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Fate, Free Will, and the Resultant Optimism

As the dust of World War II settled in France, an increasingly nihilistic sentiment festered in the populace. Years of German occupation, bloody fighting, and the uncovering of the holocaust forced everyone to ask themselves what it all meant. What the war meant, what living meant, and crucially, what life itself meant. One such person was Albert Camus. Born in 1913, he saw the Germans march into France and eventually joined the French Resistance. From these experiences he wrote many acclaimed novels and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for literature. In addition to his novels, Camus published “The Myth of Sisyphus,” a codification of his views and his answers to the above questions. This view, called Absurdism, but contained broadly in the classification “existentialism,” stands in direct opposition to Christianity. Absurdism explicitly denies the existence of God or any theistic belief whereas (as one might guess) the Christian faith is built on it. Existentialism was so grating to the Catholic canon that in his 1950 Encyclical, *Humani Generis*, Pope Pius XII directly denounces it, saying “Such fictitious tenets of evolution which repudiate all that is absolute, firm and immutable, have paved the way for the new erroneous philosophy ... existentialism.” It seems unreasonable that a complimentary or similar doctrine would elicit such a detesting response. These differences, being as they are, only obscure the critical parallels that drive the surprisingly optimistic worldviews of both Christianity and Absurdism, fate and free will, thus revealing these properties’ unique relationship of optimism.

The method herein employed to reach this conclusion is as follows. It is first necessary to show that both Christianity and Absurdism both contain fate and free will. Then, after each proof

of their existences within each philosophies, it is necessary to show their role within the philosophies in shaping the optimism here posited. These first two steps will prove that within each philosophy, fate and free will play key interwoven roles. Finally, by showing this for two philosophies as contrary as these two it should be sufficiently shown that it is in fact fate and free will producing this result, and not some other component.

Christianity displays these traits most clearly. Fate, specifically a predestined fate is a hallmark of the Christian doctrine. For example, in Ephesians 2:10, it says “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them;” it is stating in clear terms, that our path, our lives, have been “ordained”. The experiences we experience, and the tribulations we face, are “his workmanship,” i.e. made by him, i.e. fate. The divine plan was furthermore cemented in the intelligentsia of the 1700s as a necessary consequence of the traits of God himself. Rene’ Descartes, the pre-eminent philosopher of the early modern period defined God as “infinite, eternal, unchangeable, independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful...” while Anne Conway, who fervently disagreed with many of Descartes’ views, also happily assented that “God is ... infinitely wise, good, just, strong, all-knowing, all-present, and all-powerful” (Descartes 26; Conway 9). The effect of these qualities is that [1] God knows all that will happen — this results from the quality of omniscience — [2] God created everything, including time itself — this results from the qualities of omnipotence and being eternal. [1] itself demonstrates fates’ centrality to Christian doctrine: if everything is known to occur, everyone’s fates are certain. But also from [1] and [2] result [3], it is God’s will that everything will happen as it will. It is not random because God knows for certain the results of any action he would take, [1], and he has assented to all that will happen as he created it, [2]. Therefore it is clear that Christianity has a predestined fate.

This specific type of fate Christianity presents is central to the Christian story. Returning to Ephesians, this theme becomes clearer; we are *his* workmanship. We are certain that the predicaments we face have been assented to by God. That it is not more than he expects of us. The intent of this doctrine becomes no clearer than what is seen in the famous passage in Psalms 23: It says, “The lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters” — fate guides and assures us of stability, hence the shepherd — “though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, *I will fear no evil: for thou art with me*” (italics mine). In the followers of God, there is no cause for fear, there is no cause for worry, for they know, with equivalent certainty to their belief in God, that they are in the hands of *the* most-powerful being in all of existence.

In addition to this fate, paradoxically, narratively and logically, Christianity also introduces free will. Regardless, this element remains a core part of Christian life and thought — rightfully so too. This essay will not attempt to make free will logically harmonious with the determinism above explained, but will only try to show its existence within the doctrine and its place therein. That there is free will in human beings is shown quite plainly in the existence of sin. God, as per the definitions, is all-good and thus would not commit an evil act, but yet there is sin, evil, in the world. This could only have arisen out of free action, committed by a finite being, lesser than God: human persons. In fact, the first sin is shown to us in Genesis 3:6, where Adam and Eve, the first humans, disobey God (whose will, again, is all Good) and thus sin. By disobeying God, it is clear they acted freely. However, some may contest that Genesis is mere legend, but, legend or not, the fact remains that God commands (e.g., Exodus 20, the ten commandments) and people disobey.

