

Camus, Suicide, and the Absurd

“There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.”¹ Thus begins the *Myth of Sisyphus*, an exploration into the question of whether or not life is worth living. The Myth was written by Albert Camus, a French philosopher and author who lived and wrote during the mid-20th century. His works deal mainly with the internal state of man and explore feelings of alienation from the world. In particular, the Myth analyzes a state of disconnect between the human desire for objective clarity and purpose, and the lack of response from the world. Camus terms this disconnect ‘the Absurd’, and uses it as a foundation for the rest of the essay. The absurd presents itself when the purposes, ends, values, and meanings that we have internalized and asserted onto the universe become undermined by circumstances in life - and the subject begins to view the world as unwelcoming and unfamiliar. It arises when we perceive the universe as being entirely indifferent to us, and come to the conclusion that there is no inherent meaning or value in anything. At times, this feeling deprives the subject of the will to live, leading to despair, and eventually suicidal ideation. The goal of the Myth of Sisyphus is to argue that we ought to fight to live and flourish, regardless of whether or not we assume the universe to be indifferent or meaningless. However, a number of prominent thinkers have argued that, in order to reclaim reason to live, we must assume that there exists some transcendent authority that can assign rich meaning and purpose to the universe, such as the Christian God. Without positing a godlike authority, we must accept that there is no meaning for anything, and thus no reason to live. Though Camus accepts that there very well may be no meaning in life, he explicitly disagrees with the assertion that you must assume a transcendent authority in order to reclaim reason to live. Instead, Camus proposes a state of perpetual revolt against our absurd relationship with the universe by enjoying life for its own sake, appreciated in and of itself without the need

¹ Camus, Albert. “Myth of Sisyphus”. Page 1.

to ascribe any purpose or meaning to it. Through analyzing the arguments presented by Camus in the Myth of Sisyphus, a strong case can be made against suicide, and in defense of the will to live without positing the need for a transcendent solution.

Rather than define it explicitly, Camus first attempts to make the absurd clear through examples - such as when you expend huge amounts of energy trying to achieve a goal, only to have it torn away from you. Or, when you must endure a particularly stressful daily routine for very little reward, and you begin to ask what the point is. When you predicate all your goals on the prospect of a 'tomorrow', but then realize that we are servants of time and eventually there will be no tomorrow. When you begin to see nature as the strangely mechanical and inhuman process that it is. When you witness a man walking on the street, or your own face in the mirror, and see a pantomiming flesh machine. These examples are meant to illustrate situations wherein one is confronted with an alienating and unwelcoming universe. A confrontation of this sort forces us to question the reasons behind our actions. When we strip our lives of a stabilizing sense of normality, we realize (if appearances can be believed) that we are mere biological matter trapped on a rock hurtling senselessly through space. The insistence with which we assert a higher purpose to our lives and actions becomes absurd when we are confronted with a view of reality which so continually displays a gulf between the human desire for purpose and the cold, indifferent response of the cosmos. This cosmic indifference illustrates the inhumanity of the universe, and the way in which the world functions in opposition to humanity. The absurd comes not out of the universe itself, but rather the conflict between the human and the universe. As Camus says, "This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose calls echo in the

human heart.”² Time after time, we are aggressively shown that the universe is indifferent towards our pleasures and pursuits. The most striking example of this is death, which puts an inescapable end to all pleasure and pursuit. We are subservient to death, we are subservient to time, we are subservient to biology, and all of our desires and efforts must be predicated upon the fact that our legacies will eventually become dust. We are subject to a universe that contradicts many of our deepest wishes - governed, as Camus puts it, by ‘cruel mathematics’, and “no code of ethics and no effort are justifiable *a priori* in the face of the cruel mathematics that command our condition.”³ Reason and meaning can only be conferred by a conscious being - thus, if the universe is simply the product of a cruel, mathematical series of causal reactions and not a conscious being, then there can be no universal reason or meaning for anything.

