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# ALBERT CAMUS' READING OF SØREN KIERKEGAARD'S *FEAR AND TREMBLING*

Johannes Abel

“[...] if an unfathomable, insatiable emptiness lay hid  
beneath everything, what then would life be but  
despair?”

–Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

**Abstract:** The paper argues that a comparison of the normative concepts of a good life in Camus and Kierkegaard should be first and foremost a structural comparison, as Camus' interpretation of *Fear and Trembling* as both a discovery of what Camus himself calls the absurd and as an inconsequent transition from the absurd to the religious disregards the Christian paradigm the work of Kierkegaard is embedded in.

## Introduction

Academic research on Kierkegaard and Camus has to justify itself, as the Danish philosopher despised the “lecturers” (SKS 4, 156), who, far removed from the unsettledness of existence, try to make a (monetary) living out of judging great people. But also for Camus, understanding a theoretical position means having lived it (cf. MS 41). Theoretical abstract knowledge is not the same as human understanding. When the reception of their works leads to a journal article, both would have felt misunderstood, as both aim at their reader's changing their lives and not at a merely theoretical reception of their works. So why not stop here? As a provisional solution,



Gunter Scholz (Bochum University) suggested in his seminar on Sartre and Camus that academic research itself is absurd and that the academic philosopher can be close to Camus' idea of a good life.

While it has become a kind of pop-cultural knowledge that Kierkegaard is something like the Godfather of existentialism (cf. Sønderquist 2015 83 f.), there is actually surprisingly little comparative research on Kierkegaard and Camus. In a way, both share the same question: "What is a good life, in a normative sense, under the conditions of the modern age?" In both conceptions, the concept of the 'absurd' is crucial and both describe the good life as an affirmation of the absurd. But if one takes a closer look, both conceptions differ quite a lot. It is even unclear if they share the same problem, and so, how their conceptions of a good life should be comparable. The aim of this paper is to strengthen the hypothesis that a comparison of these two conceptions of the good life has to be first and foremost a structural comparison. This shall be achieved by an analysis of Camus' reading of *Fear and Trembling*. I will proceed in the following steps:

To begin, I shall analyze the concept of the absurd in Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* and briefly sketch his ideas of the failed- and of the good life derived from that concept. After that, I will name two theses central to Camus' reading of Kierkegaard. In a fourth step, the concept of the absurd in *Fear and Trembling* will be analyzed and then compared to Camus's. By analyzing Kierkegaard's transition from the absurd to the religious, I shall reach a final conclusion on how far Camus' reading can be justified. In a last step, I will sketch a structural comparison.

## 1. The concept of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus*

"It happens that the stage-sets collapse. Getting up, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, according to the same rhythm - this path is easily followed for quite some time. But one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement." (MS 29)

The absurd in MS is an experience that breaks into everyday life, as its stage-sets reveal themselves as what they really are. Behind them, or beneath them, there is no deep ground, no profound reason to live. A nihilistic truth behind everyday life reveals itself and is experienced in a negative way, as emptiness, desperation, sickness, strangeness ... .

Camus describes various ways of access to what he calls the climate of the absurd: an affective rebellion against living for the future in the face of finiteness, and an experience of strangeness of the world, of others, and of oneself. He also describes ways of knowledge of the absurd in the wake of the collapse of metaphysics, Christianity and the original idea of science. Progress of metaphysics is progress of its insight into its own impossibility and Camus puts his own position, provisionally, at the end of the process of the history of thought (cf. MS 30 ff.).

"I said that the world was absurd but I was too hasty. The world itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said about it. The absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and the strong longing for clarity ringing deep within the human heart." (MS 39)

The relation of man and world is absurd, a clash between expectation and disappointment (cf. MS 72 ff.). We try to understand and conceive the world and life in general, and we cannot stop doing so. Our demands are justified, but there is no answer. In his analysis, there is one basic figure that implicitly reoccurs in various configurations (cf. MS 36):

There are many truths.

That means, that there is no truth.

