



REBELLION AND REVOLUTION

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Man is the only creature who refuses to be what he is. We shall try to determine whether this refusal must inevitably lead him to the destruction of others and of himself, if every rebellion must end in the defence of universal murder, or if, on the contrary, without claiming an impossible innocence, it can furnish the principle of a limited culpability.

Camus, The Rebel xii

The men of Europe, abandoned to the shadows, have turned their backs upon the fixed and radiant point of the present. They forget the present for the future, the fate of humanity for the delusion of power, the misery of the slums for the mirage of the Eternal City, ordinary justice for an empty promised land.

Camus, The Rebel 247

first words

Albert Camus was born in Algeria and never ceased to be deeply committed to the fate of his country, as an activist, artist, journalist and intellectual. Indeed, he was a French Algerian – a *pied noir* or black foot – passionately committed to humanist ideals in the time of the Algerian War (1954–62) which ended the century-long French occupation of Algeria. The war was brutal and it is fair to say that, on final analysis, nobody won. According to David Macey (160):

To read or study the history of the Algerian war is to sup on horror. To do so against the backdrop of contemporary Algeria was worse. I have read so many horror stories about contemporary Algeria and have been told many others. The Algeria with which

pedro tabensky

REBELLION AND REVOLUTION

Fanon identified so strongly had become a country in which police interrogators used blow torches in cellars and in which mass murder was committed in the name of a perversion of Islam.

French iniquity was replaced by the iniquity of bickering generals and a culture of murder which long outlived the war. Camus's life was cut short in 1960 in a car accident, but his account of revolutionary violence helps us to explain why Algeria went in the direction that it did given the character of the largely failed emancipatory project that led to national independence.

I compare and contrast Camus's philosophy with Frantz Fanon's in some detail elsewhere,

but it is worth noting briefly here that, generally speaking, Camus's account of revolutionary violence better explains what came to pass in Algeria than does Fanon's. And the fundamental reason is that Fanon endorses the idea of the creation of a "new humanity" (2) and a "new world" (9) – something that necessarily involves the suspension of basic human decency in the quest for a new order – whereas Camus's aims are far less lofty. Indeed, for Fanon indiscriminate violence leading to mass physical harm can be a "cleansing force" (51), the force that will bring about the "new humanity." For Camus, by contrast, one must always avoid becoming an agent of history, for that can lead only to institutionalized violence. Both Camus and Fanon are explicitly anti-Manichaeism, but Fanon's philosophy entails Manichaeism of the sort that led to the logic of murder characteristic of both French rule and the Muslim takeover. Camus's concern is to defend basic human decency and to work for change in ways that are never forgetful of the idea that both oppressed and oppressor must be accorded the basic human decency owed to them by virtue of their humanity. This is true, Camus thinks, even of those who violate this principle. Finally, according to Camus, humans ought to be rebels but never become revolutionaries, and by this he means that all struggle must always preserve and never temporarily suspend basic human decency, whereas for Fanon decency must be suspended in order to bring about justice in the face of extreme colonial injustice. I mention Fanon here, and I will not discuss his views further below, solely in order to set the scene. And perhaps I should mention that I am particularly concerned in these pages obliquely to address a certain dogmatic and ultimately anti-intellectual endorsement present in some South African intellectual circles that hold that current injustices can only be remedied with Phoenix Bird style tactics, inspired by certain streaks in Fanon's thinking that can lead to nothing good, for reasons provided in what follows.

It is unfortunate that Albert Camus's rich, although often bewildering, philosophy has not

been sufficiently explored in the literature. There are recent important exceptions, however, such as the intellectual biographies and philosophical explorations of Olivier Todd, Robert Zaretsky, Ronald Aronson and John Foley. In this essay I aim to make a contribution to remedying this situation by exploring the views that Camus develops in his second and final philosophical treatise, *The Rebel*. And I am particularly interested here in Camus's distinction between rebellion and revolution developed there. Although this distinction has received some attention, as for instance by Zaretsky (*A Life Worth Living* 148–83), I have not come across a study that delves deeply into the distinction largely because the studies in question do not sufficiently explore the important relationship between rebellion, revolution, moderation and absurdity. Camus's philosophy of moderation is central to his critique of revolutionary violence. Camus is doing more than simply pointing to the obvious, namely that violent revolutions – characterized by monomaniacal excess – tend to end in the institutionalization of violence, but he gives us an account of the mechanisms that lead to such violence. And central to his account of the relevant mechanism is a view that central ethical concepts are both in tension with and constitutive of one another. The concepts in question moderate each other, that is, determine their constitutive limits in one another. For Camus, the moral sphere is, one could say, a field of force, with different concepts that make up the sphere pulling in opposing directions for our moral attention. And yet the moral subject must always live with this tension, which expresses itself in the form of anxiety. Indeed, this view is at the heart of his philosophy of moderation, which in turn is at the heart of his concern with revolution. Revolution aims to resolve the tension by privileging some concepts over others, thus destroying the moral sphere, transforming the moral into what it is not, namely, an agent of the absurd.

