

MORAL RELATIVITY AND UNIVERSALITY IN ALBERT CAMUS NOTION OF ABSURDITY.

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Abstract

Absurdity has become a concurrent happening in life. There is no doubt that absurdity has suicide as one of its major outcome and many has these experience irrespective of the societal present dispensation. The fundamental reason why suicide became the common outcome of the absurd that is been faced highly in the society is because, the knowledge of the absurd that ought to be accepted as a universal problem has been accepted by the individual as a relative problem. This work adopted the method of phenomenology for a descriptive human experience. Findings show that, though the absurd cannot be totally overcome in our society it can be greatly managed by the individual in the society through the acceptance of the perception of the absurd as more of a moral universal experience faced by all. Hence, the fact that makes an individual feel he experience the absurd alone in the society thereby leading to suicide is ironical. I therefore recommend that the concept of absurdity should be exposed as a moral universal problem, in order to build a consciousness ahead of the consciousness that do overwhelm individuals to suicidal thought.

Introduction

Absurdity is the most obvious theme in all of Camus's novel, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Rebel*, and *The Plague*. For Camus, absurdity is described as a natural interference to the nature of man, the nature of man on earth has been the quest to live, not just to live but to live purposefully. That is, it is inherent and innate in man as a meaning seeking being to be chiefly concerned with the meaning of his existence. While some come to the consciousness of this quest early and pattern their life to the understanding of it, some others fail in the understanding of it and face the inescapable reality and experience of life, thereby, experiencing life and the universe in a total feel of the absurd. To them human life and its endeavors are meaningless. Existence then, becomes so absurd and unbearable, individuals then experience depression and panic disorders, which makes it difficult for individuals to think towards morally right actions. Individuals slowly embrace the feelings of loneliness, helplessness or hopelessness. This is described by the existentialists as existential crises.

In philosophy, existential crises or existential dread relates to the crisis of the individual, when he realizes that he must always define his own life through the choices he makes, that inescapable point in man where man is faced with the decision he makes and man's freedom being overwhelmed with absurdity. Existential dread or depression has led many to the thought of suicide and loss of authentic existence or individual conscious self.

However, the thought of suicide or suicide itself has a great ethical implication on the Individual, suicidal thought, depression and other existential dreads individuals face today are all distractions or diversions from what can make an Individual ethical or act morally. Ethics naturally is concerned only with man's free actions, these conscious actions of man of which he is held responsible for, but with existential dread, individual capacity to decide or do what is right and wrong is lost.

Individuals attaining true state of freedom is of great importance and it is necessary for his moral life. It is the state of mind of the Individual that influences what is being accepted as being good or bad. A man's freedom that has been obstructed with absurdities and has refused to accept and overcome the absurd, will no longer see suicide as evil or bad action but will only perceive it as the best action to be taken. That is, the Individual conscious self is highly necessary in maintaining a good moral or ethical life.

Individual conscious self is seen as the realization of being in the material universe and his ability to face its absurdities. His authentic existence which can be referred to as trueness to one own self, spirit, decision and living despite absurdities. However, the absence of this conscious self can lead to existential depression, dread or crisis.

For Camus, an individual understanding of the meaning of his existence in the face of absurdity is the only true and serious philosophical problem because man could decide to continue or discontinue his existence depending on how he thinks he can live freely in the face of absurdity. Camus Quotes:

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest, whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories, Come afterwards, whether the earth or the Sun revolve around the other is a matter of profound indifference. To tell the truth, it is a futile question. I have never seen anyone die for the ontological argument... on the other hand, I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent question.¹

Individual existential living should not hang on the rationale of absurdity or no absurdity but on a consistent living of a conscious and authentic self. Socrates, an ancient philosopher, in his existential view, says "Man know thyself".

The absurdity of the individual existence is rightly emphasized by Camus in his novel "*The myth of Sisyphus*". Sisyphus, who was condemned by the gods to the meaningless and futile endeavor of rolling a rock to the top of a mountain only to watch the rock roll back to the bottom of the mountain. The Individuals have to understand just like the ongoing pandemic in the society that human life can easily be interrupted with unpleasing happenings. For Camus, we have to begin by accepting the absurd nature of the interface

between our inner subjectivity and the real world, both must be accepted without a denial, Individuals must avoid committing physical suicide, the negation of the subjective side and a philosophical suicide which can be described as the manipulation of our perception of the world so that it appears congenial.