That means, that 'there is no truth' is *the* truth.

The absurd with Camus is the first purely negative metaphysical truth (cf. MS 48 ff.). The absence of any deep ground is at the theoretical spot where deep ground used to be. The use of the concept of *the* truth in the grammatical number of singular is

precisely the point where Camus remains connected to the tradition of metaphysics. The absurd is no counterargument to the plurality of perspectives, but its consequence. I assume that this position, which at first seems to be logically paradox, can be formulated coherently if one distinguishes the three levels of argumentation as formulated. Its anthropological consequence is that man is 'essentially' the "absurd man" (MS 92). Having no essence is what he is.

## 2. The failed life and the good life in *The Myth of Sisyphus*

"In Italian museums are sometimes found little painted screens that the priest used to hold in front of the face to the condemned men to hide the scaffold from them. The leap in all its forms, rushing into the divine or eternal, surrendering to the illusions of everyday life or of the idea - all these screens hide the absurd. But there are civil servants *without screens* and they are the ones of whom I want to speak." (MS 125, italics JA)

Methodically starting from the question of suicide (cf. MS 17), Camus conceives the failed life as both practical and theoretical suicide, as an escape into physical suicide, religion, idealism, rationalism, science or everyday life. All these forms mark an escape from a normative 'ought' that Camus calls the leap into falseness, where the absurd man does not want to be who he is. Religion occurs in a counterfactual conditional structure: It would be the solution - if it was the truth - but it isn't (cf. MS 95 f.).

This conception of the failed life contains, *ex-negativo*, Camus' conception of the good life. Metaphorically, it is a life "without-screen", a 'not-escaping', that is first grasped purely as the negation of the negative. As there is no profound hold, one holds *oneself* in the moment before the leap (cf. MS 73 f.). After one's discovery of the absurd as a fundamental rupture, Camus does not argue in favor of a life of theoretical contemplation of the absurd, but for a return to the world and one's task - which can very well be that of a civil servant, as it depends on one's biography and choices - while keeping up the relationship to the metaphysical truth of the absurd in every moment, particularly to the presence of death as the most extreme absurdity. The tough task is to stay awake, to live with the sickness

of the mind (l'esprit) which is impossible to overcome, overcoming the temptation of hope, ascription of meaning, and of all those who offer the illusion of a solution to the absurd and the leap back into falseness where one originally came from. The good life is to negate the possibility of negation of the absurd in every moment.

There is no formal or abstract rule, but a collection of sketches and metaphors, which Camus sums up in concluding paragraphs that use new metaphors. Overall, the line of thought goes from the problem of suicide to an interpretation of an ancient myth that gives the theoretical essay its title.

### **3. Camus' two theses on Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling***

Camus' interpretation of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* can be summed up in two theses, which may oversimplify, but can very well guide our analysis:

Thesis (1): Kierkegaard discovers and unfolds the absurd.

Thesis (2): Kierkegaard cannot justify the transition from the absurd to the religious.

### **4. The concept of the absurd in *Fear and Trembling***

The concept of the absurd is the core concept of Kierkegaard's work published under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio in 1843. It first occurs in its central piece, Kierkegaard's interpretation of the biblical sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham. Here, the absurd is "that God should withdraw his demand" and Abraham believes that "by the power of the absurd [in Danish: i Kraft af det Absurde]" (SKS 4, 131).

To further illustrate his concept, Kierkegaard brings a second example, that of a young man who fell in love with a princess, but for whatever reason – the social disparity or her already being married – cannot be with her, as in life some things are just not possible:

"[...] he infinitely renounces the claim to the love which is the content of his life; he is reconciled in pain; but then comes the wonder, he makes one more movement, more

wonderful than anything else, for he says: 'I nevertheless believe that I shall get her, namely by the power of the absurd, by the power of that for God all things are possible.' [...] all that can save him is the absurd; and this he grasps by faith. Accordingly he admits the impossibility and at the same time he believes the absurd;" (SKS 4, 141)

In this section the initial concept of the absurd is generalized to "that for God all things are possible". The knight of faith, as he is called, both believes by the power of the absurd (which grammatically could refer to 'believe' as well as to 'get her') and believes the absurd. As faith is named the "paradox of existence" (SKS 4, 141), the concepts 'absurd' and 'paradox' are later used synonymously (cf. SKS 4, 150).