Perhaps the relative paucity of philosophical work on Camus is related to his famous fallout with Jean-Paul Sartre and his circle, particularly over the publication of *The Rebel*. This fallout happened in a period when French intellectuals,

rebellion and revolution

particularly Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, were taking sides with the Soviet Union during the Cold War and unconditionally supporting revolutionary violence on the African continent, most particularly in Algeria, Camus's motherland. And perhaps another reason for the paucity of engagement is that his thinking does not fit clearly into a mainstream conversation. Camus was a radically independent and deliberately unsystematic thinker who understood his philosophical work to be continuous with his literature, theatre, activism and journalistic work. Camus was no supporter of colonialism, but his particular version of anti-colonialism was met with scorn among the mainstream left, both in France and in Algeria. In the words of Philip Hallie (429):

His early work as a writer had been as a journalist for the *Alger-Républicain*, a daily publication that was very critical of French rule in Algeria, and in fact he was the only French journalist ever forced to leave Algeria because he sided with the Muslims. In 1956 when the Algerian drive for independence was becoming very strong, he went back to Algeria in the hope of reconciling Muslims and Europeans; but his irenic message about "French and Arabs associating freely" sounded like the old colonialism to the Muslims and looked like surrender to the Europeans.

Not all of us are rebels, according to Camus, but we ought to be, for he thinks rebellion is a feature of living lucidly, that is, honestly and without subterfuge. Moral outrage is a central moral emotion for Camus, for it reveals the extent to which we are always and already ethical. Intellectuals, Camus thinks, should be less concerned with grounding ethics on some ultimate foundation, be it reason or some other final authority, as we should be learning attentively to observe how it manifests itself in "the fixed and radiant point of the present" (Camus, *The Rebel* 247). He is less concerned with arguing for this position as he is with showing us how it is revealed by attentive observation. The ethical, Camus argues, manifests itself most clearly in rebellion, for the "no" of rebellion presupposes a "yes" that

is unrenounceable, a "yes" that makes any act of rebellion intelligible.

Although Friedrich Nietzsche influences Camus deeply, Camus distances himself from Nietzsche in key respects. What Camus thinks is centrally important about Nietzsche is that he defends life against those who, in their quest for a final solution to our woes, end up betraying it for "the mirage of the Eternal City." So, to put things differently, Camus supports Nietzsche's idea of *amor fati*, of "yes-saying" to life in all its wondrous ambivalence. But, he is critical of Nietzsche for overstepping limits and celebrating what should not be celebrated in his zeal to defend life against its detractors, those who want to put an end to suffering by looking elsewhere, either to a remote and necessarily abstract future or to another world altogether where all will be resolved once and for all. Nietzsche, Camus thinks, in defending life against those who say "no" to life ends up saying "yes" to too much and, by doing so, undermines the very conditions for meaningful protestations. Nietzsche, Camus holds (*The Rebel* 39–53), leaves us with very few grounds for genuine moral outrage (except, perhaps, outrage against life-deniers, those who want to say "yes," but at the cost of saying "no" to life). Camus, by contrast, believes that we must discover what there is to affirm predominantly when we reach a dead end and, with our fists in the air, protest: "No, I will no longer accept this!" The problem with revolutionaries is that their outrage ends by destroying the "yes" implied by their outrage and a consequence of this is far too often indiscriminate murder, as we shall see.¹

Whereas Nietzsche says "yes" to the detriment of the "no" of rebellion, the revolutionary says "no," only eventually to rub out the "yes" by the all-or-nothing logic that informs his endeavours. The all-or-nothing logic in question is one where basic human decency is sacrificed on the altar of "the mirage of the Eternal City."²

rebellion is moderation

The title of this piece is borrowed from a section of Camus's *The Rebel*, a book that defends the

idea that we are at our best when we are rebels and how it is that by overstepping the proper limits of rebellion we can often drift into revolution, one key difference being that in the latter violence is codified – it becomes, so to speak, part of the culture – while in the former it is there, if at all, in order to limit violence. Another is that the rebel is a value pluralist whereas the revolutionary is absolutist about values, that is, he believes that the pull of all but a few values must be placed on hold until revolutionary aims are achieved. Revolution hates inner strife. It requires clarity, strives for monomaniacal precision. Relatedly, healthy rebellion aims at unity, aims at constituting a social “we,” whereas revolution aims at totality rather than unity and contributes to the breakdown of social solidarity, despite its pretensions. Univocality necessarily leads to the logic of exclusion where a ranking of humanity is established in accordance with levels of agreement (the formula oppressor = vermin is commonplace, and it comes with the rationalization, based on the logic of an eye-for-an-eye, that can be summarized as follows: if they see us as vermin, then I should simply turn things around in an attempt balance things out by multiplying evils). I should mention that these comments should not be thought of as implying an endorsement of pacifism. Camus was not a pacifist. He thought that violence should always be lamented, but it is sometimes necessary. But he is deeply concerned with violence that leads to its institutionalization (as the institutionalization of oppressor violence or capital punishment always is).

In these pages I will discuss Camus’s critique of revolution, particularly revolutionary violence, and offer a description of the philosophy underlying the critique, a philosophy of moderation. In Camus’s words (*The Rebel* 243):

Moderation is not the opposite of rebellion.
Rebellion in itself is moderation [...]

