

ABSURDISM: THE SECOND TRUTH OF PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

When one surveys the history of early modern/modern philosophy, specifically the ideas and theories that fall within the domain of metaphysics and epistemology, one quickly realizes the presence of the absurd, sitting there like a pink elephant in the room, unacknowledged or at times purposely ignored. Descartes may have uncovered the indubitable primary truth - I think, therefore I am - but Camus called out what I believe is the indubitable secondary truth of philosophy - human attempts to know everything and the purpose of it all are met with a silent, indifferent, impenetrable universe that defeats every attempt. This is why practically every treatise written during the period inevitably fails or must admit God into the picture as the ultimate explanation and designer (and the inevitable notion of how small our minds are in comparison to God comes about to explain why we are having a hard time figuring the world out). From Bacon to Berkeley, rationalism to empiricism alike, we see attempts to identify the boundaries of human knowledge for the purposes of accuracy in science and to have truths built on certainty, and we see failure happen over and over. I believe this was due to the fact that none were daring enough to see the absurd at work, and what they sought was truly impossible. That is until Kant came along, who I would argue was the first to really sniff out and speak of the absurd, and when he did this he was met with fierce opposition and misinterpretation. Everyone wanted to flee from the absurd and/or deny it existed at all, rather than come to terms with it, accept it, and move on or revolt against it in personal authentic ways.

In this paper, I will discuss the presence of absurdism in the history of philosophy, demonstrating that it is not simply an existential or literary notion, but rather the key to the problems of metaphysics and epistemology. In fact, it is core to the philosophical discipline itself and philosophical inquiry. This will hopefully lead to or in the very least inspire a 'Camus renaissance', where we can start to appreciate the significance of his contribution in a much more accurate light.

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The story of the nature of reality and whether we know it or not is an old one; the Pre-Socratics were asking it long before René Descartes, John Locke and Immanuel Kant. But I prefer to begin with Descartes since he infamously wrote in his *Discourse On Method* (1637) and again later in his *Meditations On First Philosophy* (1641): I think, therefore I am. This is of course what philosophers refer to as the 'first truth' of philosophy; that which cannot be doubted and that from which all inquiry springs forth - I am "a thing that thinks ... a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wants, refuses, and also imagines and senses."¹ Sadly, what came after this jewel was pretty lackluster: the commitment to strict methodological doubt gave way quickly to "Nature is my teacher and God is no deceiver",

¹ René Descartes, *Meditations On First Philosophy*, accessed 7 January 2014, <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdfs/descartes1641.pdf>, pg. 5.

and God's constant intervening as the ad hoc solution to communications between the will and the body (and for causal interaction what so ever). But in the positing of the indubitable first truth he gave us not only the point of departure – the "I" that thinks from within the inner scull sanctum – but also a boundary problem that desperately needed to be settled. We knew the starting position, the origins of subjective experience if you will, but where does the world of our 'knowledge' extend to and end? This question sat at the very intersection of metaphysics and epistemology, and it resulted in a debate that would rage on for centuries. It also, in my opinion, forms part of the dialogue with the absurd, which I will discuss further in a moment.

After Descartes, many philosophers attempted to find and define this outer boundary of human knowledge, often in the name of science – for improved methods, for better clarity, true accomplishable goals, etc. On some occasions it was claimed finding this boundary could improve philosophy as a discipline, by doing away with vague language and empty, meaningless concepts. And then concerning metaphysics specifically the question of the boundary often was used in an attempt to prove or disprove whether it could be a science or not. Regardless of 'why' they wished to do it a pattern emerged when philosophers attempted to establish where this boundary of human knowledge was. Allow me to illustrate.

