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# CAMUS'S KIERKEGAARDIAN CONCEPTION OF A GOOD LIFE

Johannes Abel

The aim of this paper is to suggest a new interpretation of the conception of the good life in Albert Camus' philosophical main work *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) as structurally close to a conception he heavily criticizes - the ethical-religious idea of a good life of Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish thinker who wrote about 100 years before him. My use of the term 'good life' here refers to a life lived according to a normative 'ought'.

In the first part, I will briefly discuss the problems of contemporary research positions which identify Camus's position as an inversion of Kierkegaard, either of the 'aesthetic stage' (1.1) or of 'demonic despair' (1.2), to show the necessity for a more convincing interpretation. In the second part, I will suggest the afore mentioned interpretation of structural proximity. I want to show that, methodologically, both Kierkegaard and Camus use what one could call an ex-negativo method (2.1), as both derive their respective conceptions of a good life indirectly, via the study of failure, of forms of escape from a normative 'ought'. My second comparative aspect is that both thinkers structurally conceptualize the good life as saying "No!" to falseness in every moment, thereby continually upholding a relationship to *the* (respective) metaphysical truth (2.2). In both Camus and Kierkegaard life is to be lived from death towards who one truly is (2.3). And, as a last comparative aspect, both ideas of a good life require a highly individual act of translation (2.4), as both argue that there can't be an abstract general rule for the concrete individual.



## 1 Contemporary Research Positions: Inversion

### 1.1 *The Myth of Sisyphus as the Aesthetic Stage in Kierkegaard*

The first version of the thesis of inversion claims that Camus's position in *The Myth* corresponds to the so-called aesthetic stage in the pseudonymous writings of Kierkegaard. Here, one interprets Kierkegaard's position as a theory of stages – aesthetic, ethical, religious – and reads Camus as Kierkegaard 'upside-down'. Recent publications all identify this position as the mainstream of comparative research and refer to Golomb (1998) for an elaborate explanation (cf. Berthold (2013), Stan (2011)). Already in an essay added to the first German edition of *The Myth of Sisyphus* in 1959, Liselotte Richter writes: “Camus attitude is the attitude of the pure aesthetic stage in Kierkegaard” (Richter 1959), which is the essential core of the inversion thesis.

A comprehensive discussion of this thesis would require a monograph for itself, as Kierkegaard elaborates the aesthetic in the first part *Either-Or* (1843) on more than 500 pages. According to Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author Victor Eremita, who claims to have found the writings of the aesthete A and the judge William, that compose *Either-Or*, in a commode, the first chapter called “Diapsalmata” captures the mood of the aesthetic, as it is a position that, according to Eremita, is not theoretically coherent (cf. SKS 2, 11). Even this first chapter is a highly complex assembling of 90 aphorisms that should be analyzed line by line. I will therefore start with aphorism 24, which Rapic (2007) in his habilitation (post-doctoral) thesis on *Either-Or* identifies the central metaphor for the aesthetic:

When a spider plunges from a fixed point into its consequences, it just sees empty space, unable to gain a foothold, no matter how much it fidgets. This is how I feel; empty space in front of me; what drives me is the consequence that lies behind me. This life is reversed<sup>1</sup>, cruel and unbearable. (SKS 2, 32 f.)

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<sup>1</sup>The Danish “bagvendt” refers to a condition of being falsely upside-down.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, we can indeed find the central concepts of this metaphor of the spider. The absence of any deep foundational ground is central to Camus's concepts of the absurd as the clash between our demand for a meaningful life and the silence of the world. There is no profound reason to live (cf. MS 20). The concept of "consequences" (MS 32) is also central for Camus. As the spider, Camus is willing to live with the consequences that result from where he started. Camus's main point of critique is directed towards any form of inconsequent leap to a false illusion of ground on which a meaningful life could be based. This is what he calls "philosophical suicide" (MS 48). In Camus, we also find what Kierkegaard here calls a reversal. We expect a meaningful life, but what life offers us is the opposite of our expectation. In his concluding chapter, Camus's interpretation of *Sisyphus*, an image originally intended as a myth of unbearable and meaningless suffering, is the central metaphor of modern life. Life is the opposite of our expectations, and our expectations are not wrong or unjustified. Life lived means bearing suffering that seems to be unbearable.