Revolution, on the other hand, is excess, a drift in the direction of an absolute. Moderation should not be understood as a form of conservatism, although Camus was often accused of that

by those who – as with Jean-Paul Sartre, who fell out with him over a very acrimonious public squabble over *The Rebel* – sustain themselves with the self-satisfied conviction that they are dragon slayers. Moderation should be contrasted with excess, and excess could be either radical or conservative. Rebellion is moderation, Camus tells us. And it is moderation because it recognizes the importance of limits; that is, it recognizes the extent to which order is constituted through the negotiation of forces that often pull against each other, thus forcing the path of moderation that pays its respects to the plurality. We could say that Camus’s conception of the ethical is compositional; a balancing act of disparate forces pulling in all manner of directions, and the goodness or badness of these forces is a function of their place in the composition. And the composition itself is measured as successful because it best preserves meaning rather than sliding into absurdity or, more specifically, self-contradiction, as we shall see.

Despite his protestations, Camus is considered to be an existentialist philosopher. But in some key ways he is more Greek than existentialist. He differs from mainstream existentialism in believing, with the Greeks, in human nature and in thinking that to become ethical is to become most fully human. And he differs from existentialism in so far as freedom is not his central concern, although it is one of them. His philosophy of moderation prescribes the idea of an overriding value against which all other values are measured. The ethical, Camus thinks, reveals itself in us, particularly when we are confronted with the prospect of nihilism (or the absurd), of a complete breakdown of meaning and the conditions for value. Ideas, Camus thinks, ought to regulate each other and the fundamental criterion for regulation is that they do not undermine themselves by overstepping their bounds. Ideas, particularly those that ought to guide our lives, are often in tension with one another and the job of the moral agent is to find the limit of ideas in other ideas: to find the limit of justice in

freedom, for instance, and, conversely, of freedom in justice. Overstepping these limits undermines the meaning of freedom and turns it into absolute permissiveness, and overstepping the limits of justice leads to tyranny, which is not justice at all. Tyranny and permissiveness are, for Camus, varieties of nihilism. Ideas, in short, tend to pull against each other and are mutually constitutive. So, finding limits becomes a delicate task of ordering conceptual forces that threaten to pull meaning asunder while at the same time being conditions for the possibility of value and meaning. This is a summary of Camus's philosophy of moderation. And the criterion for moderation is meaning. The ideas that Camus is interested in find their meaning in moderation and lose themselves in excess, when drifting in the direction of absolutes, unmoored from the pull of other ideas.

Camus's philosophy of moderation is expressive of his particular variety of value pluralism. The idea is not merely that action requires that we pay our respects to a plurality of values. It is also that not to pay our respects to how values limit each other destroys the values, turns them into what they are not by obliterating them and replacing them with something that drifts in the direction of nihilism, of the absurd. But values must not only relate to one another. They must also relate to the actual in specific ways. Failure to do so leads to a devaluing of life. Values must be there to inform our passionate engagement with life rather than serve as standards that cannot be met and against which our lives seem a matter of little consequence. In short, values must not be understood in absolute terms. Instead they must be moderated by the exigencies of concrete living and they must flow from a lucid observation of life as it is being lived. "In the light," Camus tells us, "the earth remains our first and our last love. Our brothers are breathing under the same sky; justice is a living thing" (*The Rebel* 248).

"Justice is a living thing." Attentive observation rather than philosophizing from the armchair will reveal the ethical to us. Value is woven into the very fabric of our lives and, according to

Camus, we should be less interested in justifying our values than observing the extent to which they are unrenounceable.

Below I will show how Camus also provides us with criteria for establishing not so much ultimate foundations for values but, rather, he shows us how genuine values can only be rejected at the cost of contradiction or subterfuge. For Camus we are ethical creatures because we can be no other. And human evil, at least of the sort that promotes cultures of violence, is a function of distortion. For "justice is a living thing." It lives within us, among us. We need to learn lucidly to see it. Ordinary justice, the justice present in our daily lives, is what we should be focusing on rather than justice informed by an absolute that is not yet, by "the mirage of the Eternal City."

a philosophy of rebellion

If I were asked to summarize Camus's rich and often bewildering philosophy, one way I would do so is as follows: his is a philosophy of limits and one of the central limits is that between absurdity and lucidity. Limits, understood both in practical terms and in terms of ideas. Part of being lucid involves being able to recognize when, guided by the thirst for "order in the midst of chaos" (Camus, *The Rebel* xii), for "unity in the very heart of the ephemeral" (ibid.), lucidity can give way to absurdity – to a breakdown of meaning – by overstepping its limits and sliding from the thirst for unity or order to the thirst for totality. Our central task, Camus thinks, is to live lucidly in the face of the ineradicable threat of the absurd, a threat, I should add, that only exists for creatures capable of lucidity. The absurd is that which threatens or stands against lucidity. To live lucidly involves rebelling against the ongoing threat of the absurd while at the same time not becoming its accomplice, something that comes about as a consequence of overstepping the constitutive limits of rebellion. Camus thinks that the lucid rebel – the one who understands the limits of rebellion, the danger of drifting towards an absolute – is the ideal moral agent. Rebellion, Camus (ibid.) argues,

[...] arises from the spectacle of the irrational coupled with an unjust and incomprehensible condition [...] It protests, it demands, it insists that the outrage come to an end, that there be built upon rock what until now was written unceasingly upon the waters.

