sometimes even radically differently (compare e.g. Tesak-Gutmannsbauer and Bowker). In what follows I will outline what I take to be the most adequate interpretation.

1.1 The Absurd

In the *Myth*, the absurd is characterized in a variety of (sometimes astonishingly different) ways: as "the contrary of hope" (33), as "lucid reason noting its limits" (47), as "sin without god" (39) and so on. One thing Camus is very clear about is that he takes the term "absurd" to be a relational term, a term that refers to the *conjoint* presence of some facts (rather than some fact on its own). "The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared ..." (*Myth* 28-29). More precisely, Camus takes the term "absurd" to refer to a relation of disproportion, or contradiction, or division. In order for us to be justified to call something "absurd", there has to be some conflict between aspiration and reality (Nagel 718), between what people want and what they get, or what they can realistically be expected to get. "It's absurd" means 'It's impossible' but also 'It's contradictory.' If I see a man armed only with a sword attack a group of machine guns, I shall consider his act to be absurd. But it is so solely by virtue of the disproportion between his intention and the reality he will encounter, of the contradiction I

notice between his true strength and the aim he has in view." (*Myth* 28, for similar remarks see Nagel 718)

Given this account, many situations in our lives turn out to be absurd: an innocent person's being accused of a monstrous crime (*Myth* 28), a complicated speech's being given in support of a motion that has already been passed or a notorious criminal's being made president of a major philanthropic foundation (to take two examples from Nagel, 718). In all of these situations there is a confrontation, a discrepancy between people's intentions and reality. Such specific cases of absurdity are not what Camus is concerned with, however. His notion of "*the* absurd" does not refer to specific situations within life, but to our lives *as a whole*. Our whole life, Camus believes, is absurd.

Roughly, the elements of this absurd relation are man's search for meaning on the one and the world that does not answer this search for meaning on the other side². Camus assumes that man longs for meaning, for something that is desirable in itself, not only as a means to some other end (Pieper 65; Tesak-Gutmannsbauer 10). Our attempts to achieve this "absolute" turn out to be like Sisyphus' attempts to anchor his rock on the top of the mountain, however: they fail, they dash against an indifferent (e.g., *Myth* 26) or, as it may seem, even "hostile" (*Myth* 13) reality. "At this point of his effort man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world." (*Myth* 26) "That evidence is the absurd. It is that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints, my nostalgia for unity, this fragmented universe and the contradiction that binds them together." (*Myth* 48)

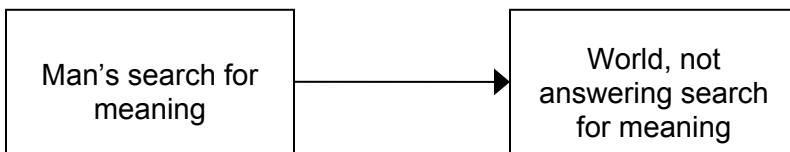


Fig. 1: Camus' notion of the absurd

1.1.1 Man's Search for Meaning

What would give our lives meaning? Camus offers no clear answer to this question. Whereas in his earlier non-fictional works ("L' Envers"; "Noces")

² This is the most common interpretation of Camus, see, e.g., Müller-Lauter 119, Hengelbrock 69, Reiff 13-14, Tesak-Gutmannsbauer 12.

he is mainly concerned with unity, in the *Myth* he describes the target of man's "wild longing" or "desire" in a variety of different ways: as "clarity" (15, 20, 49), "familiarity" (15, 50), "unity" (16, 48, 49), "the absolute" (16, 34, 49), "happiness" (26), "reason" (26), "understanding" (34), "solve" (49) and "cohesion" (49). Particularly important among the mentioned phenomena are, as far as I can see, unity and clarity. "That nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute illustrates the essential impulse of the human drama." (*Myth* 16) "If one could only say just once: 'this is clear', all would be saved." (*Myth* 26, see also 17 and 19)

