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Albert Camus and the Ethics of Rebellion

James E. Caraway

There always comes a time when one must choose between contemplation and action. This is called becoming a man.

Conquerors know that action is itself useless. There is but one useful action, that of remaking man and the earth. I shall never remake man. But one must do "as if."

The principle can be established that for a man who does not cheat, what he believes to be true must determine his action.

Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.

(*Myth of Sisyphus*, 64, 64, 5, 3)¹

THESE OBSERVATIONS BY ALBERT CAMUS focus on the heart of his philosophy, for his philosophy is an exemplification of thought informing and leading to action, toward "remaking man and the world." At the beginning of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus indicates that this work marks the introduction of an idea which he is to pursue in *The Rebel*. In affirming unequivocally that the question of whether life is or is not worth living is the fundamental question of philosophy and repeating that "the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions,"² Camus reveals that his primary work is a consideration of ethics, even though he does not provide us with a systematic ethic. In

¹Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1955); hereafter cited internally as *Myth of Sisyphus*, followed by page number.

²*Myth of Sisyphus*, 4.

this essay, I want to examine Camus' description of the rebel and of how one is to act if one is a rebel, because, for Camus, thought must proceed to action. What actions, then, characterize the life of the person who is a rebel?

Before we get to the point of "remaking man and the world," we must first examine the evidence to ascertain whether such an action is warranted. An examination concerning man and the world will lead to an indication that the absurd is at the heart of man's relation to the world.

Ontological Grounding: The Absurd

Camus' starting point is that of viewing man in the here-and-now world without the possibility of any sort of leap to a set of transcendent values to confirm man's value. For Camus, any knowledge must be on the basis of immediate personal experience, for

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. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms. (*Myth of Sisyphus*, 38)

An examination of "immediate personal experience" – and one which stops within this realm – reveals that man's relation to the world can only be described as absurd. The absurdity is not in man himself nor in the world by itself, but in the relation between man and the world.

The Absurd is not in man (if such a metaphor could have a meaning) nor in the world, but in their presence together. For the moment it is the only bond uniting them. (*Myth of Sisyphus*, 23)

Man finds himself in the world, and he must of necessity live in the world, but the world does not fulfill his basic longings. Man longs for security in his being, immortal life; the world offers death. Man longs for knowledge, but the world remains opaque, a mystery (*Myth of Sisyphus*, 11).

This is the absurd situation in which man finds himself, a situation which is clarified by the metaphor of marriage and divorce. On the one hand, man is wed to the world; if he has being, his being must be experienced in the world. There is no other arena. If the relation between man and the world were reasonable, then the world in which man has to live would fulfill his fundamental needs. On the other hand, however, the world does not fulfill his basic needs. Hence, he is divorced from the world to which by ontological necessity he is wed. It certainly makes sense to be wed to someone, and it makes sense to be divorced from someone. But to be both wed and divorced to the same person simultaneously is patently absurd. This is the situation in which man finds himself in relation to the world.

According to Camus, the ontological relation between man and the world gives rise to the most significant question in philosophy, namely, Can man find life absurd and still go on living? That the meaning of life is at the heart of Camus' work indicates that his work is concerned with ethics throughout.

With the discovery of the absurd, two alternatives are open to the man "who lives on the basis of what he knows" and "does not cheat." Man must choose suicide or recovery. The question is, Can man find life absurd and still go on living? The possibility exists, for between suicide and death a third element can be interposed, the element of hope.

While the existential philosophers have realized the absurdity which links man and the world, according to Camus "all of them without exception suggest escape." For example, Jaspers and Chestov (*Myth of Sisyphus*, 24, 25), realizing that there is nothing in experience to infer any satisfactory principle which would negate the absurd and man's impotence, posit God as the only true solution. Also unwarranted are Kierkegaard's attempt to escape the absurd by his "leap of faith," and Husserl (*Myth of Sisyphus*, 33) and the phenomenologists' attempt to escape the absurd by illogically finding absolute value in each individual thing by immanentizing an essence in each thing, and thus attempting to provide a principle of explanation the absence of which was the origin of the absurd.

