

Review of *The Myth of Sisyphus*

This is (almost) my first foray into existentialism so I'm probably missing a lot of context. Camus sometimes states his thoughts directly, but more often the desire for poetry seems to win out over the desire for clarity. Consider, for example:

So long as the mind keeps silent in the motionless world of its hopes, everything is reflected and arranged in the unity of its nostalgia. But with its first move this world cracks and tumbles: an infinite number of shimmering fragments is offered to the understanding.¹

That sounds lovely, but I don't know what it means. I guess something along the lines of: "we assume we know how to make sense of the world, but if you think about it, everything's actually hopelessly confusing"?

Anyway, this is supposedly a book about why you shouldn't kill yourself:

The answer, underlying and appearing through the paradoxes which cover it, is this: even if one does not believe in God, suicide is not legitimate.²

Camus's argument relies on the concept of "the absurd". That seems to be his term for the situation arising from the gap between what humans deeply desire and what is actually attainable. Sometimes it seems like he's talking about our unsatisfiable desire for perfect understanding of the universe:

...two certainties—my appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle...³

Other times, it seems like he's talking about our unsatisfiable desire for eternal life.

Death is there as the only reality. After death the chips are down.⁴

¹Albert Camus and Justin O'Brien, *The myth of Sisyphus*, Second Vintage international edition (New York: Vintage International : Vintage Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, 2018), 18.

²Camus and O'Brien, *The myth of Sisyphus*, preface.

³Ibid., 51.

⁴Ibid., 57.

In either case, I think Camus is mistaking his own emotions for universal truths. Terror of death is not shared by all of us, and it's not clear that such terror is the more rational attitude (see my review of Kieran Setiya's *Midlife* for some thoughts on that). Likewise, though some people may feel utterly crushed by the impossibility of finding an absolutely unquestionable foundation upon which to build a worldview, others face the same reality with a shrug and get on with their lives. I don't see why we should regard the former group as more sane than the latter.

But let's assume "the absurd" is indeed a fundamental fact of human life. How does this relate to suicide? Camus casts suicide and hope as two different ways of evading the fact of the absurd—by destroying your unsatisfiable desires, or by pretending they can be satisfied. He thinks, instead, that we ought to live in perpetual revolt against the fact of absurdity—acknowledging it and facing it with defiance.

What, in fact, is the absurd man? He who, without negating it, does nothing for the eternal. Not that nostalgia is foreign to him. But he prefers his courage and his reasoning. The first teaches him to live *without appeal* and to get along with what he has; the second informs him of his limits. Assured of his temporally limited freedom, of his revolt devoid of future, and of his mortal consciousness, he lives out his adventure within the span of his lifetime.⁵

Why? What, in Camus's opinion, makes this reaction to the absurd superior to one of denial or escape? I don't know. It seems like just an aesthetic preference that Camus has. In my view, neither the problem nor the solution in this book is established by reasoning. The whole thing is an attempt to talk you out of one emotional reaction by stirring a different set of emotions.

The conflation of logic with emotional appeals annoys me, but there is potential value in the latter. We need *something* to inspire and motivate us. So: what vision of life does Camus offer?

He promotes an "ethics of quantity"⁶—quantity of experience. At one point he seems to mean simply that you should try to live as long as possible, without regard to anything else:

Thus it is that no depth, no emotion, no passion, and no sacrifice could render equal in the eyes of the absurd man (even if he wished it so) a conscious life of

⁵Ibid., 66.

⁶Ibid., 79.

forty years and a lucidity spread over sixty years. ... There will never be any substitute for twenty years of life and experience.⁷

Well, I would agree that this perspective is “absurd”, but only in the sense that it’s arbitrary, irrational, and unappealing. But Camus later seems to endorse the very different—and incompatible—goal of pursuing a maximal *diversity* of experience. He holds up actors and travelers as paragons of this ethic:

By thus sweeping over centuries and minds, by miming man as he can be and as he is, the actor has much in common with that other absurd individual, the traveler.⁸

I think one of Camus’s main goals is to redirect us from a focus on the future and the abstract, toward the present and the concrete. In contemporary terms, perhaps, he wants to encourage mindfulness.

The heart learns thus that the emotion delighting us when we see the world’s aspects comes to us not from its depth but from their diversity. Explanation is useless, but the sensation remains and, with it, the constant attractions of a universe inexhaustible in quantity.⁹

To an extent, this resonates with me, especially the phrase “the constant attractions of a universe inexhaustible”. But Camus’s view seems too extreme. Depth and explanation are themselves forms of diversity—the beauty of an intricate mathematical proof or the pleasant exertion involved in seeking a unifying theory can lend value to existence just as a delicious meal or an adrenaline rush can.

I’m not impressed with Camus’s philosophy, but the book is full of interesting quotes. Here are a few:

In a sense ... killing yourself amounts to confessing. It is confessing that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it.¹⁰

...there is no eternal love but what is thwarted.¹¹

⁷Ibid., 63.

⁸Ibid., 79.

⁹Ibid., 95.

¹⁰Ibid., 5.

¹¹Ibid., 73.

Knowing that there are no victorious causes, I have a liking for lost causes...¹²

To think is first of all to create a world (or to limit one's own world, which comes to the same thing.)¹³

...perhaps the great work of art has less importance in itself than in the ordeal it demands of a man and the opportunity it provides him of overcoming his phantoms and approaching a little closer to his naked reality.¹⁴

The human heart has a tiresome tendency to label as fate only what crushes it. But happiness likewise, in its way, is without reason, since it is inevitable. Modern man, however, takes the credit for it himself, when he doesn't fail to recognize it.¹⁵

¹²Ibid., 86.

¹³Ibid., 99.

¹⁴Ibid., 115.

¹⁵Ibid., 128.