The precise nature of unity and clarity remains obscure. Analogously to the biblical myth, Camus seems to assume that man originally was in a state of unity, but was expulsions from this paradise at some point (*Myth* 16, 48). Now he is "separated" from the material world. Man feels foreign to the things around him, to the stones, landscapes, the softness of the sky, to other people and even his own body (*Myth* 12). Our supposed "nostalgia for unity" seems to be a desire for becoming "one" with the world again. Man's supposed search for clarity is thought of as a search for unity as well (*Myth* 15), for unity in a different, cognitivist sense, however. In order for him to achieve intellectual clarity, man would have to unify all "being" in the world (both its natural and metaphysical aspects) in the sense of reducing it to one single „rational and reasonable principle“ (*Myth* 49), according to Camus. Metaphorically speaking, one could say that man wants to know, "whatever holds the world together in its inmost folds".

1.1.2 The World's not Answering Man's Search for Meaning

Camus is known for advocating a radically nihilistic view of meaning. It would be false to assume that he denied the achievability of meaning in *any* sense, however. In a weak, imperfect sense both unity and clarity are considered to be realizable - unity via the body or bodily sensations, where the object of unification is either nature (in form of the sea, the sun, the wind etc.) or a loved one ("1935-1942"; "Noces"; "L'Envers"), clarity within a certain order (*Myth* 34). Unluckily, it is not this imperfect sense of unity and clarity man strives for. Our essential longing is directed at perfect, actual unity and clarity according to Camus. In this sense he considers it to be, indeed, a "desire for the impossible" (*Caligula* 40).

The only way of reaching meaning in its perfect sense would be God. But God does not exist according to Camus (e.g. "Essais" 1427; "Noces" 74 and 85; "The Stranger" 120-122; see also Paepke 49) or at least (his statements on the issue are contradictory³) we can not be certain that she/he

exists. "The absurd", it is said in the *Myth* (38), "does not lead to God." The absurd man "lives outside that God" (*Myth* 65).

In a universe without God, unity and clarity turn out to be impossibilities. In order for man to "come home" to the state of unity he would have to become "one" with the material world. This, however, is prevented by our search for clarity (*Myth* 47; Pieper 81-82), or more broadly by consciousness. It is consciousness that "separates" us from the material world, from the stones, the trees, the books, from everything around us: "This ridiculous reason is what sets me in opposition to all creation." (*Myth* 50) In order for man to become "one" with the material world, it would have to be the case that either the world acquires consciousness ("If man realized that the universe like him can love and suffer, he would be reconciled." (*Myth*, 16)) or that man gets rid of it ("If I were a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this life would have a meaning, or rather this problem would not arise, for I should belong to this world. I should *be* this world ..." (*Myth* 49-50)). The gap between subject and object would have to be closed. But that is, of course, impossible (*Myth* 16).

Likewise, it turns out to be impossible to achieve intellectual clarity. Intellectual clarity would require reducing all "being" to one principle, one ultimate ground. The hopelessness of this endeavour is suggested by several circumstances, according to Camus. First, even our best science cannot achieve a reduction of the required radical kind:

You describe it [this world] to me and you teach me to classify it. You enumerate its laws and in my thirst for knowledge I admit that they are true. You take apart its mechanism and my hope increases. At the final stage you teach me that this wondrous and multicoloured universe can be reduced to the atom and that the atom itself can be reduced to the electron. You explain this world to me with an image. I realize then that you have been reduced to poetry: I shall never know. (*Myth* 18)

In addition, Camus appeals to a logical paradox (*Myth* 15), to the "irrationality" (*Myth* 26), unpredictability and chaotic nature (*Myth* 49) of the world as well as to the fact that man can only think and perceive in human ways and will therefore never be able to know, "what it's like" (to use the

³ On the one hand, we find Camus saying things such as that the world is "but a vast irrational" (*Myth* 26), that "Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks" (*Myth* 119) or that "no deceptive divinity traced the signs of hope or redemption" ("Noces" 74) (which suggest an atheistic position). On the other hand, he explicitly points out that he does not claim that the absurd "excludes God", since this would "still amount to asserting" (*Myth* 38, see also his footnote on p. 40) (which suggests an agnostic position). (Mélançon 42-43)

famous phrase by Thomas Nagel) to think or perceive like other living beings (*Myth* 15-16).

