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Camus and Nagel on the Absurd

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Abstract. This research aims to offer a critical analysis of Albert Camus' The Myth of Sisyphus and Thomas Nagel's "The Absurd". Based on key documents, the analysis draws on in-depth textual analysis and philosophy discussions to deep-dive into Camus's and Nagel's intellectual world. As revealed in this research, Nagel's response to Camus on the absurd was unconvincing, from the conflation of feelings with convictions to the distortion of the original meaning of the concern about significance. Furthermore, Nagel downplayed the serious, tragic dimension of the absurd, but then he praised the transcendental consciousness, only to succumb to the same failure to appreciate our cosmic insignificance. Indeed, Camus himself never clarified how it did. In Camus' re-imagining of the myth, Sisyphus neither characterized the condition of the human individual nor the way of mankind. Rather, it was symbolic of the comic or the divine totality. Nonetheless, it is observed that Camus' recommended response to the absurd, unlike Nagel's, belonged to that of the existentialist rather than the nihilist.

Keywords: Camus, Nagel, eternity, absurd, Sisyphus

1. Introduction

In his classic work The Myth of Sisyphus [1], Albert Camus (1913—1960) defined the philosophical sense of the absurd ("notion") as a man-against-nature relation: the dissonance between anthropic care and cosmic indifference. It was defined as a relation differing from the psychological sense of the absurd ("feeling") which, being "elusive," cannot be characterized but merely enumerated. However, Thomas Nagel (1937—present), in his seminal article "The Absurd" [2], contended against Camus that the absurd was a contradiction within us, dual-perspective beings, with the inside perspective as actor and the outside perspective as spectator. His was a modal claim on the permanent possibility of a meta-perspective, accompanied by a backward step from which we could see the ultimate arbitrariness of everything. Despite our ability to step outside ourselves, it is our nature to be passionately committed to our own lives. Therein lies absurdity: comic unseriousness and tragic seriousness, i.e., the consciousness of our unimportance and the importance we take our lives to be. In lieu of defiance and scorn, Nagel recommended irony as the response to the absurd.

2. On Camus' The Myth of Sisyphus

This study would first start with a critical review on Camus' The Myth of Sisyphus. As a legendary king in Greek mythology, Sisyphus's condition was not represented by the tedious repetition of

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quotidian routines, but characterized by the throes in ascending the height. Correspondingly, Sisyphus' condition could not be interpreted as a specific form of life, such as that of the proletariat, but rather as human life in general. For Camus, the analogy of the Sisyphean fate to that of modern-day laborers, which was "no less absurd" [1], merely implied similarity in degree but not in kind. The absurd has two distinct levels: the disjunction between deeds and reason in sleeping consciousness, and the conflict between desire and a world that gives it no actualization in lucid consciousness [3]. The former is antiheroic, whereas the latter is tragic. The fate of Sisyphus, far from an automatistic existence or a naïve slavery, belonged to the tragic kind of absurdity. Sisyphus did not exert himself for the other while remaining unaware of his objectification. It is important to emphasize the role of "the height" in Sisyphus' stone-rolling. Unlike the antiheroic everyman, Sisyphus was eternally striving for that which is over and beyond him. "Thrown" into Hades, a world where his single choice was to attain his ultimate destination by prevailing over the summit. His absurdity was the impossibility of having the rock stay atop the hill. Indeed, he could only keep raising it in eternal strife. The nature of stone-rolling was thus the opposite of "professed boredom" in Waiting for Godot. Waiting, identified with having "nothing to be done" [4], was the suspension of action, whereas Sisyphus' stone-rolling was nothing other than action itself. Sisyphus, unlike Vladimir and Estragon, who could never go, was "still on the go," with the rock rolling eternally [1]. Hence the existential state of Sisyphus was not mind-numbing tedium, but violent, agonistic striving.

One might argue that Sisyphus' struggle defined the human condition when viewed on the macroscopic rather than the microscopic scale. Since there was no continual consciousness of personal identity, Sisyphus did not represent the individual, but a succession of individuals. One can interpret each cycle of ascent and descent as the limited lifespan of the individual; it is the historical and geographical totality of human beings that has a relatively long duration to be identified with the stone-rolling Sisyphus. The way of mankind appears as the cyclic movement of the ever-rolling rock: one generation is replaced by another, in a ceaseless succession of futile quests for transcendence; people come and go, leaving behind nothing whatsoever except more of the same kind, which will do the same things all over again. One sees the same struggle in the same world with the same fate. It is from the macroscopic perspective that one has the wisdom in Ecclesiastes which declares nothing new under the sun.