There is a limit to how much we are willing to accept, and when reaching this limit – when confronted with the absurd, with what threatens intelligibility – a universal ethic inherent in us is revealed to the observant in the very act of rebelling against the absurd – “the irrational coupled with an unjust and incomprehensible condition” – that against which all legitimate or lucid rebellions happen. In this regard lucid rebellion is rational rebellion, where rationality is limited rather than allowed to drift in the direction of its absolute instead of ideal manifestation, aiming impossibly at inaugurating an order that has eradicated the absurd. We shall see that according to Camus such an aim always undermines itself.

Our meaning-making efforts are a matter of finding limits between ideas and avoiding the drift of certain ideas beyond their carrying capacity in the direction of the absurd. Ideas, Camus argues, ought to moderate one another and thus find their proper place within a sphere of concepts, allowing us lucidly to engage with the reality of “flesh and blood truths” in all its complex multiplicity, a multiplicity that refuses to accommodate itself completely to our desire for unity where, taken to its absolute rather than proper limit, implies that all will be resolved once and for all. A central condition for finding the proper limit of concepts that inform action – for those are the concepts that interest Camus in the first instance – is that they relate to experience in a particular way. Ideas mustn’t be imposed on reality. Instead, they must flow from our passionate and attentive engagement with it. This includes attentive engagement with the sphere of ideas always and already present in our lives by virtue of being what we are. When arguing that revolution is a distorted manifestation of rebellion, Camus (*The Rebel* 11) advances the idea that:

Rebellion is, by nature, limited in scope [...] Revolution, on the contrary, originates in the realm of ideas. Specifically, it is the injection of ideas into historic experience while rebellion is only the movement which leads from individual experience into the realm of ideas.

A central condition for living in accordance with ideas that have found their proper limits is that they move “from individual experience into the realm of ideas.” I must be prepared to listen to the multiplicity that emerges from my concrete experiences. I must feel the pull of different ideas that are always and already part of rational life. Camus thinks that we must let experience flow through us rather than putting stops from above to what can be experienced, from the dictatorial impositions of a framework that distorts our ability to grasp human reality in all its rich complexity. This is an imposition that stems from our need for unity, and it stems from an inappropriate understanding of limits, moving from our natural desire for unity to a need for totality. Indeed, rationality must remain within its limits, for if it overextends itself in its quest for order, what it stands for is lost. Rationality in the practical domain, if allowed to drift in the direction of its absolute manifestation, will, in its quest to eradicate dissonance, ultimately become its opposite and hence become an accomplice of the absurd. More generally, Camus shuns an approach to understanding that imposes ideas over experience, that injects “ideas into historical experience.” Rationality or the practical variety must, in short, be limited by experience. If it overextends itself by failing to recognize that unity can never be total, that understanding is always partial and incomplete, it will become an accomplice of the absurd rather than a means of rebelling against it. Rationality, Camus argues, must be limited by the experience of the absurd.

Indeed, Camus (*The Myth* 12) argues that consciousness of the absurd awakens us from the slumber of a “mechanical life,” lived fully unaware of the fact that the weariness or anxiety humming permanently in the background is the feeling of the absurd, that the

order given to us by our routines finds no ultimate justification in reality. The “stage-sets” (Camus, *The Rebel* 59) of our lives can suddenly collapse and the meaning of our anxiety makes its appearance. The orders that sustain us reveal themselves as stage-sets that give the semblance of solid order. Camus believes that to live lucidly is to live without subterfuge, confronting our absurd condition lucidly and, in this manner, always remaining conscious and weary, but at the same time understanding that weariness is good, that it plays the function of keeping consciousness alive and consciousness must be kept alive for “everything begins with consciousness and nothing is worth anything except through it” (Camus, *The Myth* 12). Consciousness emerges when the “why” arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement” (11–12). Consciousness emerges in the face of a reality that replies with silence to our interrogations regarding the value of our lives, forcing us to find inner strength to cope with a reality that refuses to yield to our deepest demands for order, indeed for meaning. For Camus, the ongoing threat to order and meaning, significantly due to the fact that ideas require ongoing moderation, is a limiting condition for our concern with order and meaning.

A philosophy of limits shuns excess, shuns the idea of guiding one’s life by one overarching idea taken to its absolute limit rather than through a process of accommodation where a multiplicity of ideas are given the opportunity to defend themselves in an open tribunal and to find their proper limits in each other. One of the fundamental tasks of philosophy, for Camus, is to find the proper place of ideas among a multiplicity of ideas both informing and flowing from our concrete embodied lives. That is why his is an ethic of moderation in the sense that ethical concepts are moderated by the space of concepts that constitute the ethical as a whole and, more broadly, the domain of value.