The problem lies in the Individual's relationship to the world. It is at the interface between man and the world that the absurd is encountered. At this interface, there seems to be a destructive interaction between two surfaces that do not match. Individuals with different longings, desires, good wishes and a seemingly bright and near perfect foresightedness, making these inherent pictures turn to reality, becomes a mirage to man. The more he tries to achieve his existential right, and emancipate his freedom the more he encounters existential crises. Individual drawing farther from his exact picture has put man in the cocoon of depression and endless pursuit. The topic of this study presents itself as a problem. However, the question of human existence is the most crucial of all philosophical questions. Is it possible for Individuals to act in an ethical and meaningful manner, in a silent universe? Can Camus notion of absurdity be perceived as Moral relativism or Moral universalism? How will the Individual maintain its existence amidst absurdity? What does the absurd means for Camus? this work sets to point out absurdity as a dreadful phenomenon to individual existence and to clarify the absurdity that characterizes the human freedom and existence.

It will also provide the ideal understanding of living free in the face of the absurd, when we have the ideal understanding about the absurd, we are obliged by our knowledge of it. It is then hoped that the result of this work will create general awareness for human existence, thereby providing proper knowledge to a good ethical living in the society.

Moral Relativism

According to Tännsjö, moral relativism is when two persons pass conflicting moral verdicts on a certain action, they may both be right. The explanation is that they make their judgments from the perspective of different, socially constructed, moral universes. Moral relativism is the view that 'there is no measure of right and wrong other than the standards of one's society, the relativists hold that '...all moral principles are valid relative to culture or individual choice. Moral relativism is the commitment to respect other cultures and allow them to solve moral problems as they see fit. The inherent subjectivity of moral relativism may imply that people have no basis for making moral judgments against those with whom they disagree, as relativism provides no objective criteria for determining who is right.

Relativism is the view which is opposed to the universality of morality and the universal application of moral principles. Relativism claims that morality is a matter for every society to decide for itself, that morality differs from one society to another, that it is up to every society to decide for itself what is morally right and what is morally wrong, that different moral principles operate in different societies.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, Relativism is the denial that there are certain kinds of universal truths. There are two main types, Cognitive and ethical relativism.

"Cognitive relativism holds that there are no universal truths about the world. The world has no intrinsic characteristics, like the Sophists hold that 'man is the measure of all things, of things that are that they are, and of things that they are not that they are not.'"²

Ethical Relativism is the theory that there are no universally valid moral principles, all moral principles are valid relative to culture or individual choice. There are two subtypes,

1. Conventionalism: it holds that moral principles are valid relative to the convention of a given culture or society. "They suggest that a "culture has various standards and those constitute morality." This viewpoint solves the guidance problem, but also raises the issue that most people identify with several different cultures which could have oppositional values."³

2. Subjectivism: it holds that Individual choices are what determine the validity of a moral principle. As it is popularly stated Morality lies in the eyes of the beholder. Hemingway states "I know only that what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after."⁴ Individual moral relativism is the idea that values vary from person to person and each person has his own valid set of morals. There is no concept of correct moral principles; everything is based on what an individual desires.

Moral Universalism

Moral universalism, so-characterized, is a doctrine postulating the objective reality of concrete touchstones for judging what is right and wrong. Its posited moral charter is concrete in the sense that it sets forth clear and determinate instructions, principles or commands for the actual behavior of individuals and members of groups (do and don'ts such as "thou shall not bow down before carved images"; or "thou shall never use physical punishment to discipline a child"; or "thou shall always permit widows to remarry if they want to, but never require them to do so"). Those concrete touchstones of the moral charter are then said to be objective in the sense that (according to the doctrine) their requirements (obligations, duties, rights, prohibitions) are, and always have been, binding on all persons (or groups) without exception, and are universally obligatory regardless of a persons' or peoples' subjective or conventional acceptances, actual cultural practices or historical circumstances. At least since the early 20th century most (although certainly not all) anthropologists have rejected extreme versions of moral universalism. Many anthropologists associate moral universalism with either religious missionary efforts or with secular colonial interventions (military occupation and/or direct or indirect political rule).

According to Lahiri, moral universalism makes the fact clear that morals have a universal validity. "Moral universalism finds that moral actions are tied to the acts themselves, not regardless of the cultural context, but in respect of the basic ethical standards that exist in all cultures."⁵

Kant considers the universality of an action as an indication that it is morally right and its non-universality as an indication that it is morally wrong. In other words, in order to know whether a particular action I intend to perform is morally right or wrong, I should, according to Kant, test it by means of universalization. That is, I should try and see

whether it would be desirable. If all men in a similar situation as I am were to perform a similar action. "For Kant, Moral laws are categorical imperatives that tells what ought, should, or must be done. For him, these laws do not depend on any prior conditions or subjective, relative wish or wants."⁶ He further described that if a moral law does not come from some external laws such as God, who issues command then the law giver is reason itself. He believes that "a rational rule is one that is universal and consistent. It is universal, in that, it is a rule that applies to all people, at all times, and in all circumstances. It is consistent in that it does not lead to any contradictions."⁷ However, it is believed that the criterion for the rules used in Ethics is that they must be rationally consistent.

