

Negativism as the Philosophical Approach to the Meaning of Life

By Johannes Abel

Abstract

The thesis of the paper is that regarding the question of meaning of life in our age, a study of Søren Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death* (1849) can help us to understand the methodology as well as the theoretical position of Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), a position that has still systematic relevance today. Both start from negative phenomena, analyze forms of escape from a normative 'ought', and arrive at an idea of the good life as continually saying 'no' to the possibility of escape and thereby being who we truly are in the light of the possibilities the world offers and our own abilities, past biographical choices and historical situation. Both conceptions are highly individual. We see in Camus what happens to the meaning of life if a deep foundational religious layer breaks away. The absurd is impossible to overcome and has to be appropriately lived with.

1. Introduction

Published more than 70 years ago, Albert Camus' philosophical main work *The Myth of Sisyphus* from 1942 is still systematically relevant if we ask the question of the meaning of life today in the wake of the collapse of (western) traditional metaphysics and Christianity, which provided the philosophical framework to discuss this question for more than 2000 years.

The aim of the paper is to show how a structural comparison with the main work of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who wrote around 100 years before Camus, right at the beginning of the modern age, can help us to better understand Camus' methodology as well as his position regarding the question of meaning of life.

In the first step, I will sketch the broader theoretical framework of the negativity of the modern age in which the question of the meaning of life is situated. Secondly, I will analyze Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death* from 1849 regarding its theme, methodology, and idea of the good life. Thirdly, I will analyze Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus* regarding these same categories, as the structural parallel of those two works is my thesis. I will then briefly sketch Camus' critique of Kierkegaard, which I assume to be incorrect, before concluding the results.

2. Negativity of the Modern Age

In Western and Northern Europe, where Kierkegaard and Camus lived and worked, the modern age began in the middle of the 18th century with the rise of industrialization and the mathematically-exact natural sciences, and these developments still characterize our lives today. It is an age that, according to the continental post-Hegelian philosophical tradition from Marx and Kierkegaard via Nietzsche, Heidegger and Adorno to 21st century positions, is in its core dimension of history, society, and individual existence marked by characteristics that we cannot but understand as negative. We cannot want this to be.

Historically, we live in the shock wave of two catastrophic world wars with an unimaginable amount of suffering and death that had its negative peak in the mass murder of the concentration camps which Adorno calls the absolute negative (cf. Adorno 1971). Present day (western) societies are characterized by massive socio-economic injustice along their global supply chains and a production system that exhausts the ecosystem. The destruction of the planet seems now almost inevitable, and even saying 'almost' is a rather generous assumption. Both a look into our history books and into the daily newspaper leave us speechless. On the level of individual existence, societies are faced with epidemics of mental illnesses that have yet to be theoretically understood. Concepts of 'mental' and 'mind' appear to be unsolvable scientific riddles while phenomena of experienced meaninglessness and despair dominate our lives.

The paper will focus on Kierkegaard and Camus discussing the third dimension in their respective theoretical contexts, but I presume that, in a bigger picture beyond this paper, these three dimensions are intertwined. I nevertheless assume, an assumption I share with Camus, that while dimension of a meaningful and a just life seem to be interdependent, the question of meaning is the deeper and underlying one (cf. MS 174 footnote).

3. Meaning of life in Kierkegaard

3.1 Theme

Søren Kierkegaard's philosophical main work *The Sickness unto Death* (1849) is a study of the phenomenon of despair, which he calls both a sickness of and a sickness within the mind (cf. SKS 11, 129 ff.). The Danish word 'Aand' refers here to a broader concept than what we nowadays refer to as the mind, its German translation is usually 'Geist'. The Danish thinker repeatedly uses the metaphor of a medical doctor, a trained specialist for the diagnosis of sickness, to diagnose the phenomenon of despair as a philosophical expert. The self-assessment of the patient can help the doctor as an indicator, but he never relies on it, as a wrong image of oneself can be part a symptom itself. It is the doctor who decides who is ill and who is healthy (cf. SKS 11,139 ff.). Therefore, it is important to see that despair can be negatively experienced as agony, anxiety, emptiness, and absurdity (cf. SKS 11, 138), but it can also appear as what many would assume to be good health:

“Because a human being is that desperate, he can very well, and in fact even better live within temporality, appearing as human, praised by others, honored and well-respected, busy with all kinds of tasks.” (SKS 11,160)¹

For Kierkegaard, the un- or semiconscious everyday life with its dimensions of marriage, family, professional success, and being well-respected by others is the most dangerous form of despair. Unconscious of one's own state of despair, one is further away from sanity and what is truly a meaningful life than those who consciously suffer and view their lives as meaningless. The author's diagnosis of the modern age is an all-encompassing nihilism where few, if any, live meaningfully.