Not to be committed to finding the proper place of ideas, Camus thinks, can lead us astray in ways that we have witnessed in the last two hundred years, starting, arguably,

with the work of Saint-Just’s mad blade and leading on to the mass murders of the twentieth century, driven by what Camus thinks of as absolute ideas – ideas that overstep their limits and destroy themselves in the process precisely because they subjugate all ideas that can halt the progress towards the absolute. As already discussed, and by way of example, if justice loses sight of the demands placed on it by freedom, it lapses into tyranny and, ultimately, towards codified murder, for justice tends towards absolute control unless it finds its proper limit in freedom. And the limits in question involve understanding the role that freedom plays in justice; that is, understanding how freedom is moderated by justice. The drifting away of the idea of justice towards an absolute, which is no longer justice because freedom is no longer reflected in it, is, Camus argues, significantly responsible for the ideologically driven revolutions of the twentieth century and their offshoots, such as the Algerian Revolution, which was close to Camus’s heart. Camus (*The Rebel* 236) tells us that:

We know at the end of this long inquiry into rebellion and nihilism [absurdity] that rebellion with no other limits but historical expediency signifies unlimited slavery.

And that is what revolution has to offer, when it divorces justice from freedom. Camus contrasts rebellion with revolution and thinks of revolutions as distortions of the rebellious spirit, a spirit captured in Camus’s version of the legend of Sisyphus. Camus’s Sisyphus understands that rebellion against the absurd is an ineradicable aspect of human living and he is able to find happiness within the limits set by the uneasy confrontation between human need and the silence of the world, as Camus puts it. And revolutions are distortions because they are driven by ideas that have lost their proper place and have become absolute, that is, not limited by other ideas that are constitutive of the very idea of rebellion and by concrete embodied existence in the here and now, in reality as it appears to us in our day-to-day lives. One could say that revolution is largely a consequence of a mistaken attitude towards ideas.

Similar things can be said about freedom. Unmoored from its ongoing conversation with justice it ceases to be what it is. Freedom cannot be purely random, but if left unchecked will drift in the direction of its absolute limit. I am confident in my actions when I think that they are justified and so freedom finds its limit in justice. Justice unmoored from freedom lapses into tyranny and freedom unmoored from justice lapses into a nihilistic abyss where no choice can be justified, where everything is permitted. Both freedom and justice, taken to the extreme, lose themselves in the night of the absolute and become accomplices of the nihilistic order that freedom and justice are meant to overcome.

Camus offers a philosophy of rebellion, indeed an ethic of rebellion. Rebellion here is not merely political in nature, although it is that as well, but it is more broadly a descriptive and prescriptive philosophy of human existence. Struggle is an ineradicable aspect of our lives and it is ideally struggle against what Camus describes as the absurd rather than complicity with it or apathetic acquiescence. The absurd is born of what Camus describes as a divorce “between man and his life, the actor and his setting” (*The Myth* 7). The absurd is not, by contrast, an intrinsic feature of the world, which, Camus thinks, is blind to our demands, particularly our demands for purpose and happiness. The absurd emerges largely because our condition is that of misfits. Paradigmatically, we don’t want to die and yet we must and, more generally, our condition is that of struggle and reckoning. Consequently, anxiety is an omnipresent feature of our lives, which is one of the principal manifestations of the absurd, helping to feed our craving for order. Corrupt struggle sides with the absurd, as is the case with nihilistic suicide, discussed in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, or murder, particularly politically motivated mass murder, discussed in *The Rebel*.³ These are corrupt forms of rebellion because, besides the obvious, they are irrational, they lead to contradiction, as we shall see, and hence militate against lucidity, clarity of vision informed by reason that has not been compromised and attentive observation.

To live lucidly is precisely what it means to be ethical in Camus’s picture, a picture he shares to some extent with Plato. For Camus the epistemic and ethical converge. To be ethical is to have clarity of vision, properly to see what is right in front of us. The seeing in question is not impartial or detached. Rather, it is a seeing through non-distorted human lenses. What precisely this amounts to will become clearer as we press on. But we know already that the lucid person is one who understands how ideas need to find their proper limits in other ideas as they face the world without absolutist pretensions.

According to Camus, a central component of our meaning-making efforts is to recognize how the absurd emerges in our lives precisely because we cling to existence and this clinging drags disappointment with it. Camus (*The Myth* 89) tells us that

There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night.

It is “essential to know the night” because only in this way can we live lucidly, that is, without subterfuge. We need to understand what moves us and how this collides with a silent world that tends not to yield to our desires for unity or order and to our desire for the curtains of our consciousness never to close. Rebellion, for Camus, does not entail success. Rather, it is primarily and paradigmatically an attitude towards existence that resists capitulation in light of the inevitable. We are all condemned in so far as we are all on death row, living as finite beings. Rebellion is at once an acknowledgement of the inevitable and a refusal to fall to pieces in light of what cannot be denied without loss of lucidity. And lucidity is what is required to avoid becoming the accomplices of the absurd, led astray, among other things, by a craving for order that refuses to find its limit.

Camus tells us that Sisyphus is condemned by the gods to the futile task of rolling a stone uphill only to see it come rolling back down again, failing inevitably in his aim of once and for all letting the stone settle at the top of the mountain. He is condemned to having to rebel

against an absurd fate, but Camus asks us to imagine him happy at the end of *The Myth of Sisyphus*.⁴ Camus thinks that he must be imagined to be happy in part because he has the personal strength, the Stoic magnanimity, not to let his sentence break him and because, despite his condition, he is able to grasp the sublime beauty of existing and to relish in the fruits of the earth. Sisyphus carries himself with honour while performing the futile task he is fettered to. He cares passionately about life and it is because of this that confrontation with the inevitability of his condition horrifies him, but he refuses to give up on what he has in light of the futility of his efforts.

