

Camus's Critiques of Existentialism

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Abstract

This article focuses on Camus's perception of existentialism, which he characterized in his "absurdist period" as a form of philosophical suicide, while in his "period of revolt," he viewed existentialism as a destructive mode of thought that reduces human life to its historical dimension, leaving no room for the interplay of history and nature, and reducing everything in its path to ideological abstractions. Despite his lifelong opposition to existentialism, many commentators continue to this day to classify him as an existentialist—a practice the present article challenges as misleading.

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When Camus completed his novel *L'Étranger/The Stranger* in May 1940, he had already begun the writing phase of an essay on the absurd—a project mentioned in his *Carnets/Notebooks* four years earlier, and which would be completed in February 1941. This essay and novel, along with two plays—*Caligula* and *Le Malentendu/The Misunderstanding*—would constitute what Camus himself described as his series of the "absurd" or "negation," and although they were published between 1942 and 1945, Camus considered them expressions of his major concerns *before* the war.

It was only in the last months of writing his essay on the absurd that Camus decided to call it *Le Mythe de Sisyphe/The Myth of Sisyphus*, thereby giving to the entire work the title of its final chapter. Sisyphus was the figure from Greek mythology whom the gods condemned to rolling a boulder up the side of a mountain to its summit, at which point the boulder would roll down again; Sisyphus would then descend the slope of the mountain and begin again his useless and never-ending task.

Early in this essay, Camus states that when comforting illusions are stripped away, life can be seen to be completely devoid of meaning. He asks whether that realization necessarily means that life is not worth living. The entire essay is an attempt to answer that question.

In developing the model on which his answer would be based, Camus argues that man desperately demands meaning and clarity of the world around him but finds himself confronting a universe that is irrational and meaningless. In the face of this negation of basic demands of the human spirit, the stance to assume, according to Camus, is one of defiance and revolt, even though the effort expended in that hopeless struggle is like that of Sisyphus rolling his rock up the mountainside. Despite that hopelessness, Camus argues that it is this very defiance and revolt in the face of a world without meaning that enable man to live life as fully and passionately as possible. Stating this conclusion in its most paradoxical form, Camus affirms: "Il s'agissait précédemment de savoir si la vie devait avoir un sens pour être vécue. Il paraît ici au contraire qu'elle sera d'autant mieux vécue qu'elle n'aura pas de sens."¹ (*Essais*, 138). In this way, Camus maintains that what could easily be mistaken for grounds for suicide—a realization that life has no meaning—is in fact a basis for living life to the fullest. That, in a nutshell, is the point of the essay.

On several occasions in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, Camus makes it clear that he is arguing *against* what he sees as the existential position, which he characterizes as nothing less than "philosophical suicide" (*Ibid.*, 119). He states, for example:

¹Albert Camus, *Essais* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1965), p. 138. "It was formerly a matter of knowing whether life had to have a meaning in order to be lived. It now appears to the contrary that it can be lived all the more fully if it has no meaning." Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

Or, pour m'en tenir aux philosophies existentielles, je vois que toutes, sans exception, me proposent l'évasion. Par un raisonnement singulier, partis de l'absurde sur les décombres de la raison, dans un univers fermé et limité à l'humain, ils divinisent ce qui les écrase et trouvent une raison d'espérer dans ce qui les démunit (*Ibid.*, 122).²

This clear condemnation of existentialism on his part was often missed by commentators. In an effort to dispel what had become and still is a common misconception, Camus stated in an interview in 1945: "Non, je ne suis pas existentialiste [...] et le seul livre d'idées que j'ai publié: *le Mythe de Sisyphe*, était dirigé contre les philosophes dits existentialistes..."³

In his absurdist period, as shown above, Camus explicitly rejected existentialism. In the new and more mature philosophical position he developed in the works published just after the Second World War, Camus remained highly critical of existential thought, and though his rejection of existentialism was generally more implicit and indirect than it had been before, it was no less meaningful in relation to those issues that preoccupied him at the time.

It was in works such as *La Peste/The Plague* (1947), *L'Homme révolté/The Rebel* (1951) and the equally important editorials grouped under the title *Ni victimes ni bourreaux/Neither Victims Nor Executioners* (1946), that the somewhat abstract concepts

² "Restricting my discussion to existential philosophies, I see that every one of them, without exception, proposes evasion. By way of a unique kind of reasoning, they start out from the absurd and move across the ruins of reason, in a universe that is closed and limited to the human; [there] they deify what crushes them and find a reason for pinning their hopes on what impoverishes them."

³ "Non, je ne suis pas existentialiste," *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, November 15, 1945. Extensive excerpts from this interview are included in *Essais*, pp. 1424-1427. "No, I am not an existentialist [...] and the one philosophical book I have published, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, was written against philosophers called existentialists..." Yet on the back cover of the Vintage paperback edition of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus's essay is, to this day, described as "a crucial exposition of existentialist thought."

merely outlined in the earlier period, were for the first time given real substance. Here, in what Camus described as his "positive" series of "revolt", the absurd was no longer just a metaphysical category; now it had specific social forms as well, the most salient of which was murder. Likewise, revolt was now defined above all as a refusal to accept the loss of human lives and an insistence on viewing death as a scandal. Now in the framework of this second period of Camus's thought—consisting of works published between 1946 and 1951—the characters who have taken over the role of Sisyphus are those who stubbornly fight to save human lives, no matter how hopeless that struggle may appear or how overpowering the murderous forces may seem; they are also characters who refuse to take part in the passing of death sentences or even in passively accepting that movements or institutions do so in their name.

