

# **THE CRITIQUE OF ALBERT CAMUS ABSURDITY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The search for the meaning of existence is the beginning and end of all philosophical questions. To this, existentialism as a philosophical discipline is set to solve the problem of meaning. Man with his daily activities has always found himself fixed in the unavoidable question of whether there is meaning and worth in living. This ultimate search for meaning is heightened in the benign indifference of the universe in the face of human suffering and the finality of death. But unfortunately, man from the perspective of Camus has not been able to discover the final and objective meaning of human existence. This is because the world in which man finds himself is inexplicable in human terms. Thus Camus maintains that human existence is absurd because it is fundamentally irrational. This work is directed towards critically understanding the meaning of life and human existence. In this work the methodological exposition and reflective approach will be adopted as its research method. With this exposition, the researcher will critically examine Camus' work in order to submit a more plausible solution to the concept of absurd life.

**KEYWORDS:** Critique; Life; Absurdity; Meaning; Existence

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In the history of human inquiry as well as in philosophy and other areas of human endeavours, the concept of the 'meaning of life' has remained the subject of human inquiry. On the philosophical level which is our point of focus, it has manifested in different forms, either as affirmation or total denial. Man has been in this ceaseless and strenuous struggle as to make sense of human existence on earth. This man's ceaseless search for meaning has been a characteristic difference between man and other animals. Let's therefore review historically, the search for the meaning of life.

Thales, Parmenides, Heraclitus and other Ionian philosophers moved the race for the search of the meaning of life when they sought for the ultimate reality and the stuff that constitute life. It stands pertinent to review these thoughts of various philosophers of the different epochs who have shared their thoughts on this concept. In Plato's apology, Socrates who sees himself as a gadfly experienced great suffering in his task of exposing the ignorance of the self-acclaimed 'wise men' of Athens. From his experiences when he was indicted and imprisoned for his refusal to leave his city when he was asked to do so, he stated:

You will not believe that I am serious and if I say again that daily to discuss about virtue and of those other things about which you hear me examining myself and others, is the greatest good of man and that the unexamined life is not worth living, you are still less likely to believe me . Yet, I say what is true(Socrates)

In Platonic terms, the meaning of life implies reaching the highest form of knowledge. This highest form of knowledge he called idea (form) from which, according to Plato, every good and just thing derives value and utility.

Plato emphasized the meaning that is found in suffering. He exposed the fact that it is when we are experiencing difficulty in life that we begin to search for the meaning behind our existence. In his Apology, Plato argued that man should constantly be seeking for the greater good which is found in self examination, thus seeing meaning in life as the greatest value of life. In illustrating this claim, he presented through the image of Socrates acclaimed by the oracle of Delphi as the wisest man in Athens; that human beings should have self awareness of their being and discover the hidden meaning of their existence.

This view was supported by Socratic response to his suffering and imprisonment. He delved into his inner self through series of rigorous reflections and examinations thereby discovering that for us to find meaning and worth in life, we must examine our actions often.

In the medieval epoch, St Augustine who lived his life motivated primarily by his great search for meaning championed this search for the meaning of life. He traded through the path of some sects like the Manicheans and Neo-Platonism, but was later consumed by the meaning which only God could give and discovering it, he exclaimed:

Late have I found you O beauty ever ancient and ever new! Late have I loved you! And behold, you were within me, and I out of myself, and searched for you .....(Burt; 2009).

Augustine became conscious of the fact that his life lacked meaning. He enjoyed the intellectual companionship and brotherhood of the Manicheans in his search for meaning of life and even championed their rhetoric. Augustine opened his mind to the call of reflection after having listened to the sermon of St Ambrose of Milan and started the journey into his inner self. In awe, having discovered the meaning of life in God, he exclaimed:

You are great O Lord and greatly to be praised: great is your power and to your wisdom there is no limit, and man, who is part of your creation .... , man who bears about within himself .... and the testimony that you resist the proud. Yet man, this part of your creation, wishes to praise you. You arouse him ..... , for you have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it rests in you(Augustine)

Schopenhauer holds reality to be composed of two aspects. It represents itself both as Will and as Representation. In explaining the Will, he said that it is the driving force that is found in everything that is in existence. Representation which is the other aspect, shows the universe as it manifest to us. His book, 'The World as Will and Representation' pointed out that life is filled with suffering. He believed that the essence of human existence is the Will. As human beings, what we are, is 'objectified' [i.e., physiologically expressed] 'will:

teeth, gullet and intestinal canal are objectified hunger, the genitals objectified sexual impulse; grasping hands and nimble feet correspond to the more indirect striving of the will"(Schopenhauer; 2005).