Camus rejects any attempt to offer an explanation beyond human reason. Such attempts unjustly dismiss the absurd by altering the problem. He notes:

The leap in all its forms, rushing into the divine or the eternal, surrendering to the illusion of the everyday or of the idea – all these screens hide the absurd. (*Myth of Sisyphus*, 67)

Camus' response to any attempt to go beyond human experience and reason is unequivocal:

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. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms. (*Myth of Sisyphus*, 38)

Camus thus rules out all appeals beyond immediate personal experience: leaps of faith, appeals to transcendence whether theological or philosophical. These are essentially philosophical or theological suicide. Also unwarranted is physical suicide. For if one accepts the principle that he will act only on the basis of what he knows, he has no knowledge on the basis of which suicide is warranted since no information relative to results is obtainable.

Upon the realization of absurdity, Camus observed that one could "go back into the chain" or consider suicide or recovery. Suicide is ruled out and

all the forms of transcendent hope; if this is the case, what form could recovery possibly take? Camus' answer is found in the acts of the Rebel.

The Ethics of Rebellion

Camus poignantly describes the way in which the consciousness of the absurd begins:

All great deeds, and all great thoughts have a ridiculous beginning. Great works are often born on a street-corner or in a restaurant's revolving door. So it is with absurdity. . . . Rising, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep. Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm – this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the “why” arises and everything begins in the weariness tinged with amazement. “Begins”–this is important. Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakens consciousness and provokes what follows. What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening. At the end of the awakening comes, in time the consequence: suicide or recovery. (*Myth of Sisyphus*, 10)

If one rejects suicide – the appeal to the transcendent in all its forms – and if one does not “return into the chain,” then the alternative is recovery. Camus sees that three consequences immediately follow from the realization of the absurd, namely, man's revolt, man's freedom, and man's passion. The first alternative to suicide is the obstinate absurdity which remains in constant revolt against the world. Revolt is the opposite of suicide. Suicide is an admission that the absurd is final. Revolt is the ongoing struggle with the absurd, a struggle which maintains the tension between man's desires and what the world offers without allowing man to negate either pole by escaping through suicide on the one hand or hope which does not conform to man's experience on the other hand. Second, man sees freedom in a new light. Freedom is no longer seen as coming from God or some transcendent being or idea, nor is it freedom to work toward some future goal. Rather, freedom is now seen as founded on the certainty of death and the absurd. With the realization that man has only this present life as a certainty and with the further realization that no transcendent beyond this life is admissible, comes the freedom and release to live the present life fully. This does not negate consideration for the future, but it does not allow the future to rob man of his present. As Camus observes: “Real generosity toward the future lies in giving all to the present.”³

This realization leads immediately to the third consequence of the absurd: passion. Realizing that man is certain only of this life, and consequently

³Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower, (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 304; hereafter cited internally as *Rebel*, followed by page number.

being unbound by the future, man can now live with indifference to the future and with the desire to exhaust the present moment completely. Indeed, the

present and the succession of presents before an ever-conscious mind, this is the ideal of the absurd man (*Myth of Sisyphus*, 38)

The actions of the rebel are immediately described by Camus on the opening page of *The Rebel*:

What is a rebel? A man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes, from the moment he makes his first gesture of rebellion. . . . Rebellion cannot exist without the feeling that, somewhere and somehow, one is right. It is in this way that the rebel slave says yes and no simultaneously. (*Rebel*, 3)

The rebel, then, is the absurd man. The absurd man, the rebel, lives only on the basis of his personal experience. He does not scorn reason; he uses reason, but admits the irrational. He is little inclined to leap before knowing. He sees no further place for hope beyond this life. But, what is most important, he sees that only this life has value. He rebels against death and for life. Camus succinctly describes the absurd man:

