

To what extent is Albert Camus' absurdism a valid ethical framework?

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Word Count: 3207

Most everyone has been struck by a moment of question, in which they ask, “Why must I do anything at all?” This is a question that humans have been attempting to answer since the dawn of our creation. Many have sought the answer to this question through philosophy, religion, government, and much more. Keeping this question in mind, one can trace back virtually anything to our desire to affirm any meaning in our lives at all. But what if there is no answer; what if existence truly is meaningless? This thought is challenging to most, as it is human nature to do things for a *reason*. However, it’s not impossible to comprehend or even to accept. But how does one accept this? How can one live with an understanding of their own futility? Albert Camus’ system of absurdism presented in his collection of essays, “The Myth of Sisyphus,” has provided an answer to these questions for many, causing them to turn to absurdist thinking when faced with the concept of meaninglessness. But as with any philosophy, belief system, or ideology, one must question the ethics of absurdism. Is it ethical for one to live as absurdism would lead them to? To what extent is absurdism a valid ethical framework?

“The Myth of Sisyphus” is extremely practical, as its entire contents are about how to deal with this feeling of meaninglessness that Camus titles *the absurd*. The absurd is the conflict between the human desire for meaning and the universe’s deafening silence. Absurdism is Camus’ philosophical solution to this problem. Camus believes that humans have encountered the absurd for all of our history but have only followed it to two logical conclusions: a leap of faith or suicide. By a leap of faith, Camus meant a way that one tries to combat the absurd. He saw religion as one such leap of faith as to derive a belief in a higher power from a confrontation with the absurd, one must make some uncertain assumptions about the universe. To Camus, to attempt to find meaning in any way requires a leap of faith as it presupposes the existence of meaning. Short of this, Camus posits that the only other logical option that derives from a confrontation with the absurd is suicide. If nothing has meaning and one isn’t willing to make a leap of faith to find some meaning, what else can one do? Camus proposes his system of absurdism as a third option. Absurdism is a radical acceptance of the absurd, where one acknowledges the short and futile nature of human life and makes no attempt to find meaning. To the absurdist, this is not depressing but liberating, as it allows one to create a life worth living beyond a search for meaning that they believe is futile.

Camus uses the titular example of the ancient Greek myth of Sisyphus to illustrate absurdism in practice. Sisyphus was a human in ancient Greece who died, but was returned from the underworld only to scold his wife for betraying him. Instead of returning back to the underworld, Sisyphus chose to stay on Earth for many years, infatuated by its natural beauty. As punishment, the gods forced Sisyphus to push a boulder up a mountain eternally. Camus argues that Sisyphus is an absurdist hero, his fate only being tragic if our hero desires meaning. If Sisyphus takes every step upheld by the hope of succeeding and ending his “torture,” then his story is a tragedy. “When the images of earth cling too tightly to memory, when the call of happiness becomes too insistent, it happens that melancholy rises in man’s heart: this is the

rock's victory, this is the rock itself." (Camus 122); it is the consciousness of else that causes the pain. Instead, Sisyphus must find contentment in his fate. This idea concludes in a quote that precedes Camus in fame: "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." (123). By this, Camus means that Sisyphus is aware that his efforts are futile. However, because he is aware of the lack of meaning, he does not expect meaning. Instead, he enjoys the struggle- he enjoys the moment of reflection, watching the boulder roll back down the hill. We must imagine that Sisyphus is happy with this fate so that we can be happy with our own, as our fates are not much different than his.

Absurdism offers a refreshing view of the endless struggle and meaninglessness that dominates human existence, but how does it translate to real life? In the real world, people are waiting for Sisyphus; he has a boulder quota to fulfill. In reality, absurdism can be ethical, but as a moral framework, it fails to properly address important ethical questions.

Camus openly claims that absurdism is the logical conclusion of the absurd. However, an acceptance of meaninglessness must result in a similar meaninglessness of values. If one truly accepts the meaninglessness of everything, then how can one assert one thing as being better than another if both things have no meaning? A true absurdist cannot logically distinguish between the good of a crime and the good of a benevolent act because both are meaningless acts in a meaningless life. It could be argued that the only way an absurdist can evaluate the "worth" of these actions is through evaluating how they align with absurdist qualities. This method of evaluation ignores the effects of one's actions on others, only focusing on how one's actions serve self-fulfillment.

We can see this lack of proper ethical evaluation in the examples of absurdists that Camus gives in "The Myth of Sisyphus." Camus gives the example of Don Juan, the fictional Spanish seducer, as a true absurdist. Don Juan is a man who lives life with the sole purpose of seducing women and sleeping with them. Camus analyzes Don Juan as an absurd hero who does this for the conquest and enjoyment of the moment, not in a grand quest to find true love and quell some aching hole in his heart. Just like Sisyphus, Don Juan is content because he does not hope to find true love; he does not desire more.