In his response to the question on the meaning of life, Schopenhauer stated that;

one's life reflects one's will and that the will is an aimless irrational and painful drive. Salvation, deliverance and escape from suffering are in aesthetic contemplation sympathy for others and asceticism (Schopenhauer; 2005).

With his conclusion that life is meaningless, he is viewed as a pessimist. He based his conclusion on his observation of the suffering that accompanies boredom and stress. He holds that the essence of human existence is the will, and since the will is our essence, what we do all the time is to will. This is why our will can be completely likened to an unsatisfiable thirst(Schopenhauer; 2005); for we are always tirelessly and restlessly needing, wanting, desiring and even striving for and against things. Moreover, Schopenhauer believes that the will is aimless and without any goal; he denies the existence of the Christian God by stressing that life is meaninglessness. For him, all things that are in existing are born without reason. In that regard, all existing things are without destination. They just enter into existence, continue in weakness and perish by accident. (Kierkegaard; 2002). Immanuel Kant in his 'Categorical Imperative' thus:

believes that all actions are performed in accordance with some underlying maxims or principle, and for actions to be ethical, they must adhere to the categorical imperative (Stumpf; 2002).

The Austrian psychologist and philosopher Viktor Emil Frankl introduced his psychotherapeutic method which centers on life's meaning as well as man's search for this meaning. He perceives man as 'a being in search for meaning and at the same time responsible for its fulfillment' (Frankl; 1959). For him, the task of discovering meaning in life is one for each and every one of us. Also since each life situation presents a problem for each of us to solve, "man must not ask what the meaning of his life is but must recognize that it is he who is questioned by life and that he can only answer to life by being responsible and answering for his own life" (Frankl; 1959). From this, he places the realization of meaning solely on the individual, and made no direct reference to the necessity of God. Frankl believes:

that the meaning of life differ from man to man, day to day and from hour to hour (Frankl; 1959).

His method made use of three theoretical aspects that have their bearing in three philosophical premises of freedom of will, meaning of life and will to meaning. The meaning of one's life for Sartre is man. For him, human beings are meaningless in life and death. In explaining that human life is meaningless and purposeless except the direction man gives to it, he noted:

Man can will nothing unless he has first understood that he must count on no one but himself. That he is alone abandoned on earth in the midst of his infinite responsibilities, without help, with no other aim than the one he sets himself, with no other destiny than the one he forges for himself on the earth (Sartre; 1959).

In as much as the reality of the absurdity of life as well as the despair in human life is obviously acknowledged by Sorèn Kierkegaard, he insists, nonetheless, that all the circumstances mentioned do not in any way rob human life of meaning. Life in general, for Kierkegaard has meaning, especially when anchored on absolute faith in God. He formulated the phrase 'leap of Faith' arguing that;

life is full of absurdity and one must make his own value in an indifferent world. One can live meaningfully (life free from despair and anxiety) in an unconditional commitment to something finite and devote the meaningful 'life to the commitment, despite the vulnerability inherent in doing so (Kierkegaard; 1941).

Instead of him to seek for assistance, he would rather choose to be himself-with all the tortures of hell ... (Kierkegaard; 1941).

Kierkegaard insists on stating his position in an extreme rhetoric possible. For he continually speaks of Christianity not only as beyond reason but also as supreme paradox and even as the absurd (Kierkegaard; 1941). In his search for the meaning of life, he maintained that life still has meaning in spite of its accompanying existential as well as disconcerting human situation or condition. As a Christian philosopher, he holds that it is foolish to search for some sort of social or historical salvation as the remedy for the infirmities of the human condition. Fulfillment could only be achieved on a personal level within the confines of each individual's personal history, through a radical leap of religious faith (Kierkegaard; 2008). He believes that humans should be able to fashion out their own meaning in life through regaining their individuality which can be possible only through faith in God. Kierkegaard believes that amidst the meaninglessness that humans encounter in their existence through their experience of suffering, boredom, stress, pain and death, they should be able to construct their meaning of life through embracing a leap of faith'. Abraham for him is an example of this for if he did not have faith that he will be blessed in the future life ..., God could not have given him a new Isaac .... , he had faith by virtue of the absurd" (Sartre; 1959).