As I have shown, my thesis against mainstream research does not claim that the inversion thesis is simply 'wrong'. However, while there are common aspects, there are also crucial differences, and I claim that these are essential. First and foremost, Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage is embedded into an encompassing Christian paradigm. As late Kierkegaard understands himself, and wants to be understood, for example in his *About my Effectiveness as an Author* (1851), all of his writings are religious, aiming at helping the individual to become a Christian (cf. SKS 13, 12). The aesthetic stage is a stage to be overcome, and the horizon of a meaningful life, Christianity as the "center" (Derrida 1990), is always in the background. Kierkegaard makes unquestioned premises that Camus does not share. Moreover, Kierkegaard's aesthete is completely unable to act, paralyzed by the situation he finds himself in. In aphorism 16, he states that he feels like a chess figure, that, because of the constellation on the board, cannot be moved (cf. SKS 2, 30). By contrast, with his concepts of revolt, freedom, and passion (cf. MS 75 ff.), Camus draws completely different consequences. *The Myth of Sisyphus* is on acting in the face of absurdity. While Kierkegaard's aesthete finds some relief in music (cf. SKS 2, 39), as music can surpass barriers that the rays of the sun cannot

overcome (cf. SKS 2, 50), Camus on the contrary sees in music an excellent example of his theory of art as, one might say, an embodiment of the absurd. Music has no ground (cf. MS 135 f.).“ The absurd man recognizes these harmonies and forms as his” (MS 136).

In short, while the first version of the inversion thesis has its points, Camus's position is not simply Kierkegaard upside-down in that sense, especially if we take into account the respective difference of their paradigmatic contexts.

### 1.2 *The Myth of Sisyphus as Demonic Despair in Kierkegaard*

The second version of the thesis of inversion argues that the position in Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* corresponds to 'demonic despair' in Kierkegaard. This thesis is defended in newer contributions to comparative research, such as Hackel (2011) and Stan (2011). Kierkegaard elaborates his concepts of the 'demonic' primarily in *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844) and *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849). I will focus my analysis on *The Sickness Unto Death*, on one hand because I consider it to be his main work, in which he, as he himself writes two years later, directly formulates his position (cf SKS 13, 12). On the other hand, because this work is central for Camus's reading of Kierkegaard, as it marks for him the beginning of the thinking of the absurd (cf. MS 41).

In Kierkegaard's study of the phenomenon of despair from 1849, the demonic marks the highest point of conscious despair and concludes the first, the philosophical, part of the work. Kierkegaard writes:

[...] despite everything, in defiance of the whole existence, he wants to be himself [...], bear it, bearing his pain. Because he doesn't want to hope for the possibility of help, especially by the power of the absurd, that for God everything is possible. Looking for help from someone else, no, he does not want that, he prefers to be himself, with all torments of hell, rather than to look for help. (SKS 11, 184 f.)

As we saw with the aesthetic stage, Kierkegaard's concept of the demonic also reminds us of Camus's *Myth*. Camus consciously decides

against what he calls the “leap” (MS 73), a religion 'solution' to the absurd, which he criticizes as unjustified and unjustifiable. Using the concept of the leap, Camus turns the core concept of Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel's concept of transition against Kierkegaard himself. Camus chooses suffering, he prefers a life with the sickness of the mind (cf. MS 60) against Kierkegaard's “sanity of faith” (SKS 11. 155).

Nevertheless, there are again crucial differences. Kierkegaard paradigmatically presupposes that the choice for Christianity is the choice for *the* truth, while Camus argues that the absurd itself is *the* truth in a traditional metaphysical sense (cf. MS 52, 60). Secondly, Kierkegaard uses the adjective “tantallic” (SKS 11, 187), alluding to the myth of Tantalus, which is a metaphor for restlessness, to describe the state of demonic despair. While I do not claim that Camus directly refers to this passage, one can read Camus's concluding interpretation of the myth of Sisyphus as a counter-myth to the tantallic. Camus explicitly directs the reader's attention to the “pause” (MS 165) on Sisyphus' way down, his consciousness, momentary relief, and experience of having time, which are crucial for Camus's interpretation of the absurd life as “happy” (MS 168) – more precisely: for us having to imagine, in the light of 150 pages of argumentation, that this is happiness. A third aspect is Kierkegaard's critique of the demonic attempt of self-creation (cf. SKS 11, 182). The despaired individual does not want to see his own abilities, his own limits, the historical situation he is in, or the biographical choices he has already made. He wants to create himself. While I would assume that this critique of any form of *causa sui* may apply to Jean-Paul Sartre's idea of self-choice, I argue that it does not apply to Camus. Sisyphus' rock is “*his* rock” (MS 167, italics JA), and his absurd task in life is neither self-made nor arbitrary, but given by the Gods – which for Camus is of course just a metaphor.