1 I translate from the Danish edition of Kierkegaard and from the French edition of Camus.

3.2 Method

For Kierkegaard, his view that there is no immediate sanity of the mind (cf. SKS 11,141) has methodological implications. Sanity always means overcoming sickness. Therefore, the study failure, of despair and meaninglessness is the appropriate theoretical approach to the question of the meaning of life.

By studying despair, Kierkegaard hopes to derive, ex-negativo, the idea of the good or meaningful live.² Therefore, *The Sickness unto Death* analyzes the two main forms of despair. The first one, which Kierkegaard calls 'desperately not trying to be oneself', refers to the inability to overcome the limits of one's social surroundings. One aims in life at being just one of many, just one more human being, nothing more than a number (cf. SKS 11,149). As the Danish thinker puts it: One looks into the mirror, but one does not see oneself, but just a human being (cf. SKS 11,151 f.). The second main form of despair is the opposite, 'desperately trying to be oneself'. It refers to a life spent fantasizing about 'all the things I could do' while effectively doing nothing (cf. SKS 11,148) . One comes up with a new plan every day, but is unable to decide and takes back every decision made. One is completely unable to act, to realize one or maybe a selected number of those infinite possibilities one can imagine. Michael Theunissen (1993) suggests that both form of despair can be formulated as the individual human being not wanting to be who he really is.

3.3 Meaning of Life

It is important to understand that, for Kierkegaard, a meaningful life requires overcoming despair not once, but it consists in a continuous negation of the possibility of despair in every moment (cf. SKS 11, 131). The translation of the Danish 'Oieblik' as moment is here insufficient, as it implies a thesis on the essence of reality against what we might call scientific physicalism with its chronological understanding of time and theory of the present as a case of application of differential calculus. The meaning of life is achieved by continually saying "No!" to the possibility of a meaningless life. For a more concrete understanding, it is necessary to refer to Kierkegaard's theological concept of human existence:

"An in that sense derived, set relation is the human self, a relation that relates itself to itself, and, as it relates to itself, relates to an 'Other.'" (SKS 11, 130)

For Kierkegaard, there is no theoretical mind-body-problem. The human being is not (only) the synthesis of these opposing dimension, but the relating-towards-itself of that synthesis. We do not merely act or behave in the world, but we can change *ourselves*, an ability that would otherwise be inexplicable, as it would be unclear whether we are the person changing or the person that is being changed. This constellation is thought as "set" (SKS 11, 130) by God, and therefore a meaningful life means understanding one self as set and keeping up the relationship to God as the 'Other' in every moment in life. By saying no to despair and understanding oneself as set, one reaches what Kierkegaard calls sanity of faith.

Living a meaningful life is not mere a question of actions, but it implies a complete transformation of one's whole person towards the person that one is supposed to be – and really is. The task is then to find *one's* task in life by bringing together the infinite

² One could call this approach in that sence 'negativistic' (cf. Theunissen 1991).

possibilities of the world with one's own limits, which have their origin in one's abilities, past decisions, and history. This is achieved by the figure of the double movement of breaking up the everyday person one has become towards an understanding of possibility, and then finding back to one's necessities. There is no start from zero, no reset button, but one has to work with oneself, change oneself. Kierkegaard's idea of a meaningful life is therefore highly individual. There is a normative ethical-religious 'ought' which everyone has to translate in his or her individual context. Because we are all individuals, there is no general rule or imperative. Furthermore, the truly meaningful it is an inner attitude beyond empirical access, invisible from the outside. It could very well be the "tax collector" (SKS 4, 133).

This idea of a meaningful life is of course based on massive theological-anthropological premises. It makes use of a framework, one could say a paradigm, that remains unquestioned (cf. Huehn 2009). To Kierkegaard, Christianity is *the* Truth with a capital 'T'. He is concerned with *becoming* a Christian in a perverted world. The Christian foundation itself is beyond question (cf. SKS 13, 12 ff.). The meaning of life is becoming who we truly are: Concrete existing individuals set by God.