The sudden realization that the universe is inhuman can make human activity seem arbitrary. It can force people into a drone-like existence, reflexively sustaining oneself out of necessity without really feeling intimately connected to the purposes behind any of our actions. As the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote, “Life must go on, I just forget why.”⁴ This is how experiencing the absurd can rob one of their desire to live - it can cause us to lose any sight of purpose behind our actions. Even a subjective sense of higher purpose can be thwarted by the indifference of the universe: You try to affirm meaning in your profession, and you are fired. You try to affirm meaning in your love of sport and physicality, and your body becomes crippled. You try to affirm meaning in your loved one, and they leave you. While a sense of subjective purpose can serve as a respite from the absurd, eventually our attempts to satisfy those purposes are squandered by the indifference of the universe at large. Any assertion of meaning in life, whether it be objective or subjective, is made flat by the utterly indifferent response of the

² Camus, Albert. “Myth of Sisyphus”. Page 7.

³ Camus, Albert. “Myth of Sisyphus”. Page 6.

⁴ Edna St. Vincent Millay, “Lament”.

universe. However, Camus argues that this is not necessarily cause for despair. A recognition of the universe as fundamentally irrational and meaningless allows for us to attain what Camus terms 'absurd freedom'. Though we lose our metaphysical freedom because we become subordinate to the inescapable fact that life is meaningless and temporary, this opens up a more practical sense of freedom. If we posit a meaning in life, then we must mold ourselves according to that meaning. Oftentimes, the idea that there is meaning in life is accompanied by ethical frameworks and behavioral restrictions that compel one to act in line with this meaning. This could cause one to act against their own best wishes in order to comply with illusory restrictions. As Camus says, "To the extent to which we imagine a purpose in life, we adapt ourselves to the demands of that purpose."⁵ When we do not imagine a purpose in life, we are free from any restrictions on our thoughts and actions beyond our physical and material limitations.

This sense of absurd freedom is how Camus reclaims value in life. Through coming to a better understanding of our own fundamental desires and principles, and then utilizing the freedom available to us in order to act on these desires and principles, we can lead a truly 'authentic' life in the existential sense. By acknowledging that there is no code of approved behavior and thought that we objectively ought to abide by, we are able to live a life entirely consistent with our own motives. By not being concerned with a transcendent or externally imposed code of approved behavior and beliefs, we can harness true internal freedom - and thus a fuller and more authentically lived life. The hypothetical person who perfectly exemplifies this way of life, Camus terms 'the absurd man'. The absurd man is someone with the courage to live without any appeals to the eternal for transcendent meaning or purpose. It is someone who enjoys life as much as possible all the way up to the frontier of physical death, and does so in spite of a lack of meaning or purpose. This "constant confrontation between man and his own

⁵ Camus, Albert. "Myth of Sisyphus". Page 20.

obscurity”⁶ is, as Camus says, “that which gives life its value. Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores majesty to that life. To a man devoid of blinders, there is no finer sight than that of the intelligence at grips with a reality that transcends it. The sight of human pride is unequaled. No disparagement is of any use. 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.”⁶ To illustrate how the absurd man should live, Camus provides the example of Don Juan, the legendary Spanish serial seducer. Don Juan is able to live happily and without melancholy, despite taking pleasure only in the present moment and having no hope for transcendent significance. He does not live in ignorance of his ultimate fate, but he does not bemoan it either. This connects to Camus’ concept of revolt - to accept the absurdity of life, and yet continue living happily in defiance of it. It means appreciating what life has to offer, while also accepting the fleeting and meaningless nature of it all. As Camus postulates at the end of the Myth, “That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it.”⁶ In his short story Summer in Algiers, Camus talks poetically about dancing, loving, and living under the Algerian desert sun. He paints a vivid portrait of enjoying life for its own sake, appreciated in and of itself without the need to ascribe any purpose or meaning to it. This simple appreciation of life for its own sake is the essence of living in revolt. It is the rejection of the notion that meaning and purpose are necessary to enjoy life.

The idea that life should be appreciated for its own sake is ancient. Many traditions have espoused this idea over the years - it stems back, quite literally, to the dawn of literature itself. In The Epic of Gilgamesh, that ancient Mesopotamian epic considered one of the earliest works of literature in existence, the value of life despite absurdity and impermanence is shown by the character of Utnapishtim. Utnapishtim was a man who was granted immortality by the god Enlil,

⁶ Camus, Albert. “Myth of Sisyphus”. Page 19.