1.2 Normative Implications of the Absurd

Camus repeatedly points out that what he is interested in is not so much the absurd, but rather its consequences, its normative implications (*Myth* 1, 14). In the “Myth” he argues that starting from the absurd it turns out to be forbidden to commit physical or philosophical suicide and it turns out to be demanded to adopt the attitude of revolt.⁴

1.2.1 Proscription of Physical Suicide

Physical suicide seems to be a natural reaction to the absurd. If life has no meaning, if all my efforts to reach unity and clarity are foredoomed to failure, why go on living? Why grapple with emptiness, weariness, alienness, horror of death, nausea (e.g. *Myth* 11-14) – all those feelings that accompany my consciousness of the absurd, that make my life’s climate “deadly scarcely”, the sky “stifling” (*Myth* 27)?

Like other philosophers of the absurd (e.g. Kierkegaard or Nagel), Camus believes that appearances are deceiving. The absurd does not require suicide, quite the contrary, it even forbids it. Remember, how Camus defined the absurd. The absurd is thought of as a relation between man’s search for meaning and the world that does not answer this search for meaning. Like with any other relation, this relation only holds if all of its elements are present. When I commit suicide, however, my search for meaning is no longer present, for *I* am no longer present, *my consciousness* is no longer present, and searching for meaning does, of course, require consciousness. So, physical suicide is a wrong conclusion to draw from the absurd. By committing suicide the problem of the absurd is not *solved*, it is just *dissolved*: „Its [the absurd’s] first distinguishing feature in this regard is that it cannot be divided. To destroy one of its terms is to destroy the whole. There can be no absurd outside the human mind. Thus, like everything else, the absurd ends with death.” (*Myth* 29)

⁴ These are not the only normative conclusions, Camus derives from the absurd (see e.g. his considerations about the “ethics of quantity” (*Myth* 59-61) and the “absurd freedom” (*Myth*, 54-58)). They are the most important ones, however.

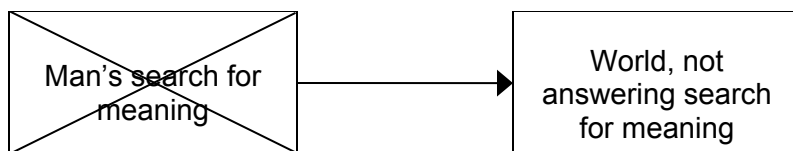


Fig. 2: Physical suicide's effect on the absurd

1.2.2 Proscription of Philosophical Suicide

Physical suicide is a very radical response to the absurd. Many people are led to a more moderate conclusion according to Camus. Since the conclusion at issue is widespread among philosophers (in the *Myth*, it is ascribed to Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Shestov, Jaspers and Husserl), and since the underlying logic resembles that of physical suicide, Camus introduces the label "philosophical suicide" for it.

The idea of philosophical suicide has been interpreted differently (compare, e.g., Mühlemann and Tesak-Gutmannsbauer 21-22). As I understand him, Camus takes philosophical suicide to be a certain attitude, or, more precisely, a certain belief: the belief that the world will answer one's search for meaning at some point in future and that, thus, one does not have to search for meaning in the present (Sagi 68, Tesak-Gutmannsbauer 21-22). Committing philosophical suicide means, in other words, *hoping* for meaning without actively searching for it.

What is it that one might set one's hope on in the face of the absurd? Camus presents three putative sources of meaning: (1) God, or life after death (*Myth* 7), or more broadly: the "irrational", as figuring most prominently in Kierkegaard and his idea of a "leap of faith" (*Myth* 35-39), (2) reason, or "the rational", e.g. in the form of platonic ideas (as said to be exemplified by the philosophy of Husserl, *Myth* 41-45), and (3) the realization of some historical or personal ultimate goal (*Myth* 7, addressed mainly in *The Rebel*).