As a side note, Kierkegaard here conceptualizes the good life of a life in this world achieved by carrying out the double movement, here as the movement of resignation and faith. Abraham does not believe that he will become happy in some life beyond, but here in this world.

Kierkegaard uses a third example to clarify the concept of the absurd, namely, among others, a version of the Agamemnon myth that is counterfactual, as the classical conflict of values is removed. Agamemnon's fleet has sufficient wind to sail, the absence of wind necessary for the public endeavor of sailing to war being his original reason to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia, but he sends her to be sacrificed nevertheless. As that alone is impossible to understand, Agamemnon adds the words: "It won't happen." (SKS 4, 152)

Kierkegaard as Johannes de Silentio now delivers a differentiated analysis of what could be called a double structure of the absurd. What Agamemnon does is absurd, but that is not the core problem. That is relatively easy to understand, as it analogously is easy to understand that it is completely absurd that for God all things are possible. The real problem is that one can actually believe that. This is impossible to understand, while the impossibility to understand it itself is again understandable.

So Kierkegaard's conception of the absurd is precisely the following: It is absurd to believe the absurd, and it is done by the power of the absurd. One believes 'that for God all things are possible' by the power of 'that for God all things are possible'.

## 5. Comparison of the two concepts of the absurd

As it becomes clear from the analysis above, the intersection of the respective concepts of the absurd is rather small. In both cases, the absurd is not understandable, and that it is not understandable is understandable. But the content is completely different. Camus is concerned with the possibility of a life in a universe without God; Kierkegaard is concerned with the possibility of faith. "As different the particular developments of existentialism are, they seem to meet in the concept of the absurd and share a common point of comparison here. But if one takes a closer look, they differ precisely in regard to this concept." (Richter 1959 116)

Camus does not claim the opposite. As the following analysis of the transition from the absurd to the religious suggests, what Camus calls the absurd seems to have different concepts with Kierkegaard, such as bottomlessness or desperation.

## 6. From the absurd to the religious?

"Praise of Abraham

If there were no eternal consciousness in a man, if at the bottom of everything there were only a wild ferment, a power that twisting in dark passions produced everything great or inconsequential; if an unfathomable, insatiable emptiness lay hid beneath everything, what then would life be but despair?" (SKS 4, 112, cf. also MS 63)

The above passage from *Fear and Trembling* is by far the longest direct quotation in the *Myth of Sisyphus*. As this is a quantitative remark and of course no argument in philosophy, it can nevertheless serve as an indication for further analysis. Kierkegaard's author Johannes de Silentio presents a fundamental 'emptiness', the absence of a deep ground, in a counterfactual conditional structure. Just two sentences further in the text, it says: "But for that reason it is not so, and as God created man and woman, [...]" referring to the opposing concept of createdness in indicative mode. Life would be desperation, more or

less meaning absurd according to Camus, but it is not because of the theological idea of createdness.

Camus seems to interpret precisely this line of thought as a false conclusion. He attacks the counterfactual conditional structure of the text, claiming that Kierkegaard has uncovered a truth that he does not want to be true. In doing so, he turns the concept of 'leap', Kierkegaard's own core concept of his critique of the transition in Hegel's thought and his core concept of reality (cf. SKS 4, 278 ff.), against Kierkegaard himself.

