

In what sense, if any, is Camus an existentialist?

Albert Camus is a well known name and an influential figure within the study of existentialism, absurdism, and philosophy in general. Any attempt to summarise exactly what he was, with regards to his occupation, is rather difficult, for he did not consider himself to be an existentialist nor a philosopher (Novello, 2020, p.413; Aronson, 2022). He considered himself an artist, rather than a philosopher (2020, p.413). Regardless of how he labelled himself, it is irrefutable that his collection of fiction and non-fiction writing alike, posed many critical philosophical questions and had an undeniable impact on philosophical study (2022). In fact, he opens one of his most notable works, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, by asserting that there is “but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide” (Camus, 1955, p.5). Though this discussion is not concerned with the wider question of whether or not Camus was indeed a philosopher, but to what extent he could be considered an existentialist, despite his own rejection of the label.

In fact, of all the philosophers to which existentialism is most often attributed, Sartre is the only one to self identify as an existentialist (Aho, 2023). This raises a fundamental issue of how one can clearly define what existentialism is, what its key concepts and characteristics are, if those considered the founders of it do not affiliate themselves with it? This issue undoubtedly creates some blurred lines in defining the concept of existentialism, which is perhaps why Camus is so easily included at the metaphorical tea party of existentialist thinkers. With this in mind, this discussion focuses primarily on the works of Sartre, the only self-professed existentialist, when exploring the fundamental characteristics of existentialism in order to discern the extent to which

Camus can be classed an existentialist. This discussion concludes that nihilism is the foundation of existentialism and absurdism, two philosophies which present two different responses to nihilism's proclamation that life has no meaning. Despite their similarities, they are ultimately a different response. Consequently, this discussion argues that Camus should not be considered an existentialist.

Nihilism is the name given to a philosophy which asserts that life is meaningless and without purpose; this is referred to as existential nihilism (Veit, 2018, p.212). Moral nihilism rejects the notion of objective values and morality, claiming that there is no objective right or wrong (2018, p.214). On the face of it, nihilism is a rather depressing and deflating philosophical view. It raises questions such as what is the point of living if life has no inherent purpose? Both existentialism and absurdism aims to provide answers to those questions, and addresses the conflict experienced by humans who are driven to find purpose and significance in a fundamentally meaningless and futile world (2018, p.212). Existential nihilism is at the root of existentialism, however, not all existentialists are moral nihilists (2018, p.214). Thus, it is important to make this distinction. Although the notion of a meaningless existence may seem cynical and depressing to some, existentialists tend to view it more as a simple fact, something to be embraced as a neutral truth of existence (2018, p.216).

One of Camus' most notable works which addresses the futility of life is *The Myth of Sisyphus*, an essay which draws inspiration from the Greek myth of Sisyphus, a man who was condemned by the Gods to continuously roll a boulder to the top of a mountain, only to watch it roll back down again once he'd reached the top (Camus, 1955, p.53). The Gods deemed it a hellish punishment to engage endlessly in such

futile and fruitless labour, a fate which Camus compares to that of a workman, sacrificing hours of his day to physical labour that serves no real purpose (1955, p.54). Camus notes that this fate is only tragic if one is conscious of the absurd, as it is only those conscious of the absurd that know that nothing has any purpose. Another comparison could be made with a phenomenon referred to as “sunk-cost fallacy”. This phenomenon refers to when people are apprehensive to abandon a course of action in which they have heavily invested, even if to abandon it would be more beneficial (Haita-Falah, 2017, p.44). An example of this would be staying in an unhappy relationship because those involved have a history, or sticking with an unsatisfactory job or career because one has spent time progressing in that field. Such a phenomenon indicates that humans generally have a hard time facing and accepting futility. Following Camus’ description of the absurd, it seems that to be enlightened to the absurdity and futility of existence would free people to make choices and decisions based on what they want, rather than investments made, as investing in something surely only makes sense if there is a purpose to it. It is perhaps for this reason that Camus ultimately concludes that Sisyphus must be happy with his fate (1955, p.55); he is aware of the absurdity of it and yet he embraces his fate. Essentially, according to Camus, we are all like Sisyphus. Whether we’re rolling a boulder up a mountain, clocking in at the office, making dinner, or doing the laundry yet again, futility permeates existence; but that doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy it and be happy regardless.

One of the central themes throughout *The Myth of Sisyphus* is Camus’ description of the absurd. Camus employs what could be considered a rather phenomenological approach in making his points, as he focuses on feelings and subjective experiences to

convey the feeling of the absurd. He declares that “at any streetcorner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face” (Camus, 1955, p.8), highlighting how the absurdity permeates everything and can be realised at any time. He paints a picture of a monotonous and standard existence of working in an office or a factory, and describes the feeling of when one starts to question “why?” as the absurd (1955, p.9). In essence, it is not the world itself or the people who inhabit it that Camus refers to as absurd, but rather the feeling we encounter when we seek meaning in a meaningless world, when we search for order in chaos and truth in uncertainty (1955, p.16). The absurd refers to the conflict we face when we try to make sense of the incomprehensible.