4. The good life in Camus

4.1 Theme

Around 100 years later, the Christian paradigm that Kierkegaard built on had collapsed. For French-Algerian Nobel prize winner in literature Albert Camus, there is no deep ground (cf. MS 20), no foundational layer of existence and therefore no profound reason to live. Camus main work *The Myth of Sisyphus* studies the negative phenomenon of the 'absurd', which he, as the concept of despair in Kierkegaard, calls the sickness of the mind (cf. MS 132). As *The Sickness unto Death*, *The Myth of Sisyphus* is built around the study of negative concepts, of which one can find more than 50.

"Sometimes the stage-sets collapse. Getting up, tram, four hours in the office or factory, lunch, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, always the same rhythm – that is usually a convenient path. But one day the 'Why' arises and everything begins [...]." (MS 29)

Absurd is precisely this clash between the human mind asking the question of the meaning of life, expecting meaning, and the world that gives no answer (cf. MS 46). We are stuck with a 'why-question' that stems from the metaphysical tradition, but, after its collapse in the 19th century, there is no access to an appropriate answer. So we are trapped within the experience of absurdity. Absurdity can either be consciously experienced or suppressed in an un- or semiconscious everyday life that is nevertheless absurd.

Camus' understanding of the question of the meaning of life stresses an important point. The concept of *the* truth in singular mode is precisely Camus' connection to the philosophical metaphysical tradition which he does not give up in the age of relativism and perspectivism. On the contrary, the *Myth of Sisyphus* makes, in numerous varieties, use of one core theoretical figure, for example in: "One answers him that nothing is certain. But at least that is a certainty." (MS 78). The underlying argument is the following:

- (1) There are many truths.
- (2) That means: There is no truth.
- (3) That means: 'There is no truth' is *the* truth.

Camus implicitly argues that the truth of the absurd is not a thesis against multiperspectivism and decentered world-views, but their theoretical consequence. We simply cannot go behind the dichotomy of true and false in a very basic sense of these concepts. The value of truth over falseness is an assumption that Camus never questions, and I assume it is, as a very basic form of rationality, a necessary one.

4.2 Method

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

As the road to an overall meaningful life is blocked, it makes more sense to refer to Camus' idea of a good life understood as a life according to the normative demands of the absurd. Similar to Kierkegaard, Camus' methodological path to this idea is the study of failure. Camus studies everyday life, traditional metaphysics, phenomenology, religious existentialism, art and literature as different attempts to escape from the absurd condition by what he calls a 'leap', an unjustified positive conclusion from the diagnosis of the absurd. Transforming Michael Theunissens basic thesis about Kierkegaard where the created man does not want to be who he really is, I suggest that in the *Myth of Sisyphus*, the absurd man does not want to be who he really is, so the basic structural formula of an escape from a normative ought is the same.

4.3 The good life

Also parallel to Kierkegaard, Camus' idea of a good life is built around a 'No!':

"In Italian museums, one can sometimes find little painted screens that the priest held in front of the faces of the convicted men to hide the scaffold from them. The leap in all its forms, the fall into the divine or the eternal, the devotion to the illusions of everyday life or of the idea – 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, italics JA)

Being continually confronted with the seduction of the ascription of meaning, the idea of a good life means saying no to the possibility of the leap in every moment. One has to understand oneself as the absurd man or woman who one really is and uphold the relationship to the absurd as *the*, purely negative, metaphysical truth in every moment. The absence of any foundational layer is structurally at the same position as Kierkegaard's foundational Christian layer. Nevertheless, the basic negativity of life is impossible to overcome. There is no path to sanity, but the good life consists in appropriately living with the sickness of the mind. So, in a way, there is no meaning of life, but there is nevertheless an idea of a good life that claims to be justified by Camus' line of argumentation.

We can also find in Camus the Kierkegaardian idea of translation. There is a systematic reason for Camus' seemingly more literary and metaphorical style than we are normally used to in philosophy, and that reason comes down to the uniqueness of each individual. Camus concludes with an interpretation of a myth, that gives the books its title, that everybody has to translate into his or her own context. The answer to the question of the

meaning of life in the age of nihilism is highly individual, finding “*one's rock*” (MS 167, italics JA), one's own absurd task in life that corresponds to one's own abilities, past biographical choices made, and historical situation. It results in, as with Kierkegaard, an inner attitude beyond empirical access. It could very well be life of the post office clerk (cf. MS 98).