Whatever form philosophical suicide takes, Camus thinks that like its physical counterpart it is a wrong conclusion to draw from the absurd. Committing philosophical suicide means not searching for meaning any longer, which in turn means that one "destroys" one element of the absurd and thus (since the relation depends on the conjoint presence of its elements) the absurd as a whole. Hope turns out to be a "fatal evasion" (*Myth* 7). "There can be no question of masking the evidence, of suppressing the absurd by denying one of the terms of its equation." (*Myth* 48)

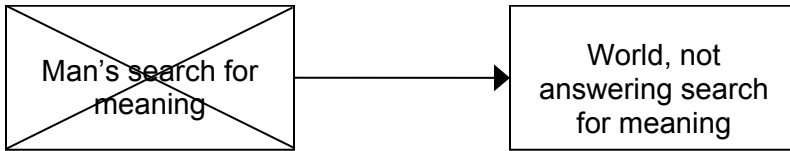


Fig. 3: Philosophical suicide's effect on the absurd

1.2.3 Obligation to Revolt

If the absurd does not only forbid physical suicide, but even detaching from one's quest for meaning *within* life, hoping, having faith, what should we do, then? Camus argues that the right conclusion to draw from the absurd is what he calls "revolt" (*Myth* 52). Like with philosophical suicide, Camus' remarks about the nature of revolt have been interpreted differently. As far as I can see, he conceives of the revolt as a certain attitude towards the absurd: an attitude that consists in accepting the absurd as a matter of descriptive fact, but rejecting it as a matter of normative fact (Pieper 102, see also Camus' understanding of the revolt in *The Rebel*, e.g. 19).

Camus' considerations about suicide suggest that there is no hope of escaping the absurd. The absurd exists. Any viable way of overcoming it leads to its destruction and ought to, therefore, not be gone. For a reasonable man there seems to be only one option, thus: one has to accept the absurd, one has to reconcile to it: "The first and, after all, the only condition of my inquiry is to preserve the very thing that crushes me, consequently to respect what I consider essential in it. (*Myth* 29)

That the absurd has to be accepted as a matter of fact does, however, not imply that it has to be approved of. Similar to psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (e.g. "Seelsorge" 134) and other proponents of his school of logotherapy (most notably Elisabeth Lukas, "Trotzmacht"), Camus emphasizes what was later called man's "noetic dimension": our freedom to adopt any attitude we like, even towards immutable states of affairs. The right stance to take towards the absurd is a stance of disapproval, according to Camus. As it represents or implies a state in which we do not achieve, what we are ultimately striving for, none of us can want the absurd. Man has to rise up against his absurd destiny: "The absurd has meaning only in so far as it is not agreed to." (*Myth* 30)

It is sometimes said that Camus considered revolting to give our lives meaning. In the relevant transcendent sense of "meaning" this is, of course, false. Even if we confirm to the rules of Camus' "ethics of quantity"

and revolt for as long as possible, this does not bring us anywhere nearer to unity and clarity.

What revolting is thought to offer, however, is a peculiar kind of fulfilment, of satisfaction, and, thus, if one wills, "immanent meaning". Camus is not speaking ironically, when he invites us to "imagine Sisyphus happy" (*Myth* 119). By revolting man is thought to achieve a kind of superiority towards his depressing *conditio*. ("There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn." *Myth* 117) He ceases to live for the future - for his retirement or for the labour of his sons (*Myth* 55) -, but instead merges in the moment, which gives him a new, unknown freedom, an increase in availability (*Myth* 55). Since he sticks with his search for meaning, he feels "whole", he does not suffer from the inner disunity of those, who negate this essential part of human identity (Tesak-Gutmannsbauer 31; Pieper 111-112).

Part 2: Challenges

I am aware that not everyone will be happy with my above interpretation of Camus (for fundamentally different approaches see, e.g., Sagi and Bowker). Nevertheless, for the rest of this article I presume that it is adequate. Let us turn, then, to the question of what to think of the early logic of the absurd. Is Camus convincing? Is his reasoning sound?