There seem to be three possible interpretations of Camus' critique: One could read a merely suggestive argument with Kierkegaard, like "Wouldn't it be terrible if there was nothing but bottomless emptiness?", which is of course no argument at all. Or one could say that Kierkegaard makes use of a normative premise such as "Bottomless emptiness should not be.", in which case his conclusion would be logically correct, but the premise is not justified. Or – and I will follow that line, while assuming that all three are intertwined – one could model Camus' argument as the claim that there is a naturalistic fallacy in Kierkegaard. In that case, the 'Is' would be the diagnosis 'There is bottomless emptiness.' and the 'Ought' 'That should not be.', with no justification to conclude that. Kierkegaard's motif, according to Camus, is anxiety and wishful thinking. His line of argument is biased, as he is directed towards escaping from the absurd (cf. MS 60 f.) – a perfect example of the failed life with Camus, that he then uses as a negative foil for his own conception of the good life.

In the following step, I will suggest the use the argument of Huehn (2009) against the criticism of a naturalistic fallacy with Kierkegaard by contemporary analytic moral philosophy to reject Camus' critique of an inconsequent transition. According to Huehn, the thesis of a naturalistic fallacy implies a severe misunderstanding of Kierkegaard. She uses a range of concepts such as "paradigm", "system of reference", "context", "beforehand", "out of question", "algebraic sign in front of the brackets", "standard" [Maßstab] (Huehn 2009 222 ff.) – to name just a few – to strengthen a point already made by Theunissen, that Kierkegaard's anthropology is never free of theological premises (cf. Theunissen 1991 37 f., on *The Sickness unto Death*). Indeed, Kierkegaard quite openly stresses his

self-understanding as a Christian writer. "Becoming a Christian" (Greve 1990 29) is the problem Kierkegaard is concerned with. That is the most difficult task. The underlying assumption of the truth of Christianity, and its inherent paradox of Jesus as man and the son of God, is out of question. That is not Kierkegaard's point of debate. There is no fallacy, as createdness is not an inconsequent conclusion, but a premise. Kierkegaard's conception is coherent within his paradigm.

While the concept of 'paradigm', the key concept of Philosophy of Science following Thomas S. Kuhn, is definitely not unproblematic in this context and can be criticized, it seems to help towards an appropriate interpretation of Kierkegaard that follows his self-interpretation in the debate with Camus.

## 7. Conclusion

In sum, Camus' thesis (2) is incorrect, as Kierkegaard's transition to the religious is coherent within his Christian paradigm. With regard to thesis (1), it appears that in a certain way, one can indeed find what Camus calls the absurd with Kierkegaard, in concepts such as bottomlessness or desperation. But, as Huehn pointed out, those concepts within the whole of Kierkegaard's thought have to be understood with an 'algebraic sign in front of the brackets', as they are always embedded in a broader context based on Christian premises. Kierkegaard does neither uncover nor think the reality or the truth of the absurd as bottomlessness as Camus does about 100 years later and with quite some history of thought, especially the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, between them. As Camus does in fact claim Kierkegaard's discovery of the absurd in a one could say strong sense as his thesis (1), he is wrong. Kierkegaard and Camus work on different problems. They do not move within the same debate. "Existence" is Kierkegaard is completely different from Camus, as the relationship to God is fundamental and out of question.

One might follow Manfred Beyer and call absurdity in Kierkegaard 'relative absurdity', that is absurdity as an experience within the context of a Christian worldview where reconciliation is possible. In turn, absurdity in Camus would be 'absolute absurdity',



the coherent sketch of the state of mankind in the wake of the collapse of metaphysics and Christianity.

If Camus wanted to argue with Kierkegaard, he therefore should redirect his critique away from the conclusion and towards the premises. It is possible that a Camusian standpoint nevertheless upholds its critique against Kierkegaard, insisting that Kierkegaard had very well discovered a new truth at the beginning of the age of modernity. But, as I stated above, there are good reasons to think that he has not, and that this interpretation of Kierkegaard misses the point the Danish thinker wants to make.

As a result, I argue that a comparison of the concepts of the good life in Kierkegaard and Camus has to be first and foremost a structural comparison.

## 8. Outlook: A structural comparison

In the last part of this paper, I want to briefly sketch what a structural comparison of the two thinkers might look like.