Individual Experience in The Face of Absurdity: A Relative Perspective.

Just like it was discussed in the previous chapter, Meursault a character in *The Stranger* and Sisyphus the absurd hero in the Greek mythology, the two characters has their perception of the absurd relatively. Sisyphus known as the absurd hero because of his desire for life despite his inescapable punishment. Camus saw in Sisyphus a lesson about the desire for life and the struggle to preserve it. He wrote, "But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises the rocks. The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy"⁸

Sisyphus had a perception of the absurd as that which all human beings must live to endure. From Sisyphus relative perspective, individuals must find it interesting rolling the rock to a never reaching, a perception of holding on to life. Like Sisyphus, an individual makes his own destiny or fate from day to day, he climbs up the hill as he pushes his rock, strives to reach the top, but towards the end of the journey he realizes that he is not going to reach his goal. While in *The Stranger*, the character Meursault experienced the absurd in the form of a death sentence, in his rejection of suicide as a way out, Camus wrote, "The contrary of suicide, in fact, is the man condemned to death."⁹ The perception of Meursault in *The Stranger* to the absurd is different from that of the individual who rushes for suicide to escape the absurd. Meursault experience in the face of absurdity describes the man intending to commit suicide rushes toward death while he is still able to live while the man condemned to death experiences an extreme passion to live although death is rushing towards him. For Meursault the closer he finds himself to his death, the stronger he becomes to his fate of absurdity. Meursault and Sisyphus portray a desire to live, which is a core attribute of the absurdist consciousness. Meursault and Sisyphus struggle individually can be ascribed as one against the world in all of its absurd manifestations.

Communal Experience in The Face of Absurdity: A Universal Perspective.

Camus illustration in the novel, *The Plague* depicted absurdity as a communal or collective experience. It described it as a universal perspective because the absurd in *The Plague* clearly affected everyone, because it became an inevitable experience. The town, Oran experienced the chaotic, irrational silence in the world. In *The Plague*, Meursault's struggle as an individual is shared by all. The symbol of shared suffering, Isolation, pains and fears in the novel, is essential to forming a communal understanding of the absurd. Camus employed this symbol expertly in *The Plague*, and he showed that there is an equal

experience of the absurd induced on all. The characters in *The Plague* at the beginning developed a quick quest to overcome the absurd by mere desire as a result of individual rational expectation about the world without accepting or in attempting to understand the absurd, this quest cannot overcome the absurd irrespective of the fact that it became a collective quest. Indeed, the desire to overcome the absurd is so great that it causes the townspeople to deny that which they cannot understand. "They disbelieved in pestilences. A pestilence is not a thing made to man's measure; therefore, we tell ourselves that pestilence is a mere bogey of the mind, a bad dream that will pass away."¹⁰ Because they cannot understand it, these people reject the absurd until it crashes on to them. Immediately the town is quarantined and the plague has become a clear reality, the characters struggle to find meaning in the face of the absurd. Many towns people turn to Father Paneloux, "a learned and militant Jesuit."¹¹ Paneloux understands the plague as a sign of divine justice. He preaches to the assembled congregation, "Calamity has come on you, my brethren, and, my brethren, you deserve it."¹² Unlike those who reject the plague, Paneloux fully accepts it and even tells the congregation to "rejoice."¹³ By his understanding, there is no need of struggle. One need only pray "and God would see to the rest."¹⁴ Paneloux's view of the plague is a "leap" because he appeals to a source outside of lived experience. Camus insisted that one must ground reason in lucidity to avoid such leaps. In *The Plague*, lucidity is a faculty that accompanies lessons learned from lived experience. For example, Dr. Rieux's occupation provides him with concrete examples of physical suffering, and therefore, he cannot fathom the possibility that this constitutes some form of justice. Rieux comments to his friend Tarrou that, "the order of the world is shaped by death" while God remains silent. When Tarrou asks Rieux who taught him this lesson, Rieux replies, "Suffering."¹⁵

Conception of the Absurd and Its Resistance.