In this part I will discuss three challenges, defenders of the logic of the absurd may be said to face. I will argue that the first challenge does not pose a problem, that the second turns out not to be a genuine one, but that it is very unlikely that the third challenge can be met.

2.1 The Genetic Challenge

The basic requirement for Camus' reasoning to be sound is the truth of its premise, the truth of the postulation of the absurd. Camus' claim has been objected to in various ways (see e.g. Ayer). Here I focus on just one argument, or, more precisely, one type of argument against the existence of the absurd, namely on what may be called "genetic arguments" – arguments that criticise beliefs in the existence of the absurd with reference to their "genesis", their causal history.

Every belief has a causal history. One way in which the causal histories of beliefs differ is with respect to their "fact-sensitivity" (Nozick). Some beliefs are the product of processes that are sensitive to the facts. If the fact at issue would not hold, if the belief were not true, we would not have the belief. Take, for example, my belief that Manila is the capital of the Philippines. It is very likely that if it was false that Manila is the capital of the Philippines, I would not believe it (since it would not be taught in school, it would not be drawn on maps and so on).

Other beliefs, however, are the product of fact-insensitive processes. These beliefs would be had, whether or not they are true, whether or not the fact at issue held. As an example consider John, who is neurotically paranoid about Sally and because of this believes that Sally is “out to get him” (Joyce 159). Whether Sally is really out to get him plays no role in John’s having the belief. He would believe that Sally is out to get him whatever the evidence is – whether it suggests that it is true that Sally is out to get him, or whether it suggests that it is false.

It has been argued that beliefs in the existence of the absurd are products of a process of the second, fact-insensitive kind rather than of the first. According to Robert Solomon, e.g., beliefs in the existence of the absurd are due to feelings of inferiority. It is the projection of such feelings, of an “emptiness *within*” (52) that actually causes the “absurdist” to experience the world as being devoid of meaning (40-41). Similarly, it has been argued that beliefs in the existence of the absurd are outgrowths of certain historical developments, e.g., the increasing role of the interior for the middle classes of the 19th century (Mühlemann), our disproportionately expectation-laden “modern ways of thinking” (again, Solomon (30-34)) or, more commonly, the proceeding loss of religious structures or the depressing situation during and after World War II.

If it were true that beliefs in the absurd are the product of any such fact-insensitive process, this would seriously undermine these beliefs, it seems. Clearly, it is not very reasonable to take John’s belief about Sally’s being out to get him to be true, knowing about its dubious genesis. But how could it be reasonable, then, to hold on to one’s belief in the existence of the absurd (knowing that this belief is not more than a product of feelings of inferiority, or certain historical developments)? Don’t we have to conclude, that there probably is no such thing as the absurd? “Once Sisyphus’ mock heroism has been unmasked, revealing the distorted face of resentment”, Solomon (46) argues, “Camus’s bitter conception of the Absurd becomes far less persuasive.” “But with the discovery of the historicity of the absurd the status of Camus’ basic concept is raised to question as well ... Camus’ claim to have arrived at a principle ... turns out not to be directly tenable any longer.” (Mühlemann, own translation)

I am not sure, whether considerations such as the above have been meant to be arguments against the existence of the absurd in any strict sense. They usually exemplify a more contextual, more holistic approach to philosophical problems in general - the continental, as opposed to the

analytic. *If* such considerations are meant to speak against the existence of the absurd, I think there are compelling grounds for objecting, however.

First, for a genetic argument against the absurd to be sound, some account of the absurd's being a product of a fact-insensitive process of belief-formation has to be true. It does not have to be one of the above mentioned, of course. But *some* such account (however it looks like) must be shown to be plausible. *Prima facie*, this does not seem like an impossible thing to do. Note, however, that in order for the genetic argument to possibly work in any stronger version it does not suffice to show that *some* of the *current* instances of belief in the absurd are *inter alia* the product of a fact-insensitive process of belief formation. It had to be shown that *all* current beliefs in the absurd are due to such a process and/or that beliefs in the absurd are due to such a process *at all times* (present, past and future) and/or that beliefs in the absurd are *only* due to such a process (see Sober, "Biological" 106 and Kahane 118-119 for remarks in this direction). To my mind, the prospects of meeting any of these requirements are rather bleak.