A first, prime example of what I am speaking about can be seen in the epistemological work of John Locke. He writes in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, "My purpose ... is to enquire into the origin of certainty and extent of human knowledge, and also into the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion, and assent"² and to do this he must inquire into the nature and powers of the understanding. The hopeful result of this enquiry is the discovery of its powers, including "how far they reach, what things they are adequate to deal with, and where they fail us."³ Furthermore, "If I succeed, that may have the effect of persuading the busy mind of man to be more cautious in meddling with things that are beyond its powers to understand; to stop when it is at the extreme end of its tether; and to be peacefully reconciled to ignorance of things that turn out to be beyond the reach of our capacities."⁴ Now it is important to recall that Locke was an empiricist and so he didn't believe in the notion of the mind possessing any innate principles; your mind at birth is a blank slate, objects of sensation produce ideas and so it is experience that furnishes the mind with everything it needs to ground knowledge. So, when we take into account his philosophical affiliation and what he said in the introduction to his *Essay* (stated above), it is rather brow-raising that his discussion ends up containing things like Substance (that 'which I know not what'; three types of Substance include God, Finite Spirits and Matter) and knowing the existence of God – things which we cannot experience with the senses directly and thus the understanding cannot really grasp for knowledge creation. To reiterate, these admissions contradict the intentions he stated and the results he hoped to achieve, and stranger yet are in direct opposition to the foundations of empiricism. Locke originally argued the boundary for human knowledge was what could be perceived/sensed, thus experienced, and then he quickly admitted things into the mix that couldn't be experienced proper (and made them explanations or causes of things). Given Locke was a very intelligent man it really does make one ask: what the heck is going on here?

Another fine example is George Berkeley, the Irish Immaterialist and Bishop of Cloyne. In the introduction to *The Principles of Human Knowledge*, he writes: "... as soon as we depart from sense and instinct to follow the light of a higher principle – i.e., to reason, meditate,

² John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, accessed 7 January 2014, <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdfs/locke1690book1.pdf>, pg 1.

³ Locke, pg. 1.

⁴ Locke, pg. 1.

and reflect on the nature of things – a thousand doubts spring up in our minds concerning things that we previously seemed to understand fully.”⁵ His purpose then is to attempt to discover the underlying sources of our doubtfulness, uncertainty, and the state of contradiction that so many philosophers have fallen into: is it natural weakness, misuse of our faculties?; Or is it unclear language?; or bad reason? Thus, this investigation must involve, “a strict inquiry into the first principles of human knowledge, to sift and examine them on all sides...”⁶ and even at this early point Berkeley thinks false principles might be to blame rather than our faculties or abilities. Specifically, he cites language and the use of abstract ideas as problems (e.g., substance, unity). Berkeley criticizes those materialist philosophers before him; those who believed in the idea that material substance/objects exist even when not perceived by anyone. He outright rejects the idea of unperceived things existing in the world. Philosophically this makes him an idealist and an immaterialist. Further, he writes, “Unless we take care to clear the first principles of knowledge from being burdened and deluded by words, we can reason from them forever without achieving anything; we can draw consequences from consequences and never be the wiser.”⁷ Once again we have a statement about the need to ‘clean house’ in philosophy.

But what he ends up arguing seems to defeat his own comments in the introduction about language: Berkeley ends up tweaking and somewhat abusing the meaning of ‘existence’ so that it becomes intimately tied to perception, in fact relying on perception of people or God to obtain whatsoever. He posits that no things exist independently of minds – his infamous motto “to exist is to be perceived.”⁸ Existence is now no longer the common sense, simple idea of something outside ourselves ‘being there’, it now means that this something is there because it is perceived to be present by a mind (ours, and if all else fails God’s): “The table that I am writing on *exists*, that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I would still say that it existed, meaning that if I were in my study I would perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it They couldn’t possibly exist out of the minds or thinking things that perceive them.”⁹ Existence, to be spoken about meaningfully amongst persons, is rather subjective (i.e., we can talk about the tree in the yard as existing because we both see it) and no longer objective (i.e., we cannot talk about other planets or species no one has experienced, or even theoretical physics): he states that it is an outright contradiction to say that there are things that exist independent of us and unperceived.¹⁰