This had not always been Camus's position. In fact, he adopted it as late as 1945 and its inception can be pinpointed to a decision he had to make concerning the execution of a convicted collaborator in the aftermath of the Liberation.

In October 1944, François Mauriac, writing in the conservative newspaper *Le Figaro*, accused the organizations of the Resistance of excesses in their condemnation of collaborators. In his own newspaper, *Combat* (originally founded as the clandestine organ of the Resistance movement of the same name, and on which Camus had worked since 1943), Camus argued that justice had to prevail over mercy if the soul of France was to be preserved and that certain crimes simply could not be forgiven. In one of the last editorials devoted to this issue, he added:

Nous n'avons pas le goût du meurtre... [Mais] la France porte en elle, comme un corps étranger, une minorité d'hommes qui ont fait hier son malheur et qui continueront de le faire. Ce sont des hommes de la trahison et de l'injustice. C'est leur existence même qui pose donc le problème de la justice puisqu'ils forment une part vivante de ce pays et que la question est de les détruire (25 oct 1944).⁴

Three months later, the writer Robert Brasillach was condemned to death for his crimes as a collaborator, and François Mauriac organized a campaign to obtain a pardon for him. On January 25, 1945, the writer Marcel Aymé—himself compromised for having worked for the collaborationist paper, *Je suis partout*—wrote to Camus, despite Camus's support for the death penalty in other cases, asking him to sign a petition to de Gaulle requesting that the death sentence not be carried out. Camus paced the floor of his apartment until dawn and finally decided to sign the petition, adding his name to those of Paul Valéry, Jean Anouilh, Jean-Louis Barrault, Jean Cocteau, Colette, Jean Paulhan, Gabriel Marcel and others, as well as Mauriac and Aymé. (De Gaulle received Mauriac, read the dossier, and did nothing to prevent the execution of Brasillach in February 1945).

From that time on, a refusal to legitimize murder in any form became the very cornerstone of Camus's thought. And in a speech he gave in 1948 at a Dominican monastery, he stated:

Il y a trois ans une controverse m'a opposé à François Mauriac. [...] j'en suis venu à reconnaître en moi-même, et publiquement ici, que, pour le fond, et sur le point précis de notre controverse, M. François Mauriac avait raison contre moi.⁵

⁴ “We have no taste for murder... [But] France carries within herself a kind of foreign body, a small number of men who recently caused her misfortune and who will continue to do so. They are men of treason and injustice. It is their very existence which is a problem for justice since they are a living part of this country and it is a question of destroying them.”

⁵ “Three years ago, I was engaged in a dispute with François Mauriac. [...] I have come to recognize for myself and now publicly that regarding the fundamental issue, and on the specific point of our dispute, Mr. François Mauriac was right and I was in the wrong.”

How many public figures have the stature Camus showed on that occasion?

In virtually everything Camus published between 1946 and 1951, an opposition to murder was central. Of primary importance to Camus was the need to prevent murderers from killing their potential victims, without becoming a murderer in turn. This is the pivotal question Camus dealt with head-on in *L'Homme révolté/The Rebel*, and more obliquely in *La Peste/The Plague*, where the allegory has two distinct social meanings, since the team of doctors and volunteers fighting against the epidemic represent both the struggle of the Resistance movement against the Nazis *and* a post-war opposition to all ideologies which legitimize violence, including that of the Stalinists.

The character Tarrou, who had discovered that the revolutionary movement he had joined in his youth was ultimately as life-denying as the political system it sought to overthrow, states in a key passage: "...j'ai décidé de refuser tout ce qui, de près ou de loin, pour de bonnes ou de mauvaises raisons, fait mourir ou justifie qu'on fasse mourir"⁶ (Gallimard, 273), thereby echoing the point of view Camus expressed in *Ni victimes ni bourreaux/Neither Victims Nor Executioners* when he wrote in 1946: "...je ne saurais plus admettre, après l'expérience de ce deux dernières années, aucune vérité qui pût me mettre dans l'obligation, directe ou indirecte, de faire condamner un homme à mort"⁷ (Gallimard, 146).

⁶ "...I have decided to refuse anything which, either immediately or remotely, and for good or for bad reasons, causes men to die or justifies causing them to die."

⁷ "...I can no longer accept as true, after the experience of these past two years, anything which might require me, directly or indirectly, to have any man condemned to death."

Throughout this period (1946-1951), Camus distinguished between two types of thought: a destructive one, rooted only in History, absolute, messianic, reducing everything in its path to ideological abstractions; and a life-affirming one, in which History and Nature balance one another, an outlook which is modest and respectful of limits. In “La Pensée de Midi”/“Thought at the Meridian”⁸, the final and most important chapter of *L’Homme révolté*, Camus identifies the life-affirming outlook with the sun-drenched cultures of the Mediterranean, and the destructive mode of thought with *rêves allemands/Germanic dreams* (*Essais*, 683-709).