In sum, while the second version of the thesis of inversion also makes valid points, it also does not give us a convincing upside-down interpretation. I thereby have shown the need for a new interpretation, and I suggest the hypothesis of structural proximity, for which I will argue in the second part of this paper.

## 2 The Structural Approach

### 2.1 *Ex-Negativo Methodology*

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, there is neither a chapter nor a longer reflection on methodology, but in various sections, Camus makes very short remarks on his approach, usually in just one sentence. I will quote two of those which I argue to be representative:

Up to this point, cases of failure relating to the demand of the absurd have us best shown what this demand is. (MS 140)

One discovers its [the absurd's] path by uncovering paths that veer away from it. (MS 153)

Camus applies what I suggest to call an ex-negativo-methodology. The idea of a good life, the normative “demand” (MS 140) is discovered via an analysis and reflection of failure. In the first two sub-chapters “The absurd and suicide” and “The absurd wall”, Camus describes in detail the feeling and the knowledge of the absurd. However, there is no direct conclusion from the absurd to the normative ought, but what Camus calls an inversion or a reverse proceeding (cf. MS 46). He does not directly give his interpretation of the ancient myth of Sisyphus from page 48 onwards, but a detailed analysis of failure – in everyday life, science, idealism, rationalism, phenomenology, existentialism, art and literature. I argue that the study of failure is not just an additional illustration, but that it is essential to his line of argument, as what Camus calls the leap reveals, ex-negativo, the position he systematically wants to argue for.

In a way, Kierkegaard applies this method in a more radical sense. While Camus offers positive sketches of a life lived according to his normative conception – Don Juan, the actor, the conqueror – Kierkegaard gives very few positive examples. *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard's conception of a good life, is a pure study of negativity, of the phenomenon of despair. The third chapter of its first part “The form in which this sickness (despair) appears” contains two studies. Firstly, despair is studied according to its structure (cf. SKS 11, 146 ff.), discussing the disequilibrium of anthropological components that

Kierkegaard assumes to be central: finiteness and infinity, and possibility and necessity. Without going into further detail here, a life just lived along social norms and a life that comes up with a new plan every day are two extreme forms of despair that, *ex-negativo*, should reveal Kierkegaard's own idea of how life should be lived. Secondly, Kierkegaard studies despair by degree of consciousness (cf. SKS 11, 157 ff.), ranging from unconscious everyday life via a continuous growth of reflection to the state of demonic despair mentioned above. While reflected despair causes the severest experience of suffering, completely unreflected everyday life is, to Kierkegaard, the most dangerous form of the sickness of the mind (cf. SKS 11, 160). Completely unaware of the falseness of what one does, one is furthest away from changing oneself. Moral wrongness is most dangerous when it goes unnoticed, when it even qualifies as normal. It means that the whole is the negative of what should be.

To conclude, both Camus and Kierkegaard apply an *ex-negative*-method, discovering their respective normative 'ought' via a reflection of failure.

## *2.2 Truth via a No to Falseness*

The French-Algerian and the Danish writer both structurally conceptualize the idea of a good life as a relationship to the respective one and only metaphysical truth, in which one holds oneself by continually saying no to the possibility of falseness.

The leap in all its forms [...] all these screens hide the absurd. But there are also civil servants without screens, and they are the ones of whom I want to speak. (MS 125)

In Camus, the dangers and the seduction of the leap, which he metaphorically describes as the screens that hide the reality of the scaffold from the convicted person, are always present. The absurd man is always in danger of believing in a metaphysical system, in a religious offer, in scientific knowledge, or in the ideology of everyday life. The artist, or the creative mind, the most absurd existence of all (cf. MS 126), is always in danger of interpreting his life as meaningful (cf. MS 139). It is impossible to discover the absurd without "being

seduced to write some kind of manual of happiness” (MS 167). The good life is a continuous negation of the possibility of negation of despair, and thereby upholding the relationship to the absence of any profound reason to live as the first purely negative metaphysical truth in every moment. It is negatively defined as not-leaping.

[...] if it should be true that somebody is not desperate, he has to destroy that possibility in every moment. (SKS 11, 131)

In Kierkegaard, it is the seduction of despair that is always present. One is always in danger of losing faith, of falling back into everyday life or consciously turning against the offer of Christianity. The good life here is negatively defined as not-despaired, as a continuous negation of the possibility of despair in every moment, and thereby finding “balance” (SKS 11, 130) in the relationship to the deep foundational layer of Christianity, which alone makes a meaningful life possible. We become who we truly are: “set” (SKS 11, 130) by God. In Camus, too, we become who we truly are – the absurd man – by not being who we essentially are not.