The conception of the absurd is like an everyday human struggle, the individual struggles to create meaning out of meaninglessness and to accept it when they simply cannot do so. According to Camus, resistance is the appropriate reaction to the absurd. Those characters in *The Plague* that refuse to acknowledge the absurd resulted to nihilistic tendencies. The absurd as described by Camus is unavoidable. Characters such as Father Paneloux, in *The Plague* who recognize the absurd and the repulsive nature, accept the absurd by giving into their desire for unity and by assuming that the tortuous events serve a divine purpose. Still others, such as Dr. Rieux, realize that the pestilence is beyond human comprehension, and because they recognize the absurdity of the plague, they resist. Indeed, Rieux limits his reflection to the immediacy of the situation refusing to try to understand the significance of the plague. He comments to his friend Tarrou, "I have no idea what is awaiting me or what will happen when all this ends. For the moment I know this; there are sick people and they need curing. Later on, perhaps, they'll think things over; and so shall I. But what is wanted now is to make them well."¹⁶ just like Tarrou, the individual ability to conceive a situation as being absurd and acknowledge its awareness irrespective of the individual's desires for life is a gateway to being free. Rather than spending quality time dreaming of the means of escape an individual ought to understand the absurd situation at hand and work towards it resistance. Camus described the struggle for love and happiness in an absurd world as a resistance to the absurd. Rambert's reaction

to the absurd is an individual rebellion in the name of happiness, and Camus suggested that this reaction is justified. Of course, Rambert comes to realize that the existence of happiness and love for the entire town of Oran is in jeopardy, and he decides to remain in Oran to work on Dr. Rieux's sanitary squads. Originally fighting his own absurd condition in the name of happiness, "Rambert decides to fight for the collective happiness of the townspeople."¹⁷ Therefore, conceiving the absurd by acknowledging the absurd and resisting the absurd is a means of sustaining true freedom.

Evaluation

Camus illustrations in his novels can simply be described as an analysis on individual existence. He was able to discover a logical progression that allowed him to resist the absurd and to proclaim the value of life. For Camus, awareness of the absurd can be described as a starting point of individual freedom. In *The Plague* the citizens of Oran experience the absurd and those who are lucid, realize that the situation is inescapable and that none is free facing the same absurdity. Meursault the protagonist in *The Stranger* acknowledges the absurd while in prison and this led to his inner freedom, he had a better feel of being free in prison than his previous days outside the prison. Camus in *The Plague*, described absurdity as a general experience which we can relate as a universal experience, because it affects all. Even at the point the experience was denied, which we can relate as nonacceptance of a universal effect. The research finds it necessary to revisit Camus analysis of human existence as absurdity ultimately has a great influence on the individual freedom. Camus discovered a logical progression that allowed him to resist the absurd and to proclaim the value of life. The value of life which is found in attaining one's freedom and responsibility. Awareness of the absurd, for Camus, is usually the first step for every individual just like the citizens in Oran in the novel *The Plague* realize that the situation is inescapable the only logical reaction is to resist. Camus further described in the Rebel that the idea of rebellion is a fundamental characteristic of human life. Man must persevere in spite of his absurd existence, like Sisyphus, condemned by the gods to push a huge rock up the side of a mountain, only to have it endlessly fall back down, to be pushed up the mountain again and again. Yet, Camus believes that man is the master of his own fate, just as Sisyphus was, as well, by the mere fact that he chose to go back down the mountain after the rock and begin again. Camus exalts, I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again, he uses Sisyphus to demonstrate higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises the rocks and concludes that all is well. The daily struggle in human existence toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

Conclusion

However, we argue that the notions of absurdity, Freedom and revolt are universal concept but relative as experienced by the individuals. The moral goodness and badness of these concepts are tied to the ideas regardless of cultural context or individual standard. The idea of absurdity is a universal idea that is experienced by all at one point or the other

but the level at which individuals experience the absurd is relative. It becomes relative when it comes to the question, to what extent does the individual experience the absurd. Camus' concept of revolt is another essential universal concept, For Camus, the absurd enlightens the individual there is no future. Henceforth the individual has to live to resist on a daily basis which he described as the reason for the individual inner freedom and the only option left for the individual in the face of the absurd is to live life to its fullest, despite the world's refusal in providing reasonable meaning. For Camus, the world is in a continuous refusal which we can describe as a continuous universal refusal in providing reasonable meaning for human existence. The only option that was given and it is applicable to all and in all society to overcome the absurd is what Camus terms as "revolt." It is bold defiance against the absurd. Revolt as Camus clarifies, "is the constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity". However, Revolt requires lucidity. Lucidity becomes the checkmate for revolt to avoid the extremity that might come out of the universality of the concept of revolt.

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