Existentialism was, for Camus in this period of revolt, one of the forms taken by what he saw as a Germanic and life-denying mode of thought. For example, in an entry in his *Carnets/Notebooks* from 1946, he wrote: “L’existentialisme a gardé du hégélianisme son erreur fondamentale qui consiste à réduire l’homme à l’histoire”⁹—a criticism Camus also made of Marxist ideology, when he wrote in 1946:

Nous vivons dans la terreur [...] parce que l’homme a été livré tout entier à l’histoire et qu’il ne peut plus se tourner vers cette part de lui-même, aussi vraie que la part historique, et qu’il retrouve devant la beauté du monde et des visages.¹⁰

⁸ “Thought at the Meridien” is the rendering proposed by Anthony Bower in his translation of *L’Homme révolté* (New York: Vintage, 1991).

⁹ Albert Camus, *Carnets* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), vol. 2 (janvier 1942-mars 1951), p. 180. “Existentialism has retained from Hegelian thought its fundamental error which consists of reducing man to history.”

¹⁰ “Ni victimes ni bourreaux,” in *Essais*, op.cit., p. 332. “We live in terror [...] because man has been entirely given over to history and can no longer turn toward that part of himself, just as real as the historical part, that he could find [in looking at] the beauty of the world and of faces.”

In another *Carnets* entry from the same period (p. 174), Camus linked existentialism to what he saw as the excessive historicism of German thought, and identified his own outlook—rooted in nature—with that of the Greeks:

Tout l'effort de la pensée allemande a été de substituer à la notion de nature humaine celle de situation humaine et donc l'histoire à Dieu et la tragédie moderne à l'équilibre ancien. L'existentialisme moderne pousse cet effort encore plus loin et introduit dans l'idée de situation la même incertitude que dans celle de nature. Il ne reste plus rien qu'un mouvement. Mais comme les Grecs je crois à la nature.¹¹

Camus identified existentialism with philosophical suicide in the series of the absurd, and with a reduction of human life to its historical dimension in the subsequent series of revolt. In each case, existentialism was seen as life-denying, and as such, as diametrically opposed to Camus's own life-affirming outlook.

In the years which followed the humiliating and paralyzing defeat Camus suffered in the wake of his public dispute with Sartre in 1952, Camus's objections to existentialism took on a more bitter and personal quality. In a 1954 entry in his notebooks, he wrote for example: "Existentialisme. Quand ils s'accusent on peut être sûr que c'est toujours pour accabler les autres. Des juges pénitents."¹² Here we have what would soon become the

¹¹ "The whole effort of Germanic thought has been to substitute for the notion of human nature that of the human situation and therefore [to substitute] history for God and modern tragedy for the former equilibrium. Modern existentialism pushes this effort even further and introduces into the idea of situation the same uncertainty as in that of nature. All that is left is a movement. But like the Greeks, I believe in nature."

¹² Albert Camus, *Carnets* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), vol. 3 (mars 1951-décembre 1959), p. 147. "Existentialism. Whenever they accuse themselves, you can be sure it is invariably in order to assail others. Penitent judges."

central concept *La Chute/The Fall* (1956), which is at least in part a mordant satire directed against Sartre and the philosophical position for which he stood.¹³

Despite Camus's lifelong opposition to existentialism, there are commentators who continue to classify him as an existentialist. Might this be a sign that Camus had more in common with the existential thinkers than he himself realized? Or is there another explanation, more respectful of Camus's understanding of his own work, yet also taking into account the intelligence and good will of those professionals who persist in calling him an existentialist?

The explanation I would propose consists of two postulates:

First, there is no one-word term—no “-ism”—which accurately identifies Camus's thought, with the result that a terminological vacuum has existed since the time Camus began his philosophical writings.

Second, commentators have tended to fill that vacuum by designating Camus as an existentialist, in order to anchor him firmly in his period and to ensure that he not be marginalized with respect to his contemporaries.¹⁴

¹³ Anyone in doubt about this should read Per Nykrog's article, "Sartre Penned by Camus, 1953-1955," in *L'Esprit créateur* XXIX, no. 4 (1989), pp. 65-74.

¹⁴ Essentially the same process can be observed in other contexts as well, such as books on impressionist painting which include chapters on Manet and Cézanne, though their canvases bear neither the characteristic impressionist brushstroke nor the impressionist concern with capturing the play of light on objects. In such cases, movements are defined broadly, inclusively, and with surprisingly little regard for those specific characteristics that give them their distinctive quality.

If this is the case, then those commentators who have described Camus as an existentialist had commendable reasons for doing so. The result, however, is nevertheless unfortunate, since it blurs important distinctions and obscures what is most specific to Camus's thought.

In calling attention to Camus's reasons for rejecting existential philosophy, the present article is an attempt to bring into sharper focus those aspects of Camus's thought that might otherwise be overlooked, or the importance of which might not be fully appreciated, by those who have come to regard him as an existentialist.

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