But the conquest of Don Juan is not ethical, as the motivation and ethos of his quest serves only himself. In fact, Camus acknowledges this, writing, "Is he [Don Juan] selfish for all that? In his way, probably." (72). Camus then justifies this selfishness by explaining that the love Don Juan seeks is different from that of the women he seduces. While most seek love that is, in a sense, eternal, Don Juan seeks to love as many as he can, however short that love may be. But what about the women? Camus seems to ignore the harm that Don Juan's lifestyle very likely causes to his partners. Don Juan deceives and tricks women in pursuit of his own pleasure- women who seek the eternal love that Camus acknowledges and believe that they can find it with

Don Juan. Don Juan is aware of this -or must be by his later conquests- yet he continues. He is an absurd hero because he rebels against societal norms, confronting the absurdity of life by living with passion. However, does that mean he's an absurd hero simply because he serves himself?

Most traditional moral codes would define Don Juan's actions as unethical. For example, Kant's ethical system of deontology emphasizes duties and rules as the basis for moral behavior. Most commonly, deontologists base their morals on ideas of universal moral rules that everyone should follow, regardless of the situation. These rules are often based on principles like fairness, justice, truthfulness, and autonomy. When judging the morality of an action, deontology only concerns itself with how the action aligns with these universal rules, not the actual outcome of said action. A deontologist would argue that the actions and life of Don Juan are immoral, as his actions violate these universal principles. Don Juan is not truthful, as he deceives women with false promises and affections to seduce them. He does not respect the autonomy of these women, as he treats them as objects for his own pleasure, not individuals with their own desires and feelings. To evaluate deontological ethics, Kant uses the principle of the categorical imperative, which posits that we should act only according to maxims that we could want to be universal laws. If we evaluated the categorical imperatives of Don Juan's life, they might be something like, "Treat others as means to your own ends," or "Seduce women with lies and abandon them." If the entire world were to live by these principles, respect and genuine connection would cease to exist. Therefore, under deontology, Don Juan's actions are unethical.

Camus does not deny the existence of morals and ethics in "The Myth of Sisyphus." According to Camus, the absurd man must not be guilty, only responsible. If the absurd man does something that is considered wrong by others, he should not feel guilty; he should only be responsible for the consequences of his actions. This concept of responsibility is not simply about facing punishment. For the absurd man, it's a profound and liberating notion about acknowledging the impact of one's choices on oneself and the world, without the burden of guilt imposed by external moral codes. This can be seen as Camus' counterargument to deontology, as deontology doesn't concern itself at all with consequences. This allows the absurd man to define their own morals, free of a predetermined right and wrong.

This concept of responsibility over guilt has its merits. Whereas guilt imposed by others might not lead to a true understanding of the effects of one's actions, being encouraged to ignore guilt and to take responsibility for one's actions does encourage a true understanding. It can address nuanced situations better than deontology. For example, deontology would argue that stealing is always wrong because, under Kant's categorical imperative, a world where everyone steals would be bad, as the universal principle of honesty would be violated. However, stealing is not *always* wrong, and absurdism addresses this. If one were to steal bread to feed their family, deontology would tout this as wrong for the aforementioned reasons. Absurdism, however, would argue that this act might be justified so long as you know you are responsible for the full

range of consequences (potential punishment, harming the victim, the erosion of trust within the community).

However, we can see the cracks in absurdism as a moral framework start to form when we ask what is meant by responsibility. Is stealing bread from a local business okay so long as I understand I have hurt them? Or must I repay them if my actions do lead to real harm? This ambiguity is seen in the example of Don Juan. While he may be responsible in an absurdist sense, his endless seduction and abandonment of women lacks both responsibility that manifests in personal consequences and general empathy for the possible damage he causes. When aligning with a philosophy that is somewhat antithetical to deontology, as it's primarily concerned with responsibility and consequences, one would think that Don Juan would handle the outcomes of his actions further than a meaningless personal acknowledgment. He does not console these women who have been hurt by his actions, or take responsibility in any way besides acknowledging that he has hurt women for his own pleasure. So clearly, the responsibility that Camus suggests aligns with absurdism does not require actively addressing the harm caused or considering the emotional well-being of others.

Let's say that we are to accept Don Juan, thieves, and all of the absurd men that Camus provides as ethical in their personal actions, as long as they take responsibility for their actions as Camus describes. Even if we accept the absurd man as ethical, what about an absurd society? While absurdism has its merits in navigating individual struggle with meaninglessness, it falters when applied to a larger societal context. While many moral frameworks are founded on some idea of universal principles, the absurd man defines his own morals based on this concept of personal responsibility. The issue with an absurdist society lies in the personal nature of absurdism as an ethical framework. In "The Myth of Sisyphus," Camus talks about how a true acceptance of absurdism means that one cannot hold values, and, therefore, there cannot be universal morals. As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, morals must be built from the idea of responsibility. If everyone were to dictate their own morals this way, then society would lack any common moral foundation that laws are created to form and be unable to function properly. A society built on absurdist principles would have little to no laws, instead relying on a loose agreement of personal responsibility. Take traffic laws, for example. One person drives 75 mph in a school zone, and another drives 25 mph. The faster person values speed and finds more fulfillment in their life by driving fast, which they enjoy. Under absurdism, this is moral so long as they acknowledge the possibility that they will harm someone driving that fast, much like Don Juan. The slower person values safety and finds more fulfillment in life driving at a slower speed. This is also morally acceptable, so long as they acknowledge that travel might take longer and they might prevent those behind them from driving as fast. A highway in this society where everyone dictates their own speed limit based on personal values would likely be prone to injuries, accidents, and fatalities an order of magnitude more so than a society with shared moral foundations. This example shows the potential dangers of a society that lacks even a basic