Sartre declares that the fundamental principle of existentialism is that existence precedes essence (Sartre, 1946, p.22). Our essence is ultimately what makes us who we are, and Sartre believed that we are what we make of ourselves (1946, p.22). Thus, our essence can only be defined once we have been brought into existence in the world. He contends that we have no essence attributed to us before being born. This notion, that existence precedes essence, is something that separates us from inanimate objects. Consider, for example, a key. The essence of a key is to open and lock a particular door. More than simply a function, the very reason that this key has been manufactured into existence is to open and lock a door. The essence of the key was attributed to it before it was created. A key that has been made before assigning it the purpose of opening and locking a particular door would likely be an inherently useless key. So, for inanimate objects, essence precedes existence. Humans, conversely, are not created with such a purpose in mind. Our arrival into the world is much more random. Further to this, humans are subjective beings (1946, p.23). Our subjectivity, in

relation to how we experience existence, is what allows us to define our own essence. A key, on the other hand, does not have a conscious experience of existence, and can therefore not define its own essence.

When it comes to defining our own essence, Sartre emphasises the significance of action. He declares that “reality exists only in action”, and goes on to say that man is “nothing more than the sum of his actions” (Sartre, 1946, p.37). He suggests that we are not defined by what we believe, our values, thoughts, or past experiences, but that we are defined solely by what we do. He believes that we are entirely free to make our own choices and pick our own course of action (1946, p.33). Sartre suggests that how humans live in the world amounts to a meaningful world in an otherwise meaningless existence (Aronson, 2022). The freedom we inherently have lays the foundation for us to build our essence as it dictates that we are entirely responsible for ourselves. In this way, we are responsible for attributing our own meaning and significance to ourselves and our lives.

The belief that we are ultimately free is shared by Sartre and Camus. Though Camus states that whether or not humans in general are free is of no concern to him, as he can only conclude that he himself is free (1955, p.27). In fact, Camus suggests that the individual who is not enlightened to the absurd is not truly free, and that the individual who may identify themselves as a father, a bank manager, or a fan of a national football team, is shackling themselves to a particular role, a role which bestows upon them the illusion of a purpose, which determines their choices and actions whilst maintaining the illusion of freedom (1955, p.28). Essentially, only the absurd person is free because they know that there is no purpose, no role to fulfil, thus, they are free to make their own

choices. The notion that we are free remains one of the foundational characteristics of existentialism, and whilst Camus conceives that the absurd person is indeed truly and unequivocally free, he also believes that some people simply aren't, and that they remain shackled by societal norms, expectations, and the roles with which they're affiliated. Camus' view on freedom is that it is conditional on the basis of facing the absurd, which contradicts Sartre's more unconditional stance on freedom.

The question of suicide is a poignant theme in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Suicide is often the result of questioning whether life is worth living. In other words, suicidal ideation often derives from questioning whether life has any meaning or purpose. Camus, however, puts forth the radical notion that life is better lived if there is no meaning (Camus, 1955, p.26). This contradicts Sartre's idea that we develop our own meaning in life. He suggests that living life, with the awareness that it is absurd and ultimately without meaning, is a sort of revolution (1955, p.26). For this reason, he contends that suicide is not a good option with regards to dealing with the inherent meaningless and futility of life.

Camus appoints the term "philosophical suicide" to the act of seeking purpose and meaning through religion. He suggests that once an individual has become awakened to the absurd, it is essentially an epiphany that cannot be unrealised (Camus, 1955, p.17). Therefore, in facing the rather uncomfortable conflict we endure as reasonable beings in an irrational world, many attempt to reconcile the conflict. For Kierkegaard, this includes taking a "leap of faith", and putting one's belief in the impossible and irrational (Rouhani, 2022, p.374). Kierkegaard, as quoted by Cottingham (2008, p.381),

describes faith as the “contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual’s inwardness and the objective uncertainty”. Camus points out how, in this case, the very thing that strips life of its meaning becomes the very thing to provide meaning, purpose, and clarity (1955, p.19). There is no faith without objective uncertainty, because belief in objective certainty is not faith. The works of other existentialist writers such as Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and Sartre seem more concerned with how we can overcome the absurdity and inherent lack of meaning in life. Camus is more concerned with how we can live alongside that feeling, resisting the temptation to seek meaning in work, religion, relationships, et cetera.

One of the issues with drawing philosophical meaning from the works of Camus is that he is, by his own admission, not a philosopher. His writing, such as in the *Myth of Sisyphus*, reads like a stream of contemplative musings. He makes no attempt to present any definitive answers to any major philosophical questions as he simply does not propose to do so. This can present a challenge in attempting to attribute a specific philosophy, such as existentialism, to his work. Undoubtedly his work does include many existentialist themes, such as freedom and the futility of life. However, he writes about freedom in what could perhaps be considered a more sociological manner, rather than a philosophical one, as he considers the role of societal norms and values in determining an individual’s freedom.

Camus believes that, upon being enlightened to the absurd, we have three choices. The first is suicide, which he doesn’t consider a good option as it involves merely escaping the absurd. The second is philosophical suicide, a term which indicates a rather reproachful attitude towards this response to the absurd. He also considers this option

to be a form of escapism. The third and final option is simply to embrace the absurd, to live freely in revolt of it. With regards to facing the absurd, Camus (1955, p.17) writes “to limit myself to existential philosophies, I see that all of them without exception suggest escape”. Here he describes the crux of the difference between existentialist views and his own. Whilst every other thinker labelled an existentialist proposes ways in which we can attribute meaning and significance to our own lives, Camus, in fact, does not. Ultimately, despite there being many existentialist themes in Camus’ work, this important difference distinguishes him from existentialist thinkers. One could consider absurdism a branch of existentialism, but to place him in the box of existentialism is to conflate some rather contrasting ideas. Thus, consequently, Camus should not be considered an existentialist.

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