Let us now review the thought of Albert Camus on the meaning of life since from the foregoing; no philosopher's solution could completely resolve the question about the meaning of life. Their thought only indicated the importance of the meaning of life.

**CAMUS AND SEARCH FOR LIFE MEANING**

Camus' notion of the absurdity and meaninglessness of life attracted many reactions; some which helped more to understanding his philosophy. As would be expected just as in any philosophical notion, Camus' thought on absurdity roused in philosophers and to the general public a deep reflection on the meaning of life which as it were, is one of the aims of any philosophical work. Kierkegaard in his contribution to life's meaning holds like Camus in his 'Sickness unto Death' that the absurd arises out of the fundamental disharmony between individual's search for meaning and the meaninglessness of the universe(Kierkegaard, 1994). He holds that as beings looking for meaning in the meaningless world, human beings have three ways of resolving the dilemma which are: suicide leap to faith and revolt. He like Camus dismissed the viability of this option and said that this does not counter the absurd, but only becomes more absurd to end ones existence. He stated that a belief in anything beyond the absurd requires a non rational but perhaps necessary religious acceptance in such an intangible and empirically unproven thing commonly referred to as a 'leap of faith'. Against Camus statement that one should accept the absurd: a solution in which one continues to live in spite of the absurd and believing that by accepting the absurd, one can achieve absolute freedom, and by recognizing no religious or other moral constraints and by revolting against the absurd while simultaneously accepting it as unstoppable, one could possibly be content with the personal meaning constructed in the process. Kierkegaard regarded and holds this solution a 'demonic madness'. He rages most of all at the thought that eternity might get it into its head to take his misery from him"(Kierkegaard; 1994).

In speaking for Camus' work, Peter Brad holds that

the discovery of the absurd will often lead one to two reflexive responses. The first entails a kind of negative leap into suicide and despair. The second involves a more common and subtle positive leap where an underlying anxiety about the human dilemma presumably causes one to forget the starting point- the place where the absurd was first uncovered(Kierkegaard; 1994).

Going further, Brad supported Camus by saying that if life has meaning , it is dependable to human beings who created the meaning. He holds like Camus that;

keeping the absurd alive, without submitting to its terms is our revolt, which is devoid of absolute hope(Brad; 2011).

Mathew Kundert in trying to explain the staring points of Camus in his ethics which has three foundations in God is dead, life is absurd and life is meaningless principles, first of all criticized him by saying that there is a discrepancy in the values rejected by God is dead principle. Also for him, it seems that the life is absurd principle can be dissolved by finding an alternative, and more fruitful vision of the universe that does not produce absurdity. Before the life is meaningless principle is reached, it is left empty and unsupported. For the God is dead principle, he holds that Camus intonation of this principle destroys deontological ethics which holds that the means justifies the end but leaves the teleological ethics intact which holds that the end justifies the means. This for him is because the teleological ethics does not need an outside arbitrator to determine the right or the wrong.

In criticizing Camus' life is absurd principle Mathew cited his comment on the absurdity of life thus:

Rising, street car, four hours in the office or in the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep and 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 that weariness tinged with amazement"(Camus; 1996).

Invariably, Matthew points out that Camus could be possibly referring to the absurdity of certain people's lives. There are, according to Matthew, some people's lives that fit into this simplistic mold. He gave an example of his sister who would like to live her life as something of a free spirit: working when the need arise, sleep sparingly and partying often. Mathew holds that Camus would supposedly argue that his sister is certainly in a mold that could easily be questioned. Why party all time? Why not work instead? Why anything at all? For him, this is not quite

Camus point for the final question is what Camus is driving at. Criticizing him further on the absurdity of our place in the universe which are found in the following lines:

'So long as the mind keeps silent in the motionless world of its hopes ... , we must despair of ever reconstructing the familiar, calm surface which would give us peace of heart"(Camus; 1996),

He, therefore, insists that by examining the passage it certainly, by itself seem absurd that the word should be in fine working order until we exercise our mind. This being the case then, he asks what the absurd part would be. To bring out the absurd part, he cited another passage of Camus thus:

This world itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd deepens as much on man as on the world. For the moment, it is all that links them together. It binds them one to the other as only hatred can weld two creatures together"(Camus; 1996).