With his rejection of materialism, he’s made all perceptible qualities (i.e., colour, extension, shape, motion, etc.) as only ideas in the mind, not outside it in the thing or as the product of a sensory union between mind and object, and thus he leaves us with really no explanation of what is the first moment of perception like (how does it all start before we get accustomed to things). He criticized others before him for not describing how the process of perception works, how objects outside of myself create ideas or impressions inside my mind, but he has left us in no better state since he too has failed to explain how perception actually works. Perception is an intentional relationship, meaning that it’s perception ‘of’ something, and Berkeley has really manipulated what this ‘of’ is. In arguing against materialism and yet not wanting to say that when I close my eyes everything is annihilated, he has left us in a position where the process of perception is rather confused, one-sided, and against common sense, but more importantly discussing the existence of something is rather convoluted (like a bad language game). Which is ironic because he stated in his

⁵ George Berkeley, *The Principles of Human Knowledge*, accessed 7 January 2014, <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdfs/berkeley1710.pdf>, pg. 1.

⁶ Berkeley, pg. 1.

⁷ Berkeley, pg. 10.

⁸ Berkeley, pg. 11.

⁹ Berkeley, pg. 11.

¹⁰ Berkeley, pg. 12.

introduction that he wished to clean out the verbal controversies of philosophy, the very weeds that hinder the growth of true and sound knowledge.¹¹ Regardless of contradictions, Berkeley's philosophical position on perception has placed the boundary of human knowledge at the eye sockets. What? I won't even get into the discussions of how God, who is described like a great voyeur in the sky. But, I ask the same question again, what the heck is going on?

And last but not least, there is David Hume, the Scottish Skeptic and Empiricist. He rightly called shenanigans on much of philosophy dealing with metaphysics and epistemology, and he cast doubt on things like our ideas of necessary connection, the self, power, the existence of God, even the accuracy of our own experience (our mind seems to have little command over itself). His psychological investigations revealed that our minds seemed to prefer and possess lots of habits, and the connections amongst our ideas could be boiled down to resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect.¹² Unlike Locke and Berkeley, Hume strictly limited human knowledge to sense-experience. In doing such, he argued that metaphysics couldn't be a science (things like God, freedom, and immortality were outside our knowledge scope; more like beliefs or opinions) and he cast a lot of doubt on human ability to actually acquire valid and truthful knowledge about the world: what we really know pales in comparison to what we think we know or can possibly know. The inductive reasoning we use every day is practical and helps us survive, but it's foundationless and based on past experience more than truth or objectivity according to Hume. Truth may be had in mathematics and in logic since they could be proved by demonstration and reliably so, but outside in the world of mankind there was only induction, and causal reasoning. There was no guarantee that the sun would rise up tomorrow, or that I wouldn't wake up as an insect like Gregor Samsa did in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. All I had to go with for expectations of tomorrow is what I experienced today and yesterday, and that isn't sound, certain reasoning.

But in doing this, he essentially threw out the baby with the bathwater. He cast so much doubt on human cognition and knowledge acquisition that philosophy seemed fruitless and foolish, one could even say natural science and theoretical physics were too, and even attempting to understand the world around us seemed utterly futile. As much as I admire Hume for his militant cleaning of the philosophical closet, it feels like too much has been pitched out – it's unsettling in barrenness and it is even hard to not become fatalistic. Once again, what the heck is going on?

I could name others and go on but I believe these three suffice for making my point. As I mentioned earlier, there is a pattern here. Each speaks of how others before him went wrong and lays out some ideas or a plan as to how to fix this so truth and certainty can be had, and then when that crucial moment of discussing what we can actually know about the world around us (that much sought after boundary of human knowledge) they do everything they can to avoid it and retreat: God or substance become used as the band-aid explanation for mysteries of existence, or it is argued that somehow our natural mental abilities/capacities are lacking or we misapplied them, or we use bad language and empty concepts, or there is the grand denial that we can have any knowledge of reality at all and so we should give up. Philosophers like these seem to go to a lot of trouble to avoid something, and this something is what Camus calls the absurd. What I call the second truth of philosophy.