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 moral consciousness, he lives out his adventure within the span of his lifetime. That is his field that is his action, which he shields from any judgment but his own. A greater life cannot mean for him another life. That would be unfair. (*Myth of Sisyphus*, 49)

These two passages are very important for understanding Camus' view of *The Rebel*. The first passage introduces the fact that the "no" of the rebel is simultaneously a "yes," and serves to indicate the dialectical method which is so important for understanding the ethical stance which Camus' rebel will take. The second passage reveals that life is the only value which the rebel realizes and that his actions will be for life. The passage underscores the fact that the rebel's actions must occur "within the span of his lifetime"; i.e., it existentializes the rebel's actions. Finally, the second passage indicates that the rebel's actions are actions the validity of which he, and he alone, must judge.

This latter observation may immediately rouse the charge of subjectivism or even solipsism, but we will see that for Camus – largely because of his

dialectic – that such a charge is unwarranted, even though the rebel's ethic can be understood as self-authenticating.

The rebel revolts against death and for life. His “no” is simultaneously a “yes.” In realizing the absurdity of his relation to the world, he revolts, but the revolt does not eradicate, circumvent, or even mitigate the absurd. The absurd is maintained simultaneously with the revolt. These two considerations illustrate the way in which Camus uses dialectic to describe the rebel's actions.

With these two illustrations as guides, consider how the dialectic works in Camus' understanding, for it is only by knowing that Camus' rebel thinks and acts dialectically that we can understand the ethic. The history of the dialectic reveals that there are at least three ways in which dialectic is employed. The Platonic dialectic is most simply understood as discursive reasoning in which question and answer lead to another question and answer with this method continuing as the discussants move more closely to “the truth.” The Hegelian dialectic is an immanentizing of the idea as it works itself out in history in concrete examples of a proposed thesis countered by an antithesis. As the idea is concretized, the false dimensions of both thesis and antithesis are repudiated and a synthesis more nearly approximating “the truth” emerges, with this to be confronted by another antithesis and so on. A third variation of the dialectic is that of Kierkegaard who describes various “stages on life's way” with each stage serving as a thesis to be opposed by the antithesis of meaninglessness in some form. When meaninglessness is experienced the person “leaps” to another alternative, a move which is essentially a “leap of faith.” The Kierkegaardian dialectic is certainly not the dialectic as used by Camus. Nor is Camus' dialectic either the Platonic or the Hegelian. Rather his use of the dialectic could be referred to as the Tillichian or Barthian dialectic, since both Tillich and Barth employed the dialectic in the same way which Camus does. In this understanding of the dialectic, two seemingly contradictory assertions are affirmed simultaneously, with neither being allowed to take precedence over the other. There is no synthesis; each pole of the dipolar group is maintained equally. Hence, in the illustrations of Camus' rebel described above, the “yes” and the “no” are maintained simultaneously and equally, just as revolt and absurdity are likewise affirmed simultaneously; neither is denied, both are affirmed. The tension between the two remains.⁴

An examination of man's relation to the world reveals that the only knowledge which man has is that he now has his present life, but that he is, to use Heidegger's phrase “a being-toward-death.” Thus, the only value which man knows is life. The rebel therefore rebels against death and for

⁴Cf. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (London: Routledge & KeganPaul, 1963); Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vols. 1, 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-63); Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961-67).

life. Whatever action is life-affirming will be that action which is ethical; that which is life-negating is not.