However, the myth of Sisyphus did not define the human condition. From the truly macroscopic perspective, the totality of human beings is just as fragile and evanescent as one human being. The myth of Sisyphus was about eternal suffering. But human existence is neither eternal suffering nor eternal bliss, and eternity itself is an illusion. It is important to note the reality of impermanence. The human individual cannot be consoled by the idea of posterity. One's offspring will die too. Furthermore, the continuity is of merely relative duration, and is not of one's own. For the offspring, the stone's return to the ground implies the renewals of life in its apparent indestructibly and inexhaustibility. For the individual, the return is nothingness. The spiritual progeny winning us "immortal fame," as with the artists, does not afford much consolation either. We are conscious of the ephemerality of such fame:

But all kinds of fame are ephemeral. From the point of view of Sirius, Goethe's works in ten thousand years will be dust and his name forgotten. Perhaps a handful of archaeologists will look for 'evidence' as to our era [1].

Being the creator of something does not give us the illusion of permanence, but rather a sense of transcendence, of absolute fulfillment. In the end, perhaps what humans desire is not simply the fact of immortality, but a certain superhuman, God-like character, to have which is to love what one is,

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one's essence, possibly symbolized by Sisyphus' rock. Camus was mistaken to invoke any representation of permanence as emblematic of human existence. The myth of Sisyphus did not capture the essence of human existence, which should be its own passing, disappearance, and nonexistence. Not only is the individual existence, but also that of the human race, "a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness" [6]. Sisyphus belonged to eternity, whereas we belong to time. Sisyphus' was immortality, whereas ours is death.

Sisyphus' mode of being, as reimagined by Camus, also aligned more closely to that of divinity than humanity. Sisyphus' movement could be illuminated through Aristotle's distinction between two kinds of action in Metaphysics, i.e., kinêsis (κίνησις) and energeia (ενέργεια). Kinêsis, like learning or curing, was described as telic, goal-oriented, which could cease and "destroy" itself once its goal was achieved, with the end outside the activity (and it would be exhausted once done). Energeia, such as contemplation or strolling, was described as atelic, with its end internal to itself. Having seen was identified with seeing, having understood with understanding, having thought with thinking (qtd. in [7]). At first glance, Sisyphus' appeared as a succession of kineses, of unfulfilled motions directed toward a summit that can never be attained. In Camus' reinterpretation of his absurd hero as "happy," however, the endless succession of kineses itself constituted energeia. Sisyphus' was not potentiality but actuality, which was the essence of God (qtd. in [7]). In contrast, human life was kinêsis as one long motion, directed toward the object of desire.

Camus never explicitly defined how Sisyphus' struggle represented the human condition, leaving ambiguous both (a) the symbolic meaning of the rock and (b) Sisyphus' relation to it. Camus seemed to equate the rock with fate, which, as a kind of "internal necessity," could be interpreted as one's character. Camus did not advocate love for one's fate [1]. Camus also posited an antagonistic dynamic between the rock and Sisyphus: either the it 'is the rock's victory' or 'he is stronger than the rock'. This antagonistic separation between man and fate suggested that the rock was something external and nonhuman; it could be nature, the world, or the universe.

In another place, however, Sisyphus possessed the rock as as a property [1]. To resolve the ambiguity of Sisyphus' relation to the rock, one might examine these differences from a diachronic perspective. Sisyphus first resisted the rock with defiance and scorn, then overcame it in possessing the rock, and at last became united with the rock. But the original problem with the myth as a representation of the human condition still persists. Let us examine the final scenario where Sisyphus was at one with the rock. When the rock was interpreted as fate, one's essential character, this union meant one's full actuality and realization of who one was. Sisyphus' mode of being was that of God's. When the rock is interpreted as the world, the unity between man and nature abolishes the absurd, which consists in a kind of confrontation between 'human need' and the 'silence of the world':

At this point of his effort man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. This must not be forgotten [1].

In this interpretation of the rock as the world, Sisyphus was one with the silent, indifferent and inhuman universe. While it is uncertain whether the rock represents fate or the world, what is certain is that, in either case, Sisyphus's struggle did not define or characterize the human condition.