destined to live for all eternity. Gilgamesh is in a deep state of mourning from the death of his friend, when he comes upon Utnapishtim. After suffering his friend's death, Gilgamesh begins to fear his own death, and seeks to obtain the secret of immortality from Utnapishtim. As he says in the epic, "Because of my brother I am afraid of death; because of my brother I stray through the wilderness. His fate lies heavy upon me. How can I be silent, how can I rest? He is dust and I shall die also and be laid in the earth forever... how shall I find the life for which I am searching?"⁷ Here, Gilgamesh has encountered the absurd. He is subject to the will of a cruel and unusual universe, and despite his impassioned cries for life, he knows it will eventually all end in dust. Utnapishtim replies that impermanence is one of the most essential facts of life. We do not create anything with the expectation that it will last forever, but we create regardless. We recognize that all things are subject to eventual nullification, and yet we protest when this essential fact is applied to us. But if we view our lives the same way we view anything else in the world, we would realize the apparent contradiction. Every day we pursue motives and pleasures and ends that we view as valuable and important, even though we recognize them as inevitably impermanent. We betray the fact that we view impermanent things as valuable every time we pursue anything at all - for all things are impermanent, and pursuit of something implies that it is valuable to you. Though Gilgamesh will not live forever, he comes to realize value in being a great king and a hero to the Uruk people, and through the pursuit of valor in life his legacy long outlives him. As Enlil, the god of fate, decrees at the end of the Epic, "Gilgamesh, this was the meaning of your dream. You were given the kingship, such was your destiny, everlasting life was not your destiny. Because of this do not be sad at heart, do not be grieved or oppressed; I have given you power to bind and to loose, to be the darkness and the light of mankind. I have given unexampled supremacy over the people, victory in battle from which no fugitive returns, in

⁷ NK Sanders, "The Epic of Gilgamesh". Page 18.

forays and assaults from which there is no going back.”⁸ This heroic portrait stands in stark contrast to the immortal Utnapishtim, whose character is that of a lazy man with little to no motivation. As Gilgamesh says, “I thought I should find you like a hero prepared for battle, but here you are taking your ease on your back.”⁹ Gilgamesh believed that immortality would imbue Utnapishtim with tremendous power, but in reality Utnapishtim has no desire to be a warrior and would much rather lounge on the beach. This is because he has no sense of *urgency*. Some sense of urgency is the motivator behind all activity. It is clear that Gilgamesh has motivation in spades - enough to topple demigods, venture across the seas, endure starvation and do battle with numerous wild animals. This is because to him it was *urgent* that he attain immortality, and so he had to brave the trials and tribulations associated with this pursuit. This urgency is what compels us to make a difference, create memories, and accomplish our goals before we die and the opportunity at life is over. The life of an immortal, however, contains none of this urgency. When you have literally all the time in the world, the motivation to act is severely dulled. Even having just a little extra time to accomplish a task can cause some people to become complacent - imagine if this ‘extra time’ was extended across eternity. The character Siduri, potentially recognizing this problem, advises Gilgamesh to focus on fostering a good life rather than seeking immortality. “As for you, Gilgamesh, fill your belly with good things; day and night, night and day, dance and be merry, feast and rejoice. Let your clothes be fresh, bathe yourself in water, cherish the little child that holds your hand, and make your wife happy in your embrace; for this too is the lot of man.”¹⁰ Camus would agree with Siduri. While death is inherent in mortality, so too is life. The reason why people should continue to live, work, and play is simply to experience the joy of living, nothing more and nothing less.

⁸ NK Sanders, “The Epic of Gilgamesh”. Page 24.

⁹ NK Sanders, “The Epic of Gilgamesh”. Page 18.

¹⁰ NK Sanders, “The Epic of Gilgamesh”. Page 17.

Because Camus was an author first and a philosopher second, much of the Myth is rich with flowery prose and provocative language. This is effective for evoking emotional reactions and connecting with the reader on a human-to-human level, but it is less effective for crafting well structured and clearly defined logical arguments. Camus runs into this issue on a number of occasions. Most significantly, he fails to effectively provide a sound logical argument for why the world is meaningless. A reader of Camus with strong religious convictions may argue that they do not struggle with the absurd, and they can feel intuitively that there is meaning and order in the universe. Camus' argument that the universe is meaningless rests on the fact that he feels it to be hostile and alienating. But if you do not view the universe as hostile or alienating, Camus loses ground. His response would likely relate to his concept of 'philosophical suicide', a term he uses to describe unsatisfactory or dishonest responses to the absurd. The idea of a God, or some other transcendent or religious entity with the power to assign meaning, is something that we simply have no definitive proof of. It may very well be that there is transcendent meaning in the universe, but it is impossible for humans to ascertain at this point in time. As he admits in the Myth, "I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it."¹¹ Camus is interested only in solutions that involve what he can know through experience, and uninterested in solutions that involve conditions that are impossible to definitively prove or disprove, such as a God. The conditions that Camus experiences 'just now', to him, are an absurd and finite life.