From this, the absurd is not the universe or man. It is their combination together that produces the absurd. Mathew does not deny that the use of reason in the world is absurd as Camus holds because Quantum theory in the past century has shown that the universe does some very unpredictable things when in very small quantity and at very high speed. What trills Mathew in Camus statement:

hence the intelligence ... tells me in its way that this world is absurd; its contrary blinds reason may claim that all is clear... I know that is false"(Camus; 1996),

is why Camus accepts his fate of never truly understanding the world, of living in absurdity. Mathew therefore holds that the answer to the absurdity is to get rid of reason; or may be not to get rid of it but not to make use of it to understand the universe. For him, Camus would object to getting rid of reason because he would say that man and reason are intrinsically connected. But though Mathew agrees that one cannot get rid of reason, however one does not always use reason. Camus holds that Mathew's hope should be gotten rid of since it gives us the illusion to eternity. We should live in absurd freedom revolting from our absurd position, but constantly reaffirming the absurd. Mathew disagrees about the place of hope in so far as there is nothing wrong with hope as long as one does not get it mixed up with eternity. While Camus live with the absurd, making hope seems dangerous. Mathew dissolved the absurdity, leaving hope to be viable and healthy option.

Sidonja Manushi having realized as he was reading Camus' essays that the absurd is a notion that catches up with us through our every day life(Manushi; 2012), echos Camus' stand that life is meaningless- absurd. "We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking"(Manushi; 2012). Most people for him certainly fall into the routine of living out of habit. Going further, Sidonja in agreement with Camus pointed out that it is only when we come to the awareness that all our goals, purposes and dreams are in fact, nothing but nothingness and that we are just pilgrims in this planet; that we come face to face with the absurd"(Manushi; 2012). In times like this, everything sees meaningless. When we lose the feeling of security and meaning, we feel like strangers, like being sucked into the void. In trying to analyze Camus philosophy, Sidonja said that Camus' philosophical propoundment certainly begins after we have become conscious of, and accepted the absurd. It is of no need denying it. There is no fighting it, as it has come to be. In supporting Camus he writes:

Until a higher power can be proven and until meaning can be found in our chaotic universe- a meaning comprehensible to the human mind- the absurd is the only truth"(Manushi; 2012).

Our life for him begins when we answer the question of what comes after we have faced the absurd. He is a supporter of living life to the fullest because of the absurd. Sidonja noted that he sees the logical conclusion of the absurd as a life full of possibilities and experiences. He does not deny that a life without an absolute meaning is scary, but asked the question whether it means we should stop living it? In answering the question, he holds that no one can stop us from doing that because facing the absurd means bringing down the walls we create and exploring true freedom- a freedom that only the individual living for the here and now can experience(Manushi; 2012). For

him, we own our fate like Sisyphus. 'Our life is our thing'(Manushi; 2012), our damnation is the absurd- we need no leap of faith or a higher power to give meaning to our life. He holds like Camus that we have accepted our life as meaningless and now we are living it.

He concludes therefore that we relate to Sisyphus because he considers our actions as a rock and the top of the hill as our goal(Manushi; 2012). . He should like Sisyphus take his actions and reach higher and repeat until he can do no more. Though it may have no absolute meaning but for him, the joy contained within his action is real- it should be enough.

### **THE PROBLEM OF EXISTENTIAL FREEDOM**

For Camus, freedom may never be achieved beyond what the absurdity of existence allows: nevertheless, the nearest one could come to being absolutely free is by way of accepting the absurd(Camus; 1996). He introduces the idea of "acceptance without resignation" as the;

way of dealing with the recognition of absurdity, asking whether or not man can live without appeal while defining a conscious revolt against the avoidance of absurdity of the world. In a world devoid of higher meaning, the human nature becomes as close to absolutely free as is humanly possible(Camus; 1996).