Camus wants us to learn to live – to learn to thrive in the here and now – rather than to place the value of living on some remote endpoint, such as life after death or the achievement of some remote political Elysium that ultimately devalues actual living, for it turns it into an instrument for something else, making it so that its value is predicated upon remote, unlikely and abstract success conditions which are a caricature of the moral complexity of our lives. Camus cautions us against hope of the sort that leads to the devaluation of the actual, hope that forgets its proper limits. And the invitation here is not for us once and for all to overcome hope, something he thinks is impossible. Rather, he invites us lucidly to engage with the ongoing temptation to seek solace in subterfuge. Indeed, he thinks that this task of avoidance is generative of meaning, for it constitutes the framework against which a passion for the present emerges, a passion for “the curve of the gulf, the sparkling sea, and the smiles of earth” (Camus, *The Myth* 87). Here is a nutshell account of Camus’s philosophy of the absurd (ibid.):

You have already grasped that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted towards accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth.

Sisyphus, one could say, thrives as an embodied being, fully present in the moment. He enjoyed “the smiles of the earth” but when condemned to the underworld he pushes nostalgia aside and makes the best of his situation, transporting his passion for life into his new condition (ibid.):

[...] one sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it and push it up a slope a hundred times over; one sees the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass, the foot wedging it, the fresh start with arms outstretched, the wholly human security of two earth-clotted hands. At the very end of his long effort measured by skyless space and time without depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments towards that lower world whence he will have to push it up again towards the summit. He goes back down to the plain.

Camus (*The Myth* 86) tells us that Sisyphus is both “the wisest and most prudent of mortals” and he practises the “profession of highwayman.” In other words, his wisdom stems from his deep involvement in the actual business of being alive in the here and now.

Properly to rebel is to do so lucidly, that is, without subterfuge, avoiding, for instance, “metaphysical solace” (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy* 12), to borrow Nietzsche’s phrase. We must aim to live without appeal, as Camus says. Indeed, for Camus, properly to live is to live lucidly, aiming at understanding and avoiding false comforts. Camus (*The Myth* 74) contrasts what could be called Grand Truths with “flesh and blood truths.” Grand Truths are abstract and devoid of materiality. They invite us to grasp actual beings primarily as representatives of a category. “[F]lesh and blood truths,” on the other hand, are grasped by a lucid engagement with reality, by attentiveness to the actual.

Rebellion, Camus tells us, is “limited in scope” for it “leads from individual experience into the realm of ideas,” never forgetful of its origins in experience. Rebellion, in other words, is interested only in “flesh and blood truths.” Revolution, on the other hand, turns the actual into an

instrument for the Grand Idea. It “is the injection of ideas into historic experience.” Revolution does not see individuals. Rather, it sees only waves of force, conglomerates of individuals that either promote or undermine the project of injecting ideas into concrete reality. Revolution is an agent of history, which fails to grasp the basic idea that historical justice is blind. The task of rebellion, on the other hand, is to improve the condition of actual existence, the condition of those living in our midst. This particular relationship to ideas does not entail blindness to the future, or even to pursuing ideals. Instead, it sees that the future can properly be served only by tending to the actual. It is not served by trying to tame reality by means of a master narrative that seeks to order everything. Such taming invariably leads to resentment for it denigrates actual existence, and ultimately to nihilism. Revolution sees as its mission the overcoming of the here and now and the inauguration of a new order beyond the exigencies of the present.

History, Camus thinks, is constituted by a dark succession of iniquities and the character of our political struggles for justice must be informed by this basic fact. Camus thinks that we must view history with suspicion and never aim to become its architects. And our thirst for understanding is permanently at odds with an unyielding world. Indeed, we are at odds with the world, and it is in this space, between the human and the silence of the world, of a reality that refuses to yield to our demands, that the absurd emerges in our lives. It emerges with the driving thirst for meaning and happiness. It’s their shadow.

camus’s *cogito*

Chapter 1 of *The Rebel* concludes with a formula (10): “I rebel – therefore we exist.” This is Camus’s *Cogito*. “The absurdist method,” Camus tells us (*The Rebel* xi–xii),

[...] like that of systematic doubt, has wiped the slate clean. It leaves us in a blind alley.

This is the method that reveals our absurd condition, “in a blind alley.” And once we are there

we are compelled to rebel, to refuse to accept. “Reasoning,” Camus argues (*The Rebel* xxii),

[...] follows the same reflexive course. I proclaim that I believe in nothing and that everything is absurd, but I cannot doubt the validity of my own proclamation and I am compelled to believe, at least, in my own protest. The first, and only, datum that is furnished me, within absurdist experience, is rebellion.

The very proclamation that all is absurd reveals a world of meanings with it. If it is absurd then it is so in relation to certain standards that the rebel at least implicitly holds. Absurdist experience not only reveals the nihilistic underbelly of our lives (the world’s refusal to grant us the order that we crave) but it also reveals our resolute commitment to value. Similarly, our resolute commitment reveals the absurd. The order it demands reveals the fact that we are misfits, that the world doesn’t give a damn about us and yet we invariably want it to care.