The dialectical understanding of reality is important in understanding what Camus means by the rebel, for at the heart of the dialectic is the concept of “limits” or “measure” so characteristic of the Mediterranean world. I have already used two of the dipolar pairs of concepts which Camus uses to describe the rebel, namely, no-yes and absurdity-revolt. To these we need to add three others, so that Camus’ dialectic can be described as follows:

No	Yes
Absurdity	Rebellion
I	We
Freedom	Violence
Violence	Nonviolence
Absurdity	Meaning

These dipolar elements guide us in understanding how the rebel acts in each case. In a real sense the absurdity-rebellion elements are *prima facie* for their presence provides the essential impetus for any succeeding act which the rebel may take. The absurdity of man-in-the-world leads to rebellion and rebellion is always a rebellion for life and against death. As such it is a positive dynamic. Rebellion is not the same as revolution, for revolution is primarily interested in negating some entity, relation, or state of affairs. Rebellion, on the other hand, is positive; it is for life. Any activity which is primarily destructive cannot be rebellion. This is illustrated in *The Just Assassins*, a play which describes the difference between a revolutionary and a rebel and hence depicts how a rebel would act vis-à-vis murder.⁵ The play tells of some young Russian revolutionaries involved in the revolt of 1905. Much of the revolutionary action prior to this was based on nihilism and terrorism. Not so with the rebels of 1905; for in them the spirit of revolt is tempered with the spirit of compassion (cf. *Rebel*, 284-86). The incident which presents an example of the action of a true rebel involves the attempt to assassinate the Grand Duke Serge by Kaliyev, one of “the just assassins” to whose lot it fell to throw the bomb destined to kill the Duke. The attempt itself was a desperate exception condoned only because all other attempts to overcome the Duke’s enslaving regime had failed. During the first attempt Kaliyev refused to throw the bomb, for with the arrival of the Duke’s carriage he discovered that the Grand Duke was accompanied by two young children. Most of his associates approved this action. The following attempt, however, found the Grand Duke alone, and Kaliyev was successful, but he was arrested and later hanged.

That Kaliyev was a rebel and not a terrorist is exemplified by two statements which he made in opposition to one of his group, Stephan, whose

⁵Albert Camus, *Caligula and Other Plays*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1958); includes *Caligula*, *The Misunderstanding*, *The State of Siege*, and *The Just Assassins*, hereafter cited internally as *Caligula and Other Plays*.

only desire seemed to be to kill the opposition, and who felt himself automatically justified in doing so. Stephan, says Kaliayev, only wants “to get something done” (*Caligula and Other Plays*, 243). He has absolutized justice: “I do not love life; I love something higher – and that is justice” (*Caligula and Other Plays*, 244). Stephan wants to kill the Duke immediately. To him Kaliayev says:

You will not kill him single-handed, as on behalf of nothing. You will kill him with us, on behalf of the Russian people. That is what justifies your act. (*Caligula and Other Plays*, 244)

Later, Kaliayev, the just rebel, points out to his colleagues that the love of life – not abstract justice – is the only reason for revolution. He says:

I believe in an ideal quite as firmly as they do. Like them, I’m ready to give my life up for it. I, too can be cunning, silent, resourceful, when it’s called for. Only, I’m still convinced that life is a glorious thing, I’m in love with beauty, happiness. That’s why I hate despotism. The trouble is to make them understand this. Revolution, by all means. But revolution for the sake of life – to give life a chance, if you see what I mean. (*Caligula and Other Plays*, 245)

This illustrates the stance of Camus’ rebel. The rebel is not a slave who rebels and seeks to become master. Rather, he is a slave who rebels against servitude and for life. His attempting to become master would merely deny the origin of his rebellion. The rebel is one who asserts the “mutual recognition of a common destiny and the communication of men between themselves” (*Rebel*, 283). The rebel is one who attempts to rediscover with others “the only value that can save them from nihilism – the long complicity of men at grips with their destiny” (*Rebel*, 284).

“The long complicity of men at grips with their destiny” reveals that rebellion is a communal dynamic. Even though the rebel as an individual rebels, rebellion is not an individualistic act, for in his act of rebellion the rebel is affirming a right for himself which by the very affirmation asserts that it is also a right for all others.