Having in mind Camus' notion of 'acceptance without resignation' as the only way one can be free from the absurdity of life, Brad submits that:

we are slaves to our uniquely human condition. The absurd binds us to its terms and we can never be free from it, though if we can learn how to carry it, we protect ourselves for the temptation of treating sources of meaning or values as absolute(Brad; 2011)

Kierkegaard stood against Camus' view on freedom that one should accept the absurd: a solution in which one continues to live in spite of the absurd and believing that by accepting the absurd, one can achieve absolute freedom, and called it 'demonic madness'(Kierkegaard; 1994). Sidonja swimming against the problem of existential freedom, echoed the individual freedom which for him, only the individual living for the here and now can experience. For him, no one can stop us from living a life without absolute meaning because facing the absurd means bringing down the walls we create and employing true freedom- a freedom that only the individual living for the here and now can experience(Manushi; 2012). Baggini speaking on this freedom holds that we discover ourselves in a universe we did not create, bound to limitations we did not choose, and consequently we became vulnerable to injury, loss and eventual death. However, this does not remove the fact of the capability of creating beauty and the potentiality of developing deep and meaningful (loving) relationships or of discovering nature as intelligible and glorious and , therefore, visualizing the possibility of some kind of fuller existence over and beyond the limitations of time and circumstances. Hence, he maintained that life has meaning to the extent we give meaning to it. (Internet; 2006). With these, he gave Camus supporting feet and borrowed his view on freedom.

Finally, Sligley Donald criticizes Camus for holding two pillars at the same time. By this he means that Camus both criticizes and at the same time defends his views (Donald; 2006). This he exemplified in Camus' understanding that metaphysical rebellion is inherently nihilistic but at the same time maintaining that it also has truth innate in its origins. For him the problem is methodological, since Camus determines to begin his investigation with a stand he has already rejected as wrong(Donald; 2006). He went on to criticize Camus for he holds that Camus attempts to begin Cartesian-style from a stand point of believing nothing, but rather of arriving at where he left himself at the end of the Myth. Invariably he takes the existential position he rejected in the essay. In making this clearer, he writes:

The price Camus pays for his constant return to this spurious, Cartesian reasoning is not small. It is the neglect of a careful and potentially.... that had been prepared for the discussion of the absurd in favour of a series of weak,... that posit hypothetically the existence of such an order by exposing the logical contradictions involved in all modern denial of it (Donald; 2006).

For Sligley, Camus method is,

an attempt to moderate rebellion by discovering its worst excesses and then critically examining the arguments justifying these excesses so that they can be rejected, leaving only a naturally good and moderate revolt. Whether this is possible is doubtful. Betaille doubts that moderation can be extracted from rebellion at all and Voegelin, who interprets Camus as rebelling against the rebels by seeking a return to a Greek understanding of human life doubts that this is enough to stave off modern extremes. While sympathetic with Voeglin (whom he admires), Sligley disagrees that the contradictions in Camus' account are down to his desire to return to the Greeks but rather his "unwittingness" to return to the Greeks and to something like the understanding of human life it entails more completely (Donald; 2006).

Furthermore, Sligley argues that the cause of Camus' methodological problems is the puzzling decision. Camus, holding on this idea as his starting point, discovered himself accepting the same idea that he intends to attack, which is that human beings are in need of some kind of mediator if they are to comprehend their real place in the world or purpose in life. One could be confused at this point, since Camus does not believe in God. Meanwhile, the mediator could not be taken to imply the Christian messiah 'Jesus Christ'. Instead, he seems to put forward his own messianic candidate, the rebel. Sligley, therefore, insists that Camus went against his writing because since we have no need to be saved from the human condition, he, thereby, needs no mediator or saviour.

## CONCLUSION

The fact that Camus dealt on one of the most occupying questions of human existence makes this work significant. His Idea about the meaninglessness of life has triggered deep reflection in man in order to understand his existence more. Thus the significance of reviewing his notion in order to find meaning in existence through critical reflection.

However, that the notion of Camus on the meaning of life has contributed in no small measure to philosophy, yet his theory still requires some critical adjustment.

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