¹¹ Berkeley, pg. 9.

¹² David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, accessed 7 January 2014, <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdfs/hume1748.pdf>

The absurd, for Camus, has two sources: the universe and death¹³. The first is the notion that absurdity lies in the chaos and irrationality of the universe, a universe that is not oriented toward our concerns but is rather benignly indifferent to our aspirations and endeavors. Twists of fate, strange patterns of behavior, and unpredictable events are all glimpses of the absurd. These also serve as evidence that there is no God, predetermined divine design or absolute purpose present in the universe. The universe is totally silent when we ask questions and demand answers.¹⁴ As fellow existentialist Sartre would say, everything exists for no reason at all, an existence without necessity and without definition. To exist is simply *to be there*.

So, why do philosophers like Locke, Berkeley and Hume want to avoid this or seem to do their best to dance around it? Because it's very unsettling; recognizing and contemplating the absurdity present in the universe, realizing the crucial role it plays in the boundary of human knowledge, creates a tension that is extreme and at times difficult to accept. It can feel unnerving, terrifying, frustrating, or paralyzing; it enhances other existential moods like anguish (feeling the heaviness of freedom, man is alone with no excuse) and abandonment (hand in hand with anguish; God does not exist, so we ourselves decide our own being and there is nothing to tell you how you ought to be or what to do). The absurd cannot be settled; it will not be overcome or ignored. It demands the dropping of illusions, like the idea that man's ability to reason makes him able to conquer the world and be the master over Mother Nature, or the idea that God created this world for us and has a big plan we all necessarily follow. If philosophers want to know the nature of reality, and have a real understanding of what we know about this world we are thrown into, then they must recognize the presence (and the reality) of the absurd – they must see that there will be things we cannot know and we must live with that tension, that mystery. Don't make stuff up to reconcile the unknowns of the absurd, don't ignore it, and don't run away from it. So, what should a philosopher do? For one thing, be like Kant and call it out.

In his magnum opus *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant begins like so many others: talking about the state of things in philosophy (metaphysics and epistemology), and how he thinks he has a better answer to the question of the limits of human knowledge (and if metaphysics can be a science).¹⁵ In short, Kant, taking cues from Hume's skeptical comments, sought to show that a merger between Rationalism and Empiricism was the best road for philosophy. He sought to explain how coming to an understanding of how the external world affects our senses and how our mind shapes the sensory content it receives could help clarify what we can know. Most importantly, investigating in this way could go a long way to proving if metaphysics, namely, enquiries into things that are beyond tangible experience like God, freedom, the soul, and immortality, could be the objects of science at all. In doing this, he did

¹³ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. Trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1991), pgs. 51-65. Camus also tells us that death is a source of absurdity, since it negates any aspirations and achievements; it destroys any meaning we have created and importance we give to things, and this means that all human desires, goals, and achievements are irrational. Every single person on this earth knows that they will die at some point, and in the face of this fact they continue to spend every day creating meaning, collecting things, aspiring, and desiring, and for Camus that is absurdity in its clearest form. Death is the great equalizer; everyone from Charles Manson, to the Pope, to President Obama, to the Dalai Lama will come to the same end – nothingness. Living each day to the fullest and creating meaning for your self is a revolt against death and the extinction it brings.

¹⁴ Camus, pgs. 51-53.

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), B295-315; A 235-260, pgs. 303-322. For Kant, metaphysics cannot be a science because what metaphysics seeks to discover and describe cannot be experienced with our senses. Thus, we cannot ever *know* in the strictest sense the true nature of things like God, freedom, the soul, and immortality. However, he does think that our reason gives us sufficient evidence to believe in all three.

something unlike his predecessors; he accepted the presence of the absurd and gave it a name – Noumena.