Because free will exists, Christianity can address two major narrative points. The first one was described in its proof: sin. Accounting for the existence of sin or evil is necessary for the Christian story because failing to implies a defect in God which then collapses the divine plan and undermines God's authority. Second, free will motivates its adherents. If you are responsible for your own actions, and are moreover going to be held accountable for them (Rev. 20:13-14), legitimate fear is inspired. However, this motivation goes beyond fear. Intermingling free will with the divine plan begets something truly peculiar: pride. The ability to effect real change and divine confidence make, as will be shown, a formidable shield. Preliminarily, observe the Apostle Paul. Who upon command of God, spared no effort in spreading the word of God across the planet. Even when he was captured and imprisoned, he "sang praises unto God" (Acts 16:25). The narrative relationship of fate and freedom will be broached more critically later, but for now, a question will be left sentimentally: What other than divine faith and responsibility could compel a man to the lengths Paul (and the other Apostles) pursued?

Moving to Absurdism, Camus' expository piece *The Myth of Sisyphus* first explores fate. Beginning with a startling question, it asks the reader to consider "the one truly serious philosophical problem:" suicide (3). He is justified in asking this. First, Camus, like his fellow existentialists, holds no conception of an afterlife, and second, we will all die. While this seems hardly worth making explicit, it is this fact that is our fate and what causes the angst and absurdity Camus is grappling with. The relationship of death and angst is evident in his initial observation of it: He states "The horror comes in reality from the mathematical aspect of the event" — the cause of our fear of death stems from its certainty; with the same knowledge we know $2 + 2 = 4$, we know we will die (15). For Camus, then, death is our fate as it is a certainty.

This can hardly be seen to be optimistic, but this grand pessimism is necessary framing for Camus' conclusion. Knowing we will die creates a specific feeling, what Camus calls "The Absurd" (hence absurdism). The absurd is not a neatly defined term. Camus spends many pages drawing out the feeling in images, stories, and novels. The plainest explanation is given early on:

He questions:

"What, then, is that incalculable feeling that deprives the mind of the sleep necessary to life? A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity" (6).

This feeling has also been colloquially referred to as an 'existential crisis.' It is that feeling that we are 'alien' to our environment, that we are actors displaced from our stages, our purposes. It prompts the big questions, "What is the meaning of life?", "What am I supposed to do?", "*Is suicide justified?*". But also, notice what causes this feeling, and what is its remedy: "a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights" and "the hope of a promised land," respectively. The universe is without explanation; it is clear that in the face of certain death, there is no answer to the questions just posed, and there is no afterlife. And because death is certain, i.e. it is fate, that the absurd is necessary as there is no chance for any true purpose beyond death.

On this backdrop, Camus sets free will, but first it must be shown that free will does exist in the Camusian world. The first proof jumps out from his starting question. If he considers

suicide a choice to be made, he must implicitly assert our free will. However, this proof is not entirely satisfactory. It could be argued that he poses the question as a legitimate question only rhetorically, and that he is truly asking whether suicide is a thing that ought to be done, without any concern for if anyone could actually choose to commit suicide. The second proof shows this is incorrect. Camus intends that we are free to act. In characterizing our place in relation to the absurd, Camus says that each person “can decide to accept such a universe” (60). By saying each person can decide, he empowers them to act freely; therefore, there is free will.

The ability to act freely is the keystone to Camus’ picture. First, he asks us to accept the absurdity of our lives, to accept only what we know is true, which is the absurd. From the absurd, Camus applies free will and finds value in living (notably, though, not meaning). He starts this reasoning by noticing that “Living is keeping the absurd alive” because “suicide [or death] settles the absurd” as in death, there is no experience of the absurd. He concludes then that “That revolt,” revolt being living in spite of the absurd, “gives life its value” because “Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty to that life,” or because “Living is keeping the absurd alive” and “the absurd cannot be settled,” or because “in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance,” etc. (54,55). Admittedly, why exactly revolting against the absurd gives life value is obscure and open to various interpretations (a few of which were given just now), but regardless it is the revolt, the defiance, *free action* that give life its value.

Although this gives an obviously less pessimistic picture, it may still feel un-optimistic — an ambivalent picture at best. However, by asserting that life has value, Camus is able to paint this optimistic picture. Because accepting the absurd removes all illusions of meaning, a future, etc. each person no longer must account for or prepare for the future, “[acceding] to the demands

of a purpose to be achieved [makes man] a slave of his liberty,” and thus they are now free to live in each moment according to each desire. The absurd revolt asks (and justifies!) us to simply live as much as we can, to live ‘like there is no tomorrow.’ Everyone will eventually die, there is no meaning to action, and therefore Camus says of any man living the absurd, “He too concludes that all is well” (123).