3. On Nagel's "the absurd"

For Nagel, he treated the absurd as a "conviction", i.e., an opinion fixed into certainty, to be defended with "reasons". However, the absurd have at least has a twofold meaning: The first meaning is a feeling, a frustration or a sense of dissonance of one thing running athwart another; The

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second meaning is an idea, with which one explains the origin of the feeling by determining two sides of the conflict. Camus had this distinction in his mind, noting that "the feeling of the absurd is not, for all that, the notion of the absurd." [1] Nagel was mistaken to introduce the absurd as a popular conviction, as though it needed "defense" like faith in democracy as a system of governance.

As another issue to be discussed, Nagel never distinguished a conviction from a feeling. He contradicted himself in the very preceding sentence of his conviction claim:

Most people feel on occasion that life is absurd, and some feel it vividly and continually. Yet the reasons usually offered in de-fense of this conviction are patently inadequate: they could not re-ally explain why life is absurd. Why then do they provide a natural expression for the sense that it is [2].

As emphasized by Nagel, this vivid and continual feeling was the absurd in the sense. To defend Nagel was to conflate (a) a feeling with vividness with (b) an opinion with certainty. Nagel, blinding himself to the inconsistency of his argument, was involved in this crude conflation. It was also amusing to observe how Nagel, after claiming that people "feel" that life was absurd "vividly and continually" in the opening sentence, accused them of giving "a natural expression" of it in the concluding sentence, as though they had no right to "express" what they "felt" .

Nagel's argument against the existential concern over the ephemerality of our deeds lapsed into a form of glib casuistry. Nagel's conclusion "nothing that will be the case in a million years matters now" is a logically, not a psychologically, symmetrical implication to the premise "nothing we do now will matter in a million years" [2]. The inevitability of human care explained why Nagel's argument appeared correct yet somewhat counterintuitive: we do desire our present deeds to be remembered far into the distant future.

One cannot be impressed by Nagel's cavalier dismissal of the "standard" arguments for the absurd. In response to the first account, which attributed the absurd to "our minuteness and brevity," Granted the legitimacy of Nagel's reductionist treatment of our existential insignificance and transitoriness to quantitative variables, i.e., to size and duration, the argument still had its internal problem of presupposing qualitative identity between mortality and immortality. If life no longer entailed death, its essence, whatever it might be, would remain radically different from that examined in Nagel's Mortal Questions [8]. Given Nagel's consideration of absurdity as an essence of mortal life, there was no reason to smuggle this essence into immortal life by representing the latter as an indefinite continuation of the former, as though they were qualitatively identical. The same is true with our minuscule size. The question of our small occupation of space essentially boils

The logical chain of "universality—particularity—contingency" articulated in Nagel's argument did not bear close scrutiny, as each concept did not logically entail the next. Nagel claimed that human could see "the particular form of our lives" in adopting "the universal viewpoint," from which all of our ultimate concerns appeared contingent and gratuitous [2]. Yet, one did not have to adopt this "nebula's-eye view" [2] in order to recognize our own idiosyncrasy, specificity, or individuality. Instead of stepping outside ourselves, we needed to turn inward to discover our individuality, delimiting, demarcating, and defining ourselves as this form of life rather than another. It is through this internal perspective, not an external one, that we saw themselves as "idiosyncratic" and "highly specific" [2]. The universal viewpoint, far from revealing our individuality, threatened instead to dissolve it, reducing a person to "one of countless possible forms of life" [2]. The individual disappeared in the universal, and one would lose one's unique, singular sense of identity. All were equalized sub specie aeternitatis. From the inside, everything is never the same; from the outside, no differences can be seen. Hence particularity cannot arise from universality.

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Nor can contingency and arbitrariness be derived from particularity and specificity. One's specific constitution is one's character as fate in the Heraclitean sense, which is necessity rather than contingency. The point is not that one could have been otherwise, but that one is constituted thus and thus. It is precisely this being-thus-and-not-otherwise that defines our particularity or specificity. Even setting aside these considerations, Nagel's claim that our ultimate concerns were arbitrary did not hold. Instead of articulating their connection, Nagel juxtaposed the concepts, "contingency" / "arbitrariness" with "specificity" / "idiosyncrasy", as though they were logically equivalent: "all the contingency and specificity of our aims and pursuits" and "arbitrary, idiosyncratic, highly specific occupants" [2] (emphasis added). Seeing the arbitrariness of the our concerns involved imagining ourselves "differently constituted" [2]: we could have been born into different forms of life and developed different pursuits.

