

Philosophy 101

Camus on the Absurd

April 10, 2014

Williams Review

Ethical Knowledge

- (Against non-cognitivism) Some ethical judgments are fact-stating—i.e. they may be true or false
- (Against error theory) At least some ethical judgments may be true
- Ethical knowledge is possible

Science & Ethics

- Our parochial perceptual representation of reality is vindicated and explained by our 'absolute' representation
 - different perceptual modes converge on same underlying reality

Science & Ethics

- Our parochial ethical representation of reality is *not* vindicated and explained by our 'absolute' representation
 - many possible social worlds which might be good for human beings
 - parochial ethical knowledge is undermined by reflection

Camus on the Absurd

Question 1

Is life worth living only if there is an objective purpose or meaning to life?

- A. Yes
- B. No
- C. *Not sure*

Question 2

Is death an evil to the one who dies?

- A. Yes
- B. No
- C. *Not sure*

Existence as a Philosophical Problem

*There is but one truly serious philosophical problem,
and that is suicide.*

Existence as a Philosophical Problem

- Why is the issue of suicide a *philosophical* problem?
 - fundamental philosophical questions are practical — they concern what we should *do*
- “Is life worth living?” is the most fundamental practical question
- Camus’s Question: If life is absurd, then is life worth living?

The Absurd

- Why is life absurd?
 - human beings are driven to ask questions concerning existence for which there are no answers

The Absurd: Three Problems

- Life is finite
- The world is not fundamentally rational or intelligible
- There are no objective values or purposes

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Absurdity & Value

- Can life be meaningful if there is no objective point or purpose to it?

A Meaningful Life

- A meaningful life → A life worth living
- A life is worth living when there are goals worth living for
 - Goals inspire a subject to go on living
 - Goals are worth living for only if there are values/reasons for bringing those goals about

Nihilism

Nihilism: denial of the existence of objective value; nothing is objectively wrong or right, good or bad

Two Questions

- ① Does the truth of nihilism entail that life is absurd?
- ② If life is absurd, does that mean it isn't worth living?

Camus's Position

- Life is absurd — we have expectations about the meaning/value of existence that cannot be met
- We have two options
 - ① escape
 - false consciousness
 - suicide
 - ② defiance

Camus's Position

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, 8)

Camus's Position

- Conscious affirmation of *both* the absurdity and the value of one's life
 - is this a psychologically realistic position?