### *Negativism:*

The core concept of a structural comparison of these two conceptions of the good life in the modern age appears to be 'negativism'. I understand negativism as the attempt to develop the analysis of existence along negative phenomena (cf. Theunissen / Greve 1979 46). It encompasses a *thematic* as well as a *methodological* dimension.

In Kierkegaard, negative themes such as 'anxiety' and 'desperation as sickness' are central and give the titles to his two late works. Camus chooses 'Sisyphus' as his core myth and the title for his main work, which starts in its first sentence from the problem of suicide, developing a normative conception along the lines of anxiety, desperation, emptiness, meaninglessness, suffering and pain.

Methodologically, Kierkegaard's main work *The Sickness Unto Death* aims at a Christian conception of the good life via description, analysis, and reflection of failure as desperation. The good life can

only negatively be defined as not being desperate (cf. Theunissen 1991 55). Analogously, there is no direct deduction of right consequence from the analysis of the absurd in Camus, but a study and reflection of practical and theoretical failure, of physical and 'philosophical suicide'. Camus develops his theoretical conception against, according to his analysis, two opposing theories that both fail to draw the right conclusions, namely Kierkegaard and Husserl.

### *The failed life:*

In both conceptions, everyday life is regarded as a form of un- or semiconscious failure, a form of escape from what life truly is. And the failed life is quite convenient, often accompanied by social and economic success in a false and perverted world. There is a sickness of the mind, often covered by phenomena of health on the surface, with no sense of urgency to change. One is that desperate that one does not even know that one is desperate.

Both analyses can be brought down to the basic formula 'man does not want to be who he truly is' (cf. Theunissen 1993 18). The conceptions are structurally parallel, while the difference is paradigmatic and anthropological: man as 'the absurd man' with Camus, 'created' with Kierkegaard. Both absurdity and Christianity claim to be *the* truth in a traditional metaphysical sense and in a way provide the normative standard by which life and the world is to be judged.

### *The good life:*

Both Camus and Kierkegaard conceptualize the good life as a rupture, an awakening, a break with what has been, and a second beginning. It is a process of deconstruction of falsehood, discovery of the truth, and a form of repetition. In both conceptions, a confrontation with the reality of death is the key that liberates man from being caught up in everyday life. The good life is not a life of contemplation, but a return to the world – be it as a civil servant (cf. MS 125) or a tax collector (cf. SKS 4, 133) – but upholding a relationship to the metaphysical truth (the absurd in Camus, the

Christan God in Kierkegaard) in every moment (cf, SKS 11, 130). The discovery of truth is in both cases self-discovery, be it as the absurd man or as a child of God. The good life is the negation of the possibility [with Camus: of the negation of] desperation in every moment (cf. Theunissen 1991 55). It is essentially and structurally not-escaping. As the seduction of failure is strong, it is in jeopardy in every moment and it's easy to fall back.

The good life is invisible from the outside, it could be every second person or basically nobody. It is only accessible in the first person singular and communication is limited. Man is essentially an individual and alone, not one of many or a 'case'. There is no abstract universal rule, but the good life requires an individual translation of an 'ought' into unique individual circumstances shaped by history and biographical choices made.

I assume that also in Camus, it is possible to detect traces of the double movement towards death and from death towards the self. One understands what possibility or freedom is, and then one grasps necessity from the standpoint of possibility. Man finds and affirms *his* task in life (cf. Theunissen / Greve 1979 49), "*his rock*" (MS 167, italics JA).

Maybe Camus adds a twist, a decentering of the conception of Kierkegaard, that makes Kierkegaard's faith a form of escape, while keeping the structure intact. I assume that Camus' position is neither the aesthetic or the demonic in Kierkegaard, as has been argued (cf. Hackel 2011 405 ff., Stan 2011 85 ff. et. al.), as both of the conceptions are formulated within the Christian paradigm Camus does not share. Camus is structurally closer to the religious in Kierkegaard, but with that twist. Kierkegaard would probably call Camus demonic, and might be right within his early to middle 19<sup>th</sup> century theological-anthropological paradigm, but wrong after its collapse.

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