Second, even if it should turn out that at all times all beliefs in the absurd are only the product of a fact-insensitive process of belief-formation, this would lend support to not more than a very weak conclusion. Given certain theories of justification, and given that all the evidence we had regarding the truth of beliefs in the existence of the absurd was "genetic" in nature (concerning its genealogy), it would be legitimate to conclude that beliefs in the absurd are *unjustified* (for similar considerations see Joyce 168, Kahane 105). By no means, however, it would be legitimate to draw the stronger, metaphysical conclusion that there is no such thing as the absurd, or that it is likely that there is no such thing as the absurd. To see this, let us have a look at another case in which a belief is the product of a fact-insensitive process of belief-formation:

Consider my colleague Ben, who walks into his introduction to philosophy class one day with the idea that he will decide how many people are in the room by drawing a slip of paper from an urn. In the urn are a hundred such slips, each with a different number written on it. Ben reaches in the urn, draws a slip that says "78," and announces that he believes that exactly 78 people are present. (Sober, "Biological" 105)

One might be tempted to think, that the genesis of Ben's belief implies that the belief is false. But this would yield, of course, an invalid argument. Although Ben would believe that there are exactly 78 people in the room whether or not there are exactly 78 people in the room, it is certainly possible that his belief comes out to be true (say, he's lucky). Likewise, although John would believe that Sally is out to get him whether or not Sally is really out to

get him, it is possible that his belief comes out to be true (say, he's unlucky). Thus, considerations about the genesis of a belief do not allow for the conclusion that the belief is false (e.g. Klement 387, Engel 194-195, Sober "Biological" 105 and "Evolution", Joyce 160)

But doesn't the genesis of some beliefs at least imply that they are *likely* false? In fact, some philosophers consider inductive genetic reasoning (as opposed to deductive) to be valid. In some of his publications (e.g. "Evolution") Elliott Sober, e.g., seems to advocate this view: "Surely it is reasonable to conclude that Ben's belief is probably incorrect." ("Biological" 105) "... facts about the genesis of a belief can provide non-deductive evidence about whether the proposition believed is true." ("Evolution") However, Sober himself later relativizes this claim ("Biological" 110) and I think, that he does well to do so (Klement 387, Joyce 160-161). Of course, it seems likely that Ben's belief that there are exactly 78 people in the room is false. The reason, however, is not the belief's unusual genesis, but rather our (completely non-genetic) background knowledge that it is unlikely in general that a university class contains exactly 78 people. Suppose you come to know that the presidency of Ben's university stipulated that classes have to contain between 70 and 80 people, or more extremely, that they have to contain exactly 78 people. Even though Ben forms his belief by randomly drawing a number from an urn – given our different background knowledge, the belief does not seem likely false any longer. (Sober, "Biological" 110; Joyce 160) Thus, considerations about the genesis of a belief do not even allow for the weaker conclusion that the belief is likely false. I conclude that there is no way of inferring the non-existence or probable non-existence of the absurd from merely genetic considerations.

Of course, this conclusion mustn't be overestimated. The failure of the genetic argument does not mean that there really is such a thing as the absurd. Other objections have been raised against Camus' claim, and an often neglected possibility has to be considered as well – the possibility that Camus' remarks are simply too vague as to allow for a determinate answer to the question of whether the absurd exists. All I have tried to show here is that one popular line of objection against Camus' claim is fallacious.

2.2 The Is-ought Challenge

Suppose Camus' postulation of the absurd turns out to be plausible. This does, of course, not guarantee the soundness of his logic of the absurd. In order for Camus' reasoning to be sound, it also has to be the case that the

proposed conclusions (the prohibition of physical and philosophical suicide and the command of revolt) logically follow from the premise of the absurd.