Camus takes it for granted that the world is silent to many of our most pressing demands, such as the demands of meaning and care. These demands can lead to nihilism, to a sense that all is absurd. In the face of nihilism, of absurdity, where nothing appears really to matter, we reach a dead end and we are faced with the prospect of suicide. Nothing matters, then why not bring it all to an end? But this modality of suicide grounded in philosophical speculation (rather than, say, romantic desperation) is in actual fact a refusal and all refusals presuppose value. I rebel in the light of certain values that are being undermined. Suicide of this sort is an act of rebellion, a “no” to creation, which in the very act of being pronounced shows us that value is non-renounceable. In Camus’s words (*The Rebel* xii):

Hence it is absolutely necessary that rebellion derive its justifications from itself, since it has nothing else to derive them from. It must consent to study itself in order to learn how to act.

But, Camus tells us (*The Rebel* xi), “[o]ne cannot be a part-time nihilist.” If I am

rebellion and revolution

committed to nihilism, why should I spare others? The fact that through my solitary act I spare others, I am showing consideration that is incompatible with the nihilism that led me to the alley. “The man who kills himself in solitude,” Camus tells us (*The Rebel* x–xi),

[...] recognizes a value, since, manifestly, he claims no right to the lives of other people. The proof of this is that he never uses, in order to dominate others, the terrible strength and freedom which he gains from his decision to die; every act of solitary self-destruction, when it does not proceed from passion, is in some way generous or scornful. But one is scornful on behalf of something [...]. Absolute negation is therefore not achieved by suicide. It can be achieved only by absolute destruction, of both oneself and everybody else. Or at least it can be experienced only by striving toward that delectable end. Suicide and murder are thus two aspects of a single system, the system of an unhappy intellect which rather than suffer limitation chooses the dark victory which annihilates earth and heaven.

So nihilism can only lead us to the alley, to the recognition that our world is not as different as we would like from Sisyphus'. It offers us not what we want. But the nihilist cannot consistently terminate his life or become a murderer; for every act of rebellion reveals that we cannot coherently renounce value, that nihilism is not a coherent philosophical position. The nihilist undermines his philosophy by sparing others. Indeed, the very idea of a caring nihilist is self-refuting.

Iniquity is defied by the cry of the universal, that which is shared by all. When I stand up for something it must be in the name of a common principle, recognized as such by a moral community. My cry, therefore, drags reason with it. It opens itself up to rational scrutiny and I am obliged by this very cry to accept the force of countervailing evidence, were this evidence to be presented to me once I manage to see the “yes” that is expressed by my refusal. True rebellion implies rationality. And I must be willing to accept that my rebellion will only be acceptable if it is justifiable. So, to claim “I

rebel” drags with it the idea that my rebellion is not only about me. Rebellion drags universal morality with it. Rebellion, Camus tells us (*The Rebel* 1),

[...] means, for instance, that “this has been going on too long”, “so far but no farther”, “you are going too far”, or again “There are certain limits beyond which you shall not go.” In other words, his “no” affirms the existence of a borderline.

Ethics, for Camus, is always and already present in our lives. For him, as for Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch and Ludwig Wittgenstein, the task of refining our ethical natures involves ongoing attentiveness to the ethical as it presents itself to us and commands our attention.⁵ Indeed, Camus follows the Ancients in thinking that we are by nature ethical animals, which means that the ethical inheres in us and manifests itself to the observant. In Camus’s words (*The Rebel* 4):

An analysis of rebellion leads us to the suspicion that, contrary to the postulates of contemporary thought, a human nature does exist, as the Greeks believed. Why rebel if there is nothing worth preserving in oneself? The slave asserts himself for the sake of everyone in the world when he comes to the conclusion that a command has infringed on something inside him that does not belong to him alone, but which he has in common with other men – even with the man who insults and oppresses him.

And he also adopts a version of the doctrine of the mean, indeed a version that is continuous with Nietzsche. In his “An Attempt at Self-Criticism” Nietzsche argues against a reductionist approach to value, where there is one “master value” – namely moral value – that always overrides. Both Camus and Nietzsche are value pluralists who think that value reductionism will invariably lead to a depreciation of life. When Nietzsche (“An Attempt” 8) asks “So let us add the hardest question of all! What, when seen through the prism of life, is the meaning of morality?” he is inviting us to place morality within a space of other values against which

morality must be measured. Priestly morality, Nietzsche thinks, is hostile to life because, among other things, it reduces all value to a limited variety of values and, in doing so, devalues life itself.

A rebel, we have seen, cannot consistently be a nihilist, for she stands for something. She clamours for dignity. Nihilistic suicide or nihilistic murder is proscribed by reason. She contradicts the basic impulse that rebellion expresses. A rebel, properly understood, remains true to herself. She must act as she must, where the command does not so much come from emotion unhinged from reason but the “flesh and blood truths” that are constitutive of the very act of rebellion. These are the only truths that move us to make genuine sacrifices, at least when we are not chained to subterfuge of the sort that informs revolutionary movements, those that seek to inject ideas “into historic experience.”

Ethics does not show itself by a mere act of choice. Something must be at stake. It emerges when one is compelled by the force of necessity, when one is against the wall and is compelled to say “no.” And in the very moment of negation the rebel finds himself to be the embodiment of a “yes,” of a value that presents itself to him in the very act of drawing a line, of establishing a limit. As Camus says (*The Rebel* 1):

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 as soon as he begins to think for himself.

