

# Camus and Heidegger

Sturm Mabie

December 20, 2010

For Camus, the absurd is the most primary and fundamental structure anyone could ever believe in. The absurd, defined by Camus as the “divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting,” frames and gives rise to all important philosophical questions, or at least, the only important philosophical question (to Camus at least): the question of whether life is worth living, the existence of absence of values. If not for this disconnect between man and the universe, if both were in perfect harmony, philosophy would quickly become obviated for if everything is okay, if everything makes sense, what is the purpose of or point of philosophical discourse? As Camus admits himself, this notion of the absurd (or at the very least, the nothing) is not a unique idea, not even a seldom touched one, for discussions of the lack of value “run through all literatures and all philosophies.” Most notably perhaps and definitely most likely, Heidegger’s discussion of existential anxiety, the anxiety of nothing, influenced and served as a precursor of Camus’ absurd. Does Camus improve upon what Heidegger already discusses, does he add value? Does Camus’ of Heidegger’s ideas about nothingness have unique value in respect to each other? These are the questions we will try to answer.

Heidegger begins his discussion of anxiety with a definition of fleeing, specifically, *fleeing in the face of itself*:

Dasein’s absorption on the “they” and its absorption in the “world” of its concern, make manifest something like a *fleeing* of Dasein in the face of itself—of itself as an authentic potentiality-for-Being-its-Self... But to bring itself face to face with itself, is precisely what Dasein does *not* do when it thus flees. It turns *away from* itself in accordance with its own most inertia of falling.

Heidegger then goes onto give a preliminary description of anxiety:

*The turning-away of falling is grounded rather in anxiety, which in turn is what makes fear possible... That in the face of which one has anxiety is Being-in-the-world as such.*

This marks the first discrepancy between Heidegger's anxiety and Camus' absurd. For Heidegger, the existential anxiety is grounded in our very own existence as conscious beings, or as Dasein. That is, from our immersion in the world, this Being-in-the-world that normally faces us except in times of angst, anxiety is born as a questioning of this. For Camus and the absurd, this is not at all the case. Instead, as aforementioned, the absurd is this divorce, this contradiction, between what man needs to like, that is, meaning and value, and what is revealed to him by the universe. It is not this turning away or reaction like how Heidegger characterizes anxiety, it is simply a disconnect. Heidegger quickly leaps, in one of the few unique cases in which he does this, from a very formal discussion to one in which everyone can relate and understand (albeit still laden with hyphens):

Nothing which is ready-to-hand and the present-at-hand discovered within-the-world, is, as such, of no consequence; it collapses into itself; the world has the character of completely lacking significance.

With this, though he doesn't make it explicit, Heidegger is describing an aspect of the complete paralysis that results from meaninglessness. A man does hate life when in a state of true anxiety, nor does he will it to end, rather, he is caught in a coma, unable to act, unable to reason. The world becomes hopeless and stricken, he does nothing. This description of the result of anxiety is in sharp contrast to the result of realizing the absurd: suicide. Camus offers up an anecdote:

Of an apartment-building manager who had killed himself I was told that he had lost his daughter five years before, that he had changed greatly since, and that that experience had "undermined" him.

The problem of the man Camus is describing is not anxiety, he is not confronted by the meaninglessness of existence. Instead, he is confronted by the absurd: he wants the life of his daughter, he wants her presence; the universe does not want his daughter to live, the universe gives her, and him, death. If instead the man had experienced a confrontation with the nothing through anxiety, the life (or death) of his daughter would have been no consequence. Like his work, like others, like his own life, she would have become valueless and thus of no concern. Rising from this lack value would then of course not be suicide, but nothingness. This, I think, is where the real distinction between absurdity and anxiety lies: absurdity terminates in a will to suicide; anxiety results in a will to nothingness. Besides paralysis (or possibly suicide I guess), man has put one other option in reaction to the nothing:

In falling, Dasein turns away from itself. That in the face of which it thus shrinks back: it is Dasein itself.

For Heidegger, the nothing seems to exist inside man himself. It is a structure or force that resides inside each individual that either forces the Dasein to turn away. For Camus, the nothing exists not inside man, but outside, in the surrounding universe. What man wants is definite and real, it is not the nothingness of himself that a man confronts when the absurd strikes, but rather, it is the nothingness and valuelessness of the world in juxtaposition and opposition to the wants of man. Thus, for Heidegger, the nothing is within; for Camus, it is without.

Camus, in reaction to the absurd, advocates not suicide but revolt, for the man who revolts finds freedom: “he enjoys a freedom with regard to common rules.” To stand on the dizzying zenith of a peak, balancing on this edge between suicide and life, the absurd and man’s own will, creates a freedom that gives life infinite value and purpose. In this freedom, in this infinite value and purpose, the absurd, or rather, the revolt of it, individualizes and gives possibility to the personalization of each man’s own existence. For Heidegger, anxiety does much the same thing:

But in anxiety there lies the possibility of a disclosure which is quite distinctive; for anxiety individualizes. This individualization brings Dasein back from its falling, and makes manifest to it that authenticity and inauthenticity are possibilities of its Being.

Though Heidegger doesn’t go into such description of the freedom and individualization of man through the confrontation of the nothing as Camus does in relation to the absurd, he does acknowledge a freedom derived from this confrontation, this revolt almost.

We now see precisely how the Camus’ absurd differs from Heidegger’s anxiety and exactly where they agree. They, in themselves, are very different from one another, one, a disconnect, the other, an emptiness. The inauthentic reactions to both also differ: suicide and paralysis, for Camus and Heidegger, respectively. But in what man can learn from them, in what he is supposed to learn and do in reaction to these two different concepts is, conveniently enough, the same. So which, if either, is better? I think the more valuable of the two approaches and concepts is Heidegger’s: he looks at the problem from the perspective of Dasein, from the individual; For Heidegger, man is dealing with himself when in a mode of anxiety, he is anxious of his own existence. Camus, in contrast, doesn’t adopt such a phenomenological outlook and instead phrases both the absurd and man’s reaction to it in terms of the world or universe. It is my opinion that the former is a more worthwhile approach or characterization than the latter for as beings with each a first-person and

individual perspective, the value of thinking outside these terms will result in limited value.