It has been argued that this is not the case. In particular, it has been argued that Camus violates what is commonly known as "Humes' Law": the "law" against moving from purely descriptive premises to normative conclusions (e.g. Hochberg 92, Müller-Lauter 125).

Roughly, the logic behind Camus' reasoning seems to be that the absurd exists and that therefore it ought to be preserved (by not committing physical and philosophical suicide, but by adopting the attitude of revolt):

(P1) The absurd exists

Ergo: (C) The absurd ought to be preserved (by not committing physical and philosophical suicide, but by adopting the attitude of revolt)

The nature of the two claims is rather obvious. (P1) is a descriptive claim; it tells us something about how things *are*. (C) is a normative claim; it tells us something about how things *ought to be*. That is, indeed, Camus seems to derive an "ought" from an "is", seems to violate Humes' law: "Camus has leaped from the factual premise that the juxtaposition of man and the universe is absurd, to the evaluative conclusion that this state ought to be preserved ... For this transition we have no justification, Camus has not ... made his point. He has simply begged the question." (Hochberg 92) The absurd turns out to be an "unwarranted postulate", it – implausibly – is thought to "demand its being sustained out of itself" (Müller-Lauter 125, own translation).

Is this objection justified? Is the is-ought challenge a real one? I do not want to rule out this possibility. There may be grounds for believing that Camus (led astray by his emotionally and morally highly loaded language) derived an "ought" from an "is". Personally, I prefer a different interpretation, however. I think Camus does not violate Hume's law, for it is simply not true that he starts from a set of purely descriptive premises. In arguing against suicide and in favour of revolt, Camus implicitly appeals to certain values, or, more precisely, virtues. Let me give you three examples. One virtue that plays a major role for Camus' reasoning in the *Myth* is, I believe, the virtue of sincerity. Camus is in close neighbourhood to the classical existentialist conception of authenticity here. He demands that if one really takes something to be true, one has to live according to it: "If I become thoroughly imbued with that sentiment that seizes me in face of the world's scenes, with that lucidity imposed on me by the pursuit of a science, I must sacrifice everything to these certainties and I must see them squarely ... Above all, I must adapt my behaviour to them and pursue them in all their

consequences.” (*Myth* 20) “The principle can be established that for a man who does not cheat, what he believes to be true must determine his action.” (*Myth* 5; see also Tesak-Gutmannsbauer 23-26)

A second virtue Camus appeals to is the virtue of courage. Physical and, in particular, philosophical suicide are repeatedly spoken of in terms of “escape” (e.g. 30, 34, 50, 52), “evasion” (7), “elusion” (34, 52) and “retreat” (48) in the *Myth*. By committing philosophical suicide the “struggle is eluded” (*Myth* 34), it is said. Both the abstract and the religious philosopher live in “anxiety” (*Myth* 46). “In a sense, and as in melodrama, killing yourself amounts to confessing. It is confessing that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it.” (*Myth* 4) As far as I can see, these are attempts to discredit physical and philosophical suicide by linking them to cowardice – something, Camus obviously very much disapproves of (when he talks about existential philosophy, about the “helplessness” of Kierkegaard (*Myth* 48) or Jaspers, the “apostle of humiliated thought” (*Myth* 32), one feels almost something like moral disgust about their supposed cowardice). In contrast, Camus demands to be courageous, to confront the absurd and “challenge the world anew every second” (*Myth* 52).

A third virtue I consider to be important for Camus’ reasoning is the virtue of mental strength or endurance. Bearing one’s absurd destiny, resisting the temptation to either commit suicide or to leap into faith (*Myth* 51) are depicted as signs of inner strength – a character trait, Camus is very fond of: “That discipline that the mind imposes on itself, that will conjured up out of nothing, that face-to-face struggle have something exceptional about them.” (*Myth* 53) Two figures that exemplify the addressed discipline and will very clearly are the “conqueror” (one of Camus’ examples of absurd ways of living) and Sisyphus. The conqueror is portrayed as someone, who is mainly concerned with conquering himself, with cultivating mental strength in order to maintain awareness of the absurd: “Conquerors sometimes talk of vanquishing and overcoming. But it is always ‘overcoming oneself’ that they mean.” (*Myth* 85) Sisyphus is condemned to a never ending futile labour, but does not surrender, does not fall into despair, but staunchly struggles and proves, that, at least in his “hour of consciousness” he is “stronger than his rock” (*Myth* 117).