But to grasp the “yes” that comes with the “no” one must be living lucidly, that is, attentively, with one’s feet on the ground, fully immersed in life.

the yogi and the commissar

Rebellion reveals a conciliatory attitude, Camus (*The Rebel* 230) tells us. So, revolutions, which are a particular form of rebellion, are necessarily irrational for they contradict the universal impetus that is expressed in the act of saying “yes” and “no.” The non-conciliatory attitude

– the absolutist attitude – demands that one choose between “yes” and “no.” But to do this entails an endorsement of nihilism, either by acceptance of all that is or by rejecting all that is – nihilism through complacency (something that follows from Camus’s interpretation of Nietzsche, as discussed above)⁶ or life-denial (priestly morality of the sort that Nietzsche critiques).⁷

As discussed already, Camus holds that reconciliation must also occur between freedom and justice. If one chooses one over the other, then the other will suffer. In Camus’s words (*The Rebel* 233):

Absolute freedom mocks at justice. Absolute justice denies freedom. To be fruitful, the two ideas must find their limits in one another. No man considers that his condition is free if it is not at the same time just, nor just unless it is free.

It is also necessary, Camus argues (*ibid.*), that we find the limit between violence and non-violence:

The same reasoning can be applied to violence. 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 their limits.

More generally, ethical concepts must find their limits in a space of concepts that constitute the domain of value. And Camus establishes the limits of concepts by showing how going beyond the limits destroys the ethical fabric of life and transforms values into what they are not. Freedom becomes limitless permissiveness and justice becomes tyrannical.

Camus contrasts two human types: the yogi and the commissar. Both reject conciliation as they work with absolute ideas rather than ideas that find their limit in others. And because they reject conciliation, they are both ineffective (*The Rebel* 230):

The former chooses only the ineffectiveness of abstention and the second the ineffectiveness of destruction. Because both reject the

rebellion and revolution

conciliatory value that rebellion, on the contrary, reveals, they only offer us two kinds of impotence, both equally removed from reality, that of good and that of evil.

The “impotence” or “ineffectiveness” of yogi and commissar is born of the fact that both are “removed from reality.” Both reject “conciliatory value” or “the logic of limits.” Camus contrasts conciliatory value with “absolute thought” (ibid.)

[...] in other words, absolute nihilism on the one hand, absolute rationalism on the other. As for the consequences, there is no difference between the two attitudes. From the moment that they are accepted, the earth becomes a desert.

The yogi sides with good – that is, good that rejects conciliation, all-or-nothing good – and the commissar with evil – mass murder in the name of an overriding conception of justice that encompasses everything. And both yogi and commissar deny reality in so far as they deny conciliation. Affirming reality involves conciliation, understanding the competing value demands that allow us to see the real – human reality in all its rich complexity – in all its complex multiplicity. The commissar sees his work as world historical, but according to Camus (ibid.):

History in its pure form furnished no value by itself. Therefore one must live by the principles of immediate expediency and keep silent or tell lies [...] Purely historic thought is therefore nihilistic: it accepts wholeheartedly the evil of history and in this way is opposed to rebellion.

The drive for absolute justice demands this perspective, but by adopting this perspective justice ceases to be that but in name. To side with history is to side with expediency, that is, with the idea that the end justifies the means, where action aims to bring about a historical good, something like a Hegelian *telos*. The actual is a mere instrument for what is to come. The yogi, on the other hand, abstains from engaging with reality because he is unable to make sacrifices. It’s all or nothing

for him. There is no place for limited culpability aimed not at bringing about a reality beyond all reproach, something Camus thinks is impossible, but with the aim of improving the conditions of life on earth. In his words (*The Rebel* 245):

No possible form of wisdom today can claim to give more. Rebellion indefatigably confronts evil, from which it can only derive a new impetus. Man can master, in himself, everything that should be mastered. He should rectify in creation everything that can be rectified. And after he has done so, children will still die unjustly even in a perfect society. Even by his greatest effort, man can only propose to diminish, arithmetically, the sufferings of the world. But the injustice and the suffering of the world will remain and, no matter how limited they are, they will not cease to be an outrage.

The consequence of not accepting that, despite our efforts, “children will still die unjustly,” is that we will destroy the home of value. We will slide from rebellion to one of its absolute manifestations, namely revolution. The accepting here does not carry complacency in its bosom. Rather, it is to accept our Sisyphean condition.



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notes

1 This is not the place for me to quibble about Camus’s interpretation of Nietzsche. I would be happy to accept that he is being uncharitable. What I am interested in here are Camus’s ideas, including how Camus interprets Nietzsche. His interpretation is at least plausible, but Nietzsche is, of course, notoriously difficult to pin down and Camus has little time for detailed textual analysis. His concerns are elsewhere.

2 See, for instance, Camus, *The Rebel* 248.

3 See Camus, *The Myth* ix.

4 For a discussion on this topic, see my “Blind Sisyphus.”

5 For a discussion on the common ground between these authors, see Zaretsky’s *Albert Camus: Elements of a Life*.

6 See Camus, *The Rebel* 39–53.

7 See Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality*.

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