However, another less religious argument in response to this is that an indifferent universe and a finite life do not necessarily equate to a lack of meaning. Many people believe that life is rich in subjective meaning, and they do not see the argument that the universe itself is irrational and ambivalent as particularly compelling. 'There is no need for the universe to assign

¹¹ Camus, Albert. "Myth of Sisyphus". Page 34.

an inherent purpose to our lives', they might argue, 'we can create it ourselves'. To these people I would argue that, if the indifference and irrationality of the universe itself is assumed, any basis for subjective meaning would be arbitrary and illusory. It would be arbitrary because there is no universally effective scale by which to judge one subjective sense of meaning as more 'valid' than another. We fall into pure relativism, and there is no way to objectively say that the person who takes meaning from hitting two rocks together is living a less meaningful life than Socrates. Without any objective standard by which to determine the validity of different subjective doctrines of meaning, any attempt to assert subjective meaning upon the universe is built on an inherently unsteady foundation.

Then comes the illusory element, the fact that any subjective sense of meaning would necessarily have to be asserted onto the world by and for humans. I call this 'illusory' because any subjective sense of meaning is imagined - it is something we invent for ourselves, designed through a combination of internalized societal norms and values, personal convictions, practices, beliefs, desires, and so on. Camus would label this philosophical suicide as well, arguing that we are identifying a meaning to the world that is not actually present. We assert this because we are scared of the absurd and avoid it by positing a manufactured solution. God becomes 'subjective meaning', but both are illusory and do not reckon honestly with the consequences of the absurd. As Kirilov says, "Man has done nothing but invent God so as to go on living, and not kill himself; that's the whole of universal history up till now."¹² In this case, we invent 'subjective meaning' so as to go on living, rather than God - but both are inventions.

We have already seen Camus' arguments for the affirmation of life - revolt against absurd conditions, utilizing strength of will to overcome the despair associated with a crushing fate, a focus on the present moment and the joys of life, and an appreciation of life for its own sake

¹² Dostoevsky, Fyodor, "The Possessed". Page 639.

without the need to ascribe further meaning to it. However, some contemporary philosophers do not find these to be particularly compelling reasons to reject suicide. These philosophers argue that there is no valid reason to go on living without positing a rational and meaningful universe. Many of these philosophers also believe that the only entity with the capability to apply objective reason and value to the universe is God. One such thinker is Dr. William Lane Craig, a professor at Houston Baptist University. In his essay *The Absurdity of Life Without God*, Craig argues that there is no reason to go on living if we exist in a Godless universe. His view is that only a transcendent God can assign meaningful purpose to our lives. Without God, our lives are simply the result of random causal processes that possess no inherent value. As Craig argues, “without God life would be without purpose. For man and the universe would then be simple accidents of chance, thrust into existence for no reason. Without God the universe is the result of a cosmic accident, a chance explosion. There is no reason for which it exists. As for man, he is a freak of nature—a blind product of matter plus time plus chance. Man is just a lump of slime that evolved rationality.”¹³ Life becomes simply a blind race into oblivion - a momentary blip of lucidity before an eternity of nonexistence. According to Craig, whether that oblivion comes in fifty seconds or fifty years makes no difference once you have lost eternity. Because of this, there is no good reason to value life over suicide. Craig also critiques Camus for holding to what sees as two contradictory viewpoints: the premise that life is absurd, and the belief that we ought to go on living. If life in the world is absurd, then life has no value, and there is no good reason why one should go on living. However, as we saw with Gilgamesh, we live as though there is value in things every time we do anything. Craig sees this as an inconsistent way of living. He presents the allegory of a two-story house, where an absurd reality is the first floor and an inherently meaningful reality is the second floor: “In the lower story is the finite world without

¹³ Craig, William Lane. “The Absurdity of Life Without God”. Page 7

God; here life is absurd, as we have seen. In the upper story are meaning, value, and purpose.