So far, this essay has attempted to show how both of these disparate philosophies use the same tools (free will and fate) in different ways and structures to ultimately create an optimistic worldview. Christianity sees that by the power of God we are empowered to act and are assured of a good fate. Absurdism sees that our guaranteed death allows us to rightfully live and act without restraint and in full joy of life itself in any manner we so choose. This parallel leads most certainly to the conclusion that fate and free will must have a unique relationship that generates optimism. However, this relationship cannot help but feel paradoxical in logic. So that we might feel this optimism emanating from both philosophies it will be helpful to analyze two narratives. Christianity will be explored using “A Hope in the Unseen” by Ron Suskind, a biographical tale of Cedric Lavar Jennings, a black kid from the inner city who eventually made it in the Ivy League. Absurdism will be explored using Camus’ titular tale, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which he too uses as his conclusion. *The Myth of Sisyphus* recounts Sisyphus’ life, from his deception of the Gods and Death to his fate: rolling a boulder up a hill everyday only for it to fall back down the moment it reaches the top.

Throughout his journey, Cedric Jennings exemplifies this relationship in many ways. During his time in the inner city of Washington D.C., specifically at his high school, Ballou, he was an outcast. Impoverished and downtrodden, many within the school looked down upon anyone who tried to break from the mold. In this time he relied on his belief in the divine

providence of God. In a moment of insecurity, as Cedric is submitting his application to Brown University he whispers “God, this is where I want to be ... I worked so hard. I deserve it. Yes, I believe this is it. This is the place I want to be. Bless me, Lord. Let your will be done. If this is where I’m supposed to be, let your will be done” (109). These two qualities immediately jump out. He pays deference to God’s will, trusting that God will help him, even if Brown is not where God has destined him. The fate gives him a solid groundwork. But he also inputs his own wants into his prayer and he calls his work his own. He treats himself as an agent, a part of the team, so to speak. Because of this he was not idle in trying to go to Brown and acted appropriately. Again, this pairing comes out in Cedric’s salutorian speech. As he recounts doubts thrown at him and his capability, he triumphantly responds, shouting “THERE IS *NOTHING* ME AND MY GOD CAN’T HANDLE” (137). He has no doubts as to his success. Any challenge he faces, he is backed by and watched by an omnipotent friend, but he also believes he is responsible. *He* is a part of the force that can handle anything; *he* is responsible and thus free. The certainty in God’s providence allowed Cedric to be confident in his future while the responsibility to act motivated him to actually pursue the ends necessary for that future. It is also for these reasons in this manner that Paul the Apostle was driven; divine confidence in prison and divine responsibility in spreading the word of God. Christianity, whether it be Cedric or Paul, gives its adherents this optimism.

Similarly, Sisyphus comes into contact with this relationship, albeit in a different mode. It is necessary to preface this section with the observation that the specific fate Sisyphus faces is different than the one Camus thinks everyone else faces. Sisyphus is doomed to push a rock up a hill for the rest of eternity, not death. The difference in these fates is solely cosmetic though, both fates are [1] certain and [2] meaningless. In fact, many believe his fate is tragic for this very

reason. Camus disputes this reading. His view is best shown in his own eloquent words. Camus writes,

“At the very end of his long effort measured by skyless space and time without depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward that lower world whence he will have to push it up again toward the summit. He goes back down to the plain.

“It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me... I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock” (p.121).

In this passage Camus describes Sisyphus’ reckonings with his fate. He expends so much effort, rising the rock only for it to fall, and then he must descend, it is his fate. However, Camus thinks Sisyphus is “superior to his fate” because while Sisyphus could reject his fate, fight against it, try to imbue it with meaning, Sisyphus instead takes a “heavy yet measured step.” He *chooses* to descend not angrily, but more contemplatively. He is not overdone by the rock, not defeated by it. He revolts against the absurdity of it all by indulging in his fate, in choosing to live, to push the rock evermore. The pessimism we see in this fate is only aesthetic; meaninglessness is only tragic because we despise the fate. In choosing to descend, in accepting the absurd reality, “his fate belongs to him,” and we must find that that once dreary fate, “The struggle itself toward the heights[,] is enough to fill a man’s heart” and therefore “One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (p.123).

The journey of Cedric and the struggle of Sisyphus both demonstrate the interweavings of fate and free will. The conclusion each time was nothing short of a jubilant celebration of life, there can be no denying it. It must be therefore admitted what a curious relationship these *prima facie* contradictory properties have, and that in any philosophy containing both, one may expect optimism. As to why these two properties form such a union, I will speak now, but only on the behalf of my own conjecture. I believe that it is the pairing of certainty, that we *know* what will happen, with the freedom to do what we desire that makes the optimism. We are empowered to tend to the small minutiae that interests us without having to worry on the sum total. They allow us to choose how we live, worry-free. Such a fate, I would scarcely believe anyone would disagree is optimistic.

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