One of the most significant and controversial notions Kant introduced is the distinction between phenomena and noumena: the conception of a gap between how something appears to a person and how it is in-itself, or to put it another way, how the mind assembles the cognition of an object from the sense data provided could differ from how the object actually is in the world.¹⁶ For example, Kant thought that objects must be perceived in space and time, and that space and time are fundamental for experience. Hence, space and time are not only psychologically prior, but also logically prior to experience. According to Kant, humans have pure forms of space and time hardwired in their minds, in the Faculty of Sensibility, and so all sensory stimuli are processed through them. What this means, in the simplest of terms, is that when experience begins, the first intuitions consist of (1) there are things outside of myself (a primal distinction between me and not me; my feeling of embodiment against the world), and (2) that I can feel my conscious mind process data sequentially (I feel my mind being aware in a series of time rather than as some chaotic mass). The extension of this notion is that Kant recognized that objects themselves do not necessarily exist in space and in time the identical way we perceive them, or at all. He also acknowledges that it is highly possible that things in the world exist in dimensions we cannot perceive, have colors our eyes cannot distinguish, are made of textures our touch cannot sense, and have tastes for which we have no receptors. Kant's point is that we have to accept that our experience of the world is limited to the capacities we have. We have to admit that objects may have more intrinsic features than we can perceive and these are aspects we simply cannot know. For Kant, the noumena will never be seen or understood, no matter the amount of training in philosophy you have or how hard you analyze all the phenomena of a thing. It's simply an issue of cognitive and biological limitations. This is the limit of human knowledge. Kant's noumena, I would argue, is the first true recognition of the absurd (in philosophy).

The beauty of this distinction is that it is largely epistemological in nature; it speaks to what we can know using the faculties we possess, and where the limits of our knowledge are. However, it does have ontological consequences in that objects themselves retain the possibility of having qualities we cannot sense or know; the world can have its mysteries and chaos, and that's fine. Because of the way we are biologically and psychologically constructed and have evolved, we cannot or may not ever be able to know everything about the world around us. Not every question has an answer; not every mystery can be solved. Unlike Locke and Berkeley, Kant doesn't rely on substance or God to address the absurd, nor does he become the skeptic and deny much of our knowledge like Hume. The absurd for him is a fact of life; see it, understand it, live with it, and move on. Noumena, like Camus's notion of the absurd, are silent, indifferent, impenetrable aspects of the universe that defeat every attempt we make to understand them. They may be the underlying sources of phenomena, but that doesn't imply they are knowable, predictable, or logical.

Kant's distinction caught a lot of attention and he endured a lot of criticism for it. Most of his critics were Empiricists (one of his main critics, Feder, took a position closer to Locke). Most felt Kant's phenomena-noumena distinction reinstated a Platonic or dualistic framework, where people mentally construct their own reality, they said he was just another Berkeley Idealist.¹⁷ What this implied was that people had no ability to have any real, objective knowledge of the world around them whatsoever- everyone had their own

¹⁶ Kant, A34-49; B50-73, pgs. 88-104.

¹⁷ Brigitte Sasson, *Kant's Early Critics: The Empiricist Critique of the Theoretical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

subjective versions of knowledge, thus reality.¹⁸ For some critics, the difference between the phenomenal and the noumenal worlds was so vast; it was like having two different plains of reality on earth. They felt this was damaging to science as much as philosophy. They didn't agree with our knowledge being of appearances only, they didn't like being told they had no access to things themselves, which they felt was necessary to avoid idealism and have viable knowledge of the world: they basically screamed out, "How can we live in a world in which we cannot know anything?" In short, these Empiricist critics of Kant couldn't deal with the presence of the absurd and the unsettling tension it brings. They would do anything to avoid it and make it go away.