Nagel had a proclivity to suppress the tragic, serious component of the absurd. Stepping into the meta-perspective did not make life absurd; what dame it absurd was that, despite the possibility of this perspective, we did not forsake our allegiance to our lives, pursued with "energy and attention" [2]. But the seriousness after we took the meta-perspective became "laced with irony" [2]. As a mode of being, seriousness laced with irony is inconceivable. It is a contradiction: "[w]e cannot seriously attend to a piece of music ... and, at the same time, declare it to be ultimately pointless" [9]. It concerns us as a problem unless the contradiction is understood as definitive of the absurd, the incongruity of seriousness and unseriousness. In the conclusion of his essay "The Absurd", Nagel expunged the serious component of the absurd by prescribing irony as the normative response:

If sub specie aeternitatis there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that does not matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair [2].

Nagel insisted that one ought not to feel self-important, yet the sense of self-importance precisely constituted the human nature as the other, individual or "earthly" component. Nagel's position succumbed to the very one he criticized [2]. The absurd can no longer be called the absurd, deprived of the tragic component. To fully grasp the absurd, it is essential to appreciate the simultaneous truth of cosmic unimportance and our individual importance: I am a speck, a fleeting spark, a drop in the vast ocean, yet I am also a boundless cosmos illuminating the myriad phenomena.

Nagel's valorization of our capability "to transcend ourselves in thought" was inconsistent with the essential argument of his essay. If Camus' position was "romantic and self-pitying" [2], Nagel's was equally romantic and self-congratulatory. According Nagel, the transcendental consciousness was "a certain kind of insight," a "capacity" that belonged to "our most advanced and interesting characteristics" [2]. Hence, we should be encouraged to pride ourselves on this distinctively human attribute. However, this position could be defeated by Nagel's own argument. There was always a permanent possibility to put things into doubt. In the same way that from a meta-perspective any "larger purpose" [2], such as glory of God or service to the state, could appear insignificant, from a "meta-meta-perspective" even the meta-perspective does not matter, and so on ad infinitum. If anything did not matter at all, then the value of the transcendental consciousness did not matter either. If sub specie aeternitatis all was on the same level and nothing is special, the transcendental consciousness could not be "a special capacity" as Nagel contended [2]. Yet this strand of criticism could be applied to all kinds of relativist philosophy: if there is no absolute truth, what the philosopher establishes is but one perspective among others. Here, what needs to be shown is the problem inherent in Nagel's argument, not one generalized to relativism. Nagel's criticism of Camus reflected back on himself finally. In elevating the transcendental consciousness as a distinct human faculty, Nagel contradicted his own urge "to appreciate the cosmic unimportance of the situation" [2]. Therefore, Nagel's valuation of the transcendental consciousness was unnecessary.

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4. Concluding reflections

As above argument has shown, Nagel's argument was neither consistent nor honest, as his cursory discussions concerning the absurd lacked philosophical rigor in presupposing the qualitative identity between mortality and immortality. Nagel wrongly extrapolated the absurdity of a mortal life to an immortal life as though they were qualitatively identical. Hence, Nagel's response to Camus on the absurd was unconvincing, from the conflation of feelings with convictions to the distortion of the original meaning of the concern about significance. True particularity, discovered through inward reflection, could not emerge from an external viewpoint, nor does the recognition of our particularity reveal the contingency or arbitrariness of all things. Furthermore, Nagel downplayed the serious, tragic dimension of the absurd, but then he praised the transcendental consciousness, only to succumb to the same failure to appreciate our cosmic insignificance.

If the absurd for Nagel constituted what it meant to be human, Camus' absurd hero did not define the human condition. Camus himself never clarified how it did. In Camus' re-imagining of the myth, Sisyphus neither characterized the condition of the human individual nor the way of mankind. Rather, it was symbolic of the comic or the divine totality. In other words, it was either nature as self-repetition or God as actuality: whereas human life could be kinêsis (goal-oriented motion), Sisyphus existed in energeia (purpose contained within activity). The cyclic pattern of the myth still gives the illusion of permanence, concealing time and mortality, rendering Sisyphus' struggle an inadequate analogy for the human condition. Nonetheless, it is observed that Camus' recommended response to the absurd, unlike Nagel's, belonged to that of the existentialist rather than the nihilist [5].

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