Of course, this list is not intended to be exhaustive. There may be other values as well, Camus appeals to. What the above considerations should suffice to show, however, is that there is a hidden moral dimension to the logic of the absurd. Camus does not derive his conclusions from the

purely descriptive premise about the existence of the absurd, but from this descriptive premise *and* a number of evaluative judgements.⁵

(P1) The absurd exists

(P2) If something is considered to be true, it ought to be preserved. Preserving the absurd is courageous. And so on.

Ergo: (C) The absurd ought to be preserved (by not committing physical and philosophical suicide, but by adopting the attitude of revolt)

Interpreted in this way, Camus does not violate Hume's law. Note, however, that for his reasoning to be sound yet another challenge would have to be met, namely the challenge of showing (P2) to be plausible, of showing sincerity, courage and mental strength to be valuable. This is an issue Camus himself did not address. Although the mentioned virtues are of crucial importance for his reasoning, he never endorsed them explicitly and probably was not or only vaguely aware of his being committed to them.

2.3 The Consistency Challenge

In the last section I tried to show that the logic of the absurd presupposes the reality of certain virtues, e.g. sincerity, courage and mental strength. As far as I can see, these virtues are of crucial importance for Camus' reasoning. Imagine (1) there are no virtues at all or (2) there are virtues, but what qualifies as virtuous are not so much sincerity, courage or mental strength, but rather traits like forbearance, acceptance, or humility. In both cases, Camus' normative conclusions cannot be derived. In the first case, the absurd does not tell us anything about what we ought to do at all (this was, of course, the point of the is-ought objection). In the second case, the absurd entails obligations that are the opposite of those, Camus considered it to entail (not revolt, not protest, but silent bearing or even philosophical suicide). I conclude, thus, that sincerity's, courage's and mental strength's being valuable is a central commitment of the logic of the absurd.

But now recall the beginning of this article. There I suggested that in his early years Camus explicitly denied the possibility of there being values in a universe dominated by the absurd. Here is, again, what is probably his clearest statement on the issue: „Belief in the meaning of life always implies a scale of values, a choice, our preferences. Belief in the absurd, according to our definitions, teaches the contrary ... Once and for all, value judgments are

⁵ If I am right, Camus' change of mind regarding values (see introduction) has to be interpreted differently. It is not a shift from "There are no values" to "There are values", but from the appreciation of one kind of values to the appreciation of another.

discarded here in favour of factual judgments.” (*Myth* 58-59) This denial of the existence of values is a central commitment of the early philosophy of the absurd, too. Camus repeatedly emphasizes that there are no moral or qualitative differences. It is not important, *what* people do. All that matters is that they do it against the backdrop of the attitude of the revolt and that they revolt as long as possible (*Myth* 58-62). “... what counts is not the best living but the most living.” (*Myth* 58) “Where lucidity dominates, the scale of values becomes useless.” (*Myth* 61)

What we find in Camus is, thus, an inconsistency. On the one hand, he (implicitly) appeals to values in order to establish the normative conclusions he takes to follow from the absurd, on the other hand he explicitly rules out the existence of values. Can this contradiction be resolved? Can the consistency challenge be met?

The only possible way of resolving the contradiction that comes to my mind would be to show that Camus does not rule out the existence of all, but only of a certain kind of values and that the values implicitly appealed to (the values of sincerity, courage and mental strength) do not belong to this kind. Such an interpretation does not seem to be supported, however. Camus’ claims about the non-existence of values are very bold. He speaks of “value judgements”, “scales of values” and so on *simpliciter*, without making any qualifications.

I conclude, thus, that if the interpretation given in the previous chapter is correct (if Camus really appeals to certain values in arguing against suicide and in favour of revolt), his early logic of the absurd is inconsistent.

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