5. Camus' critique of Kierkegaard

In his critique of Kierkegaard (cf. MS 60 ff.), Camus attacks Kierkegaard transition from despair to religious faith as an unjustified conclusion, a 'leap', philosophical suicide, in his terms. Thereby, Camus completely misunderstands Kierkegaard's theological-anthropological premises of the individual 'set' by God. Within an unquestioned Christian paradigm, faith is no incoherent conclusion, but rather a very coherent one. As Camus misinterprets the context, his identification of Kierkegaard's concept of despair with his own concept of the absurd (cf. MS 44) is also incorrect, as Kierkegaard's interpretation of concrete phenomena as despair always presupposes the Christian point of view that Camus does not share. So Camus attacks Kierkegaard's conclusion while he should attack his theological-anthropological premises.³

6. Conclusion

While Camus misinterprets Kierkegaard's Christian framework, he nevertheless structurally follows a similar approach with regards to the question of the meaning of life, an approach that one might call negativistic: Both start from negative phenomena, both detect a normative ought via a study of forms of escape, and both conceptualize the meaningful or at least good life as a continuous 'no' that holds up the connection to the one metaphysical truth within a world of failure, as being who one truly is – set by God in Kierkegaard, the absurd man in Camus. What this means for us as concrete individuals is something we all have to find out for ourselves.

So despite all their differences and Camus' vicious attacks on Kierkegaard, and vice versa as Kierkegaard, from his point of view, probably would have called Camus' position a state of demonic despair, both conceptions are actually very close on a structural level. A negativistic interpretation of Kierkegaard, who is the more precise thinker, helps us to understand Camus' approach. We see in Camus what happens when the deep foundational religious layer breaks away: We are faced with absurdity. I assume that Camus' position regarding the question of the meaning of life is central to one's self-understanding in the wake of the collapse of metaphysics and Christianity.

3 For a more detailed analysis see: Johannes Abel, "Albert Camus' reading of Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*", in: *Journal of Camus Studies*, 2018.

Literature

Primary literature

Albert Camus, *Le mythe de Sisyphe*, Paris: Gallimard, 1942.

Søren Kierkegaard, *Skrifter*, Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Joakim Garff, Johnny Kondrup, Karsten Kynde, Tonny Aagaard Olesen und Steen Tullberg (Ed.), København: Søren Kierkegaard Forskningscenteret, 2014.

Secondary literature

Theodor W. Adorno, *Erziehung zur Mündigkeit*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1971.

Daniel Berthold, "Kierkegaard and Camus, either/or?", in: *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 73, Springer, 2013, 137-150.

Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity, from Kierkegaard to Camus*, London: Routledge, 1995.

Manuela Hackel, "Das Dämonische bei Kierkegaard", in: Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, Karl Verstrynge (Ed.), *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, Vol. 2011, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011, 383-410.

Jürgen Hengelbrock, *Albert Camus, Ursprünglichkeit der Empfindung und Krisis des Denkens*, Freiburg: Alber, 1982.

Lore Hühn, *Kierkegaard und der deutsche Idealismus, Konstellation des Übergangs*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009.

Annemarie Pieper, "Absurdes Dasein, Albert Camus auf der Spur von Kierkegaard und Nietzsche", in: Rudolf Langthaler & Michael Hofer (Ed.), *Existenzphilosophie, Anspruch und Kritik einer Denkform*, Wien: nap, New Acad. Press, 2014, 84-98.

Roger Poole, "Kierkegaard, Twentieth Century Receptions", in: Alastair Hannay, Gordon D. Marino (Ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, Cambridge: CUP, 1998, 48-76.

Avi Sagi, *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2002.

Leo Stan, "Walled within God", in: Jon Stewart (Ed.), *Kierkegaard and Existentialism*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011.

Jon Stewart, "Kierkegaard as Forerunner of Existentialism and Poststructuralism", in: Jon Stewart (Ed.), *Kierkegaard's International Reception, Kierkegaard Research, Sources, Reception and Resources*, Vol. 8, Tome I, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009, 421-474.

Michael Theunissen, *Das Selbst auf dem Grund der Verzweiflung*, Frankfurt a.M.: Anton Hain, 1991.

Michael Theunissen, *Der Begriff Verzweiflung, Korrekturen an Kierkegaard*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1993.