This leads to a consideration of the dipolar elements: I-We. It is the individual man who rebels, the one who says “no” to slavery and death. He is a single individual who affirms that it is “better to die on one’s feet than to live on one’s knees” (*Rebel*, 15). Yet, this does not mean that the rebel’s stance is an individualistic or subjectivistic one. While rebellion “springs from everything that is most strictly individualistic in man,” it nevertheless “questions the idea of the individual” (*Rebel*, 15).

The individual may rebel but in so doing he is implicitly affirming a right for himself which he cannot deny for others. Let Camus summarize:

In absurdist experience, suffering is individual. But from the moment when a movement of rebellion begins, suffering is seen as a collective experience. Therefore, the first progressive step for a mind overwhelmed by the strangeness of things is to realize that this feeling of strangeness is shared with all men and that human reality in its entirety, suffers from the distance which separates it from the rest of the universe. (*Rebel*, 22)

Camus notes that “rebellion” plays the same role in our everyday human trials as does the “cogito” in the realm of thought. The rebel, therefore, says: “I rebel, therefore, we exist” (*Rebel*, 22). Camus’ insistence that the individual can do nothing, but he can do everything, is the affirmation that the I and the we will both be asserted simultaneously; neither can be affirmed over the other. Rebellion began because the individual was called into question, the individual was enslaved. But the rebel can claim nothing for himself that he would not also claim for everyone. Hence, “man’s solidarity is founded upon rebellion, and rebellion, in its turn, can only find its justification in that solidarity. We have, then, the right to say that any rebellion which claims the right to deny or destroy solidarity loses simultaneously its right to be called rebellion and becomes in reality an acquiescence in murder” (*Rebel*, 22).

The rebel also affirms his freedom, but this cannot be absolute freedom for it finds its limits in “the other.” Hence freedom cannot be affirmed apart from justice. But rebellion was born from a view of justice which did not ensure the individual’s freedom. Hence, justice cannot infringe upon freedom. Neither can be absolutized. Each must be affirmed simultaneously and find its limits in the other. Both must support the value of life. Rebellion was born in freedom but “rebellion puts total freedom up for trial.” Of the rebel Camus observes:

The rebel wants it to be recognized that freedom has its limits everywhere that a human being is to be found – the limit being precisely that human being’s power to rebel. . . . The freedom he claims, he claims for all; the freedom he refuses, he forbids everyone to enjoy.

.....

Absolute freedom mocks at justice. Absolute justice denies freedom. To be fruitful, the two sides must find their limits in each other. (*Rebel*, 284, 287-88)

The rebel is one who, in principle, opposes violence. But just as he says “yes” to both freedom and justice, the rebel says “yes” to both violence and nonviolence. While rejecting violence in principle, the rebel is not absolutizing nonviolence for to do so would make of him a mere conformist. But, what

is more important, he cannot absolutize nonviolence for such would become the negative support of violence. Camus therefore asserts:

Absolute non-violence is the negative basis of slavery and its acts of violence; systematic violence positively destroys the living community and the existence we receive from it. To be fruitful, these two ideas must establish final limits. (*Rebel*, 291)

A final pair of dialectical elements is absurdity-meaning. The Rebel is not one who, by his rebellion, overcomes absurdity. The relation between man and the world is absurd and remains so even in the face of rebellion. The primary value is life, life affirmed even though absurdity remains. But what kind of meaning could possibly ensue while the absurd continues?