understanding of right and wrong. A society that operates in this way is flawed in that anyone can do anything that aligns with their values so long as they have a baseline level of responsibility.

“Absurdist responsibility” might lead one to form an idea that an absurd man can have a basic level of responsibility to have respect towards others and their lives, values, etc.. However, an absurdist only has responsibility over the consequences of their actions, not any responsibility towards others. The moment an absurdist decides that they must acknowledge the existence of others, each with their own unique values and lives that an absurdist must still respect, they fail to fully accept the absurdity of the universe and values and they are no longer an absurdist.

So if the set of rules that an absurd man must follow lack any moral structure, can an absurdist apply other ethical frameworks to their lives while still remaining as true absurdists? Kant’s aforementioned deontology exists in direct conflict with absurdism’s abandonment of values. The purpose of deontology is to determine whether an action is right or wrong based on a set of rules.

A society of people who have no consideration for their life’s work beyond the time span of their own life wouldn’t progress. The absurd man, content in the moment and focused solely on what he can be certain of, might lack the motivation to contribute to long-term societal goals, as he lives only for his life, not for future lives he can’t be certain of. Technological and scientific advancement would inevitably be slower because the idea of future generations seeing the fruits of our labor would create less motivation. Although this isn’t inherently bad or immoral, there’s certainly an argument that, in this way, the absurd man is selfish, living his life only for his own means, not to contribute to society or the overarching goals of humanity. If Sisyphus pushes the boulder without the peak of the mountain in mind, how will his successors know where to go?

This is not to say that absurdism absolutely equates to selfishness. The absurd man’s focus on certainty of the present might indeed lead him to prioritize self-fulfillment over long-term societal goals. However, this doesn’t mean that the absurd man doesn’t contribute positively to society. This is seen in Camus’ example of the conqueror. The conqueror is not so much a conqueror as he is a political soldier/fighter. The conqueror throws himself into action and strives to leave a mark on history. This desire to leave a mark on history may seem antithetical to absurdism, but the conqueror doesn’t believe that this impact on history has any greater meaning than itself. The conqueror finds meaning and purpose in the struggle itself, a struggle which may have societal benefit. Sisyphus may not point his successors towards the peak, but he moves them closer and allows them to find their own way to find contentment.

While an absurdist society might not value the idea of contributing to a legacy and

subsequently be less innovative, one has to question- isn't that the point? Contemporary society is so obsessed with the idea of legacy and meaning that the idea of an absurdist society, which completely disregards these desires, is almost frightening. To evaluate the ethics of an absurdist society, a more utilitarian view must be taken. While an absurdist society might be less productive and innovative, an absurdist would certainly argue that it would be happier. People would spend less time obsessing over a legacy and ruling their actions by a fear of being forgotten, and more time doing what they enjoy, and if not actively doing what they enjoy, finding enjoyment in their struggle. However, one might argue that the greatest good for the greatest number of people will always result from innovation as investment into technological, scientific, and medical research are what allow for the quality of life that first world countries experience today, and that argument is absolutely correct. Diseases like Smallpox have been virtually eradicated because of technological advancement and millions of people who might've been affected by it have instead been able to live happy and healthy lives. Innovation is a great good for a large number of people, so an absurdist society might be worse to a utilitarian.

One might argue that absurdist thinking is better- that people should do things that they enjoy now because life is short. But the issue is that all the presented examples, regardless of their ethical character, are absurdist. If we are to think as Camus thought and follow the logical conclusions of the absurd that he presents as a base truth, it is impossible to derive any ethical meaning or framework that can be applied to everyday life. In fact, absurdism finds itself in conflict with any ethical framework at all, leading only to the conclusion that it is impossible to live ethically as a true absurdist. This essay may be dismissed simply by asking, "isn't that the point?" And in a way, the answer is yes. Absurdism is not intended as an ethical or moral framework; it's simply a logical conclusion of the absurd, according to Camus. But society as a whole largely operates on ethics and morals, and we must evaluate the ideas we live our lives by with this in mind. Just because absurdism is seemingly amoral doesn't mean that it can't be ethically evaluated.

Work Cited

Camus, Albert. *The myth of Sisyphus, and other essays*. Edited by Justin O'Brien, translated by Justin O'Brien, Vintage Books, 1991.