Now modern man lives in the lower story because he believes there is no God. But he cannot live happily in such an absurd world; therefore, he continually makes leaps of faith into the upper story to affirm meaning, value, and purpose, even though he has no right to, since he does not believe in God.”¹³ Here, Craig seems to suggest that to assert value in anything represents an appeal to something that we have no basis for without belief in God.

There are a number of objections that could be raised against Dr. Craig. Craig argues at the end of his paper that Biblical Christianity is the optimal method of attaining objective meaning, but does not make any arguments as to why Christianity in specific is true. He simply presents his argument as a sort of Pascal’s wager, where we have nothing to lose by putting our faith in Christ, and everything to lose by not doing so. However, Craig does not address the fact that there are countless other religions that all profess to also have privileged access to knowledge of universal meaning and purpose. Even if we are to accept Craig’s wager, it is impossible to know which religion we should subscribe to. But beyond this, I argue that accepting a transcendent solution to the absurd without evidence is not only intellectually dishonest and a clear form of philosophical suicide, but also leads to a worse quality of life. My argument for this connects to the concept of absurd freedom. Through refusing transcendent solutions and acknowledging our absurd condition, we can solidify ourselves as the master of our own destiny. We may pursue any pleasure or project we want without being restrained by fear of divine judgement, a weakening of the eternal soul, or some other transcendent punishment. Through an acceptance of the apparent fact that our actions will have no significance to us beyond their consequences in mortal life - which will inevitably end - we realize that there are no eternal punishments for our behavior. As I have argued above, by acknowledging that there is no

transcendent authority or eternal punishment, we can refuse any transcendent code of approved behavior and live authentically by our own maxims, desires, and convictions. A critic of this idea may respond like so: If we are discarding any objective sense of reason or value, and we see subjective meaning as illusory and arbitrary, on what ground does Camus argue that absurd freedom is a beneficial characteristic? Why is it 'good' that we live freely and authentically rather than under duress and oppression, on what basis is this value judgement being made? For Camus, the answer is very simple. The basis for judgement of how 'well-lived' a life is, according to Camus, is directly proportional to how much the life is enjoyed by the person living it. This is why Camus presents Don Juan as a prime example of the absurd man - he lives life in the moment, always chasing after that which gives him the most pleasure and fulfillment. As I have argued above, the very fact that we can take pleasure in and pursue any end at all suggests that these ends have value to us, insofar as we desire and pursue them. If we want something, then clearly it has inherent value to us. Thus, while subjective *meaning* may be illusory, subjective *value* is not. We imagine meanings in order to assert them upon the universe, but what we *value* is asserted upon *us*. The qualitative difference between a terrible meal and a fantastic meal is not something we must invent, it is clearly communicated to us through our experience of the meal. Similarly, the qualitative difference between a terrible life and a fantastic life is not something that we must invent, it is communicated to us through our experience of the life. Thus, the value judgement of whether or not a life is well-lived is something that can only be decided by the experiencer of that life. Both a good and bad life may have no meaning, but the qualitative distinction is still there.

If we can enjoy the life we lead while we lead it, we have reclaimed the only necessary component for a satisfactory and fulfilling life. Our ability to enjoy a life that we can

simultaneously recognize as futile and meaningless may seem contradictory, but it is nonetheless an ability that we possess. As human beings, we are imbued with tremendous power of will - and Camus recognizes the ability to overcome the absurd as pure willpower. Even though we have no objective reason to go on, we can apply our willpower in order to “live and create, in the very midst of the desert.”¹⁴ We can simply thumb our noses at the universe’s cold attempts to diminish the significance of our lives and go on living. In this way, Dr. Craig misses the point of Camus’ concept of revolt. Camus agrees with Craig that life without God is meaningless and absurd, but the whole objective of revolt is to recognize the absurdity of life, refuse hope in a transcendent solution, and enjoy life regardless. We do not need to posit the existence of God in order to appreciate and revel in the joys of life. The fact of the matter is that life is often beautiful and exciting on its own - and this is reason enough to experience it. Never mind what the universe has to say.

¹⁴ Camus, Albert. “Myth of Sisyphus”. Foreword.