To attempt to answer this question, take note of Camus' stance relative to man's responsibility for the situation in which he finds himself. It is not until *The Fall* that Camus faces the problem of the guilt of man.⁶ Until this novel Camus has proceeded as if "the other" were somehow the guilty party rather than "the man" who is being described in a particular mode. However, the so-called innocent man himself becomes "the other" to those with whom he is relating.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus speaks of "the principle of his innocence" in describing the absurd man. He notes: "There may be responsible persons, but there are no guilty ones" (*Myth of Sisyphus*, 50). In *The Stranger* we see man struggling against an unjust legal and social order. In *The Plague* innocent man struggles against the horrors of natural evil. In *The State of Siege* man encounters the enslavement of a totalitarian regime. Moreover, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus provides four examples of the absurd man. The first example, Don Juan, "goes from woman to woman." He is not in search of total love. Rather, it is because he loves each with "the same passion and with his total self that he must repeat his gift and his profound quest" (*Myth of Sisyphus*, 51). Each woman attempts to give him love, assuming that it can be given only by one. But for Don Juan it is not a matter of "at last" but "once more," for "why should it be essential to love rarely in order to love much" (*Myth of Sisyphus*, 52). He is not one "brought up on Ecclesiastes." He lives each present to the fullest without appeal.⁷

A second example of the absurd man is the actor who lives to the fullest the succession of "presents" consisting of those roles which he plays. He must become "the other," Hamlet, Shylock, or whoever for the three hours he is on the stage, and his meaning consists in his doing so. He must live

⁶Albert Camus, *The Fall*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1956); hereafter cited internally as *The Fall*, followed by page number.

⁷Cf. Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1942); idem, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: The Modern Library, 1948); and idem, *Caligula and Other Plays*.

fully in this present time upon the stage. He is successful or even superior to the extent to which he hides himself and reveals the character he is portraying. This, says Camus, is “called losing oneself to find oneself” (*Myth of Sisyphus*, 59). The conqueror is also an example of the absurd man for he fully involves himself in “remaking man and the earth” (*Myth of Sisyphus*, 65), even though he knows “that action is in itself useless.” He knows he can never remake man but he lives “as if.” The conqueror knows that “the individual can do nothing and yet he can do everything” (*Myth of Sisyphus*, 64). The final example of the absurd man is that of the artist or creator. He is faced with the fact that his creation has no ultimate or lasting meaning. He can neither explain nor resolve. He merely feels and describes the world and his relation to it. He describes with nothing added to it. This is a painfully difficult attempt, but in doing this, the artist communicates his personal awareness to others, thus revealing their common lot.

Of these examples, Camus is careful to note that “an example is not necessarily an example to be followed . . . and these illustrations are not therefore models” (*Myth of Sisyphus*, 50-51). He insists that the “absurd mind cannot so much expect ethical rules at the end of its reasoning as, rather, illustrations and the breath of human lives” (*Myth of Sisyphus*, 50).

But, finally, with *The Fall* Camus speaks of individual guilt, and in the personage of Jean-Baptiste Clamence, paints “a portrait which is the image of all and of no one” (*The Fall*, 139). By describing in an exhaustive array of vignettes his confessions, Jean-Baptiste Clamence makes every listener aware of his own guilt, for sooner or later the listener hears the story of sins which he himself has enacted. The message is clear: it is a portrait of everyone. But the central theme of the absurd and the crucial dimension of the activity of the rebel is central. All the themes of revolt are present in *The Fall*. The solidarity of men is still asserted, for Jean-Baptiste Clamence is a portrait of all. The rejection of absolutes is still present, as is the rejection of any transcendent hope or grace which may serve to absolve the judge-penitent and, through him, all others from their guilt. Yet, the primary guilt, the Fall of Jean-Baptiste Clamence is his failure to act as a rebel: he took no risk; he failed to use his freedom responsibly for the affirmation or saving of life.

Camus’ fall has the advantage of existentializing “the sin” of man. It avoids the mythological (Genesis) and meaningless neoplatonic explanations of Augustinianism. It may provide no definitive answers, and certainly it offers no salvation. Yet, the realization that each person must act for life and live to the fullest, along with the guidelines of Camus’ dialectic overarched with the understanding of “limits,” provides us with a strong prolegomena to ethical analysis. But, to be sure, this must be an analysis of our own acts and relations, for the rebel is one who, in the final analysis, adheres to no

judgment but his own. He is a self-authenticating individual, for, after all, only he is responsible for his own acts.