### 2.3 *From Death towards the Self*

The central figure in Kierkegaard is the execution of what he calls a double movement. We find this figure in his major works, in *Fear and Trembling* as the movement of resignation and faith, or in *The Sickness Unto Death* a movement to the infinite and from the infinite to the finite (cf. SKS 11, 146). In his newest contribution to research on Kierkegaard, Anders Moe Rasmussen points out the importance of Kierkegaard's speech *At a Grave* from 1845 for his idea of a meaningful life against the challenge of nihilism (cf. Rasmussen 2017). In this speech, it is the presence of death, the certainty of its 'that' and the uncertainty of its 'when', that liberates the human being, wakes him up from the ideological everyday life and enables him to live *his* life (cf. SKS 5, 453 ff.). In *At a Grave* as well as in *The Sickness Unto Death*, one finds one's task by breaking up everyday life, understand what 'possibility' really means, and from that perspective have a fresh look at one's life with its necessity. One cannot start from zero, but has to work with oneself.

I argue that there is a similar figure in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. It is death that reveals to us what life in its finiteness really is (cf. MS 31 f.). It is the “absurdity of possible death” (MS 82) that shatters the illusions of everyday life and its false ideological promises, that wakes us up and enables us to become who we truly are. Death liberates us (cf. MS 84, cf. also MS 111) – here and now. Both Camus and Kierkegaard repeatedly use metaphors of awakening from what has been a state of unconsciousness, of coming to life from what has been a purely mechanical existence.

In sum, life should not be lived as if it went on forever within the narrow limits of everyday life, but, from death, with a new understanding of what possibility really means, towards the real individual self.

#### 2.4 *The Necessity of Translation*

The obvious question concerning such an idea of a good life is: What does that concretely mean? What is the normative duty? Both Kierkegaard and Camus argue that this cannot be generally said. There is no formal algorithmic rule as a Kantian Categorical Imperative in his *Groundworks of Metaphysics of Morals*, as any general rule necessarily is an abstraction and misses the concrete and unique individual human being. No two circumstances are similar. Both conceptions of the good life are highly individual. Everybody has to translate the normative 'ought' for him- or herself.

In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, we see a movement from “reasoning” (MS 17) towards the interpretation of a myth. Camus's main philosophical work concludes with literature, with telling an ancient story and interpreting it. Kierkegaard's works, too, cross the border between literature and philosophy with the systematical implication that this is necessary. Abraham, the role model of faith, is not to be taken literally (cf. SKS 4, 125). The good life does not literally consist of pushing a rock upon a hill or believing that God will give you a new son after you killed him, but figuratively. Nobody can tell you what these metaphors mean for you, you have to discover that for yourself.

In both conceptions, the possessive pronoun 'one's' is crucial. The good life means finding one's own individual task in life, one's



metaphorical rock. In Kierkegaard, that means bringing together the infinite possibilities of the world with one's own individual limits, such as one's capabilities, one's historical situation, and past biographical choices made. Nobody can tell me if my task in life is being a kindergarden teacher, a nurse or a lawyer. It depends on who I am. The good life means "becoming concrete" (SKS 11, 146), becoming the concrete person that I am.

A related problem is the assumption that direct communication is impossible. In his encompassing diagnosis of despair, Kierkegaard describes how concepts such as self, man, happiness, education, and faith are falsely used in the world. If people say "being who truly I am", they mean the wrong thing, usually referring to an unreflected, rather secure and successful life within their respective social contexts. Therefore, direct communication will be misunderstood, will be interpreted as an attack on what one falsely perceives as one's happiness (cf. SKS 11, 158). The consequence is that communication has to be indirect. Learning therefore means being left free to discover for yourself.

In Camus, we also see the reversal of core normative concepts, such as the concept of freedom in everyday life (cf. MS 82), and, of course, the concept of happiness. Sisyphus is happy (cf. MS 168) – or at least we *have to* imagine him to be so if we follow the line of argumentation. Any direct communication about the idea of a good life is therefore faced with the severe problem that our everyday concept of happiness is completely wrong. Happiness is the opposite of what we unreflectedly imagine it to be.

The good life therefore is beyond language and generalization. Every individual human being has to discover it for himself, has to translate what it means to be the absurd man, or set by God respectively.

Summing up the results, my aim was to show that Camus's position corresponds neither to the aesthetic stage nor to demonic despair in Kierkegaard, but is structurally very close to Kierkegaard's own idea of a good life, and can in that sense be called Kierkegaardian. In Camus, we see what happens to a Kierkegaardian conception of a good life when its foundational religious layer breaks away.

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