As I mentioned earlier, death is the second source of absurdity for Camus. Death negates any and all human aspirations and achievements; it destroys any meaning we have created and importance we give to things, and this means that all human desires, goals, and achievements are irrational. Every single person on this earth knows that they will die at some point, we cannot control when death will come, and in the face of this fact they continue to spend every day creating meaning, collecting things, aspiring, and desiring, and for Camus that is absurdity in its clearest form. Death is the great equalizer; everyone from Charles Manson, to the Pope, to President Obama, to the Dalai Lama will come to the same end—nothingness. However, he does not advocate despairing over this or committing suicide; both are a denial of freedom, responsibility and of defining one's essence, and moreover suicide is an acceptance at its extreme and a reconciling of the absurd. In a section titled 'Absurd freedom,' Camus writes:

Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully. Now, no one will live this fate, knowing it to be absurd, unless he does everything to keep before him that absurd brought to light by consciousness. Negating one of the terms of the opposition on which he lives amounts to escaping it. To abolish conscious revolt is to elude the problem. The theme of permanent revolution is thus carried into individual experience. Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it... One of the only coherent philosophical positions is thus revolt. It is a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity.¹⁹

The response Camus proposes is one of rebellion – revolt gives life its value.²⁰ Go down kicking and screaming; make your life so meaningful it is as if to stick the finger to death (just as Sisyphus did to the gods as he rolled the boulder daily – a strong sign of, "you cannot defeat my will"). He says, "it is essential to die unreconciled and not of one's free will ... The absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself. The absurd is his extreme tension, which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows

¹⁸ Kant's theory was highly and hotly debated because other philosophers (mainly empiricists) felt that Kant was telling them that we didn't have access to reality inasmuch as he asserts that noumena affect our senses but remain completely out of our reach. Some even suggested that noumena occupy a different world. They saw Kant as saying that noumena existed but that we couldn't know they did, which is a complete contradiction and quite ridiculous sounding. They also did not like the idea of faculties or intuitions being innate in the mind, that dreadful word 'a priori'; because empiricists, like John Locke, saw the mind as a blank slate imprinted upon and shaped by experience. For Kant, much of what shapes experience, enables experience to happen at all and the way we have it, some things like faculties, pure intuitions, pure concepts, etc. must be logically and necessarily in the mind prior to experience. These a priori entities in the mind are, however, meaningless without the data provided to them by experience; without sensory information they have nothing to work with, nothing to process, nothing to do. Cognition, then, is a beautiful handshake between the external world and the internal workings of the mind – a merger between the empiricist and rationalist views – at least on the epistemological side of things. Because cognition can only be of experiential things, knowledge bears the same boundary: we can only *know* something if we can empirically experience it (i.e., if sensory data is provided to our mind to process).

¹⁹ Camus, pgs. 53-54.

²⁰ Camus, pg. 55.

that in that consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof to his only truth, which is defiance."²¹ I think this response offered by Camus is an excellent one for philosophers as well, in the situation of realizing the presence of the absurd in the universe.

Philosophers need to be ever aware of the role absurdity plays in the universe at large and in particular concerning the boundary of human knowledge: Like the absurd man Camus describes in his *The Myth of Sisyphus*, philosophers need to acknowledge the absurd is present, live that tension, and not let it stop them from creating work that brings meaning and truth to their lives and that of others. However, this doesn't mean creating ad hoc solutions, strange illusions or language games, since to do such things is an avoidance of the absurd and a denial of one's freedom and project. It means being like Kant - seeing it, calling it out, and then doing what can in the face of it (having philosophy, not committing suicide or running away).

Philosophers are also affected physically by death just like everyone else: it extinguishes all the meaning they've created, all the ideas they've thought up and contemplated, and any importance given to affiliations, figures or arguments. The only way philosophers can 'beat death' is to become immortal through their printed works. And let's face it, I think most would prefer to be remembered for brilliance and depth of truth rather than their mistakes and foolishness. Confronting the absurd and philosophizing in the face of it is one way to obtain the former and avoid the latter.

²¹ Camus, pg. 55.

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