

Understanding Albert Camus' Absurd as Ambivalence, and its Relevance for Existential and Psychodynamic Approaches

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Introduction: Contemporary Ambivalences

Over the past thirty years, increasing numbers of researchers in political and social scientific fields have argued that uni-valent, one-dimensional models of human attitudes are inadequate to describe the complexity of human experience. Social psychological investigations of ambivalence have been applied to a wide range of topics, from parenthood to race relations, from the selection of presidential candidates to attitudes about abortion and the death penalty. For over a century, psychoanalysts have argued that ambivalence, in various shapes and guises, is at the heart of psychological life. It might even be argued that ambivalence (although not always going by that name) has been treated as a central aspect of the human condition since Goethe, Pascal, Montaigne, Shakespeare, even Attic tragedians and the authors of the wisdom books of the Tanakh.

Sociologists, anthropologists, and historians like Robert Merton (1976), Clifford Geertz (1968), and Robert Jay Lifton have all argued that the ambivalent demands made by contemporary cultural norms and political institutions require a more dynamic understanding of the relationship between self and society, as individuals seem to struggle with incongruities in their environments and the "absurdity" implied by "the absence of 'fit'... between individual self and outside world" (Lifton 1993, 94). The era of late modernity, or "high modernity," as Anthony Giddens (1991) calls it, is often described as an era not only of particularly rapid change, but of increasingly contradictory and ambivalent pressures, of a "push and pull... mix and break," that operates on levels from the global to the personal (Chan and McIntyre 2001, 4). If Roland Robertson's (1995) term, "glocalization," expresses some of the ambivalences at work in some contemporary societies, Stephen Castles (1998) has outlined them more fully by highlighting several "fundamental contradictions" at the heart of global change, including the contradictions between "inclusion and exclusion," "the Net and the self," "modernity and post-modernity," and the "national and the global citizen."

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In only slightly different terms, Giddens' well-known *Modernity and Self-Identity* describes the psychological impact of a world full of increasingly intense 'dilemmas'. These dilemmas are of an ambivalent nature: "unification versus fragmentation," "powerlessness versus appropriation," "authority versus uncertainty," "personalized versus commodified experience," and ontological security versus existential anxiety (1991, 181-208). Giddens argues that increasingly 'reflexive selves' must strive to heal the terrible rifts in their experience occasioned by these dilemmas, beneath which lies a constant and "looming threat of personal meaninglessness" (1991, 201).

However we characterize the challenges of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, large-scale social change is increasingly recognized as something that penetrates "through to the very grounds of individual activity and the constitution of the self" (Giddens 1991, 184). As advances in communication technologies increase exposure to difference, contradiction, and crisis, often making the latter "a normal part of life" (Giddens 1991, 184), Kenneth Gergen has argued that we are witnessing the advent of "multiphrenia," which is "the splitting of the self into a multiplicity of self-investments" (2000, 73-74). For Gergen, the "social saturation" brought on by frequent but discontinuous contact with an increasing number of others, of options, and of possibilities causes a sort of over-population of the self, where we exceed even Walt Whitman in containing greater and greater 'multitudes', to the detriment of our values and relationships (Gergen 2000, 68-80).

While the psychoanalytic understanding of the term 'ambivalence' still guides contemporary usage, a number of recent studies and applications of the concept, such as those mentioned above, have dislodged it from a purely psychoanalytic context. For instance, the philosopher Philip Koch uses the term 'ambivalence' to refer to all kinds of "conflicted feelings" (1987, 258n). Likewise, Ihor Zielyk's taxonomy of ambiguity and ambivalence defines ambivalence as "the taking of a mixed stance toward a social object or category of objects" (1966, 57). Steve Harrist, in his interesting phenomenological investigation of ambivalence, takes ambivalence "in the broadest sense," meaning simply "attraction and/or aversion... so as not to prematurely restrict the horizon of inquiry" (2006, 87). Harrist construes ambivalence to mean "both sides are strong" or "both sides have their own worth" (2006, 91); his interviews begin with the simple question: "Can you describe a time when you had more than one feeling?" (2006, 94).

A psychodynamically-informed but broad definition of ambivalence as conflicting emotions serves us best in attempting to clarify the meaning of Camus' absurd. Such a definition respects the etymology of the term as dual (*ambi*) emotional forces (*valences*) while distinguishing it from 'ambiguity', which denotes indeterminacy or uncertainty. It also follows standard usage: "A duality of opposed emotions, attitudes, thoughts or motivations, which a person simultaneously holds towards a person or object, is the centerpiece of the standard psychoanalytically shaped definition of ambivalence" (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989). More importantly, this definition permits us to make use of the

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psychodynamically-informed understanding of 'ambivalence' as it was established by Eugen Bleuler and Sigmund Freud in the early 1900s and later developed by Melanie Klein and others.

This paper argues that a fruitful analogy may be drawn between the philosophy of the absurd and the concept of ambivalence. It is important to clarify, however, that it is not necessary to *reduce* Camus' idea of absurdity to any of the more traditional psychoanalytic categories of ambivalence, e.g., ambivalence about mothers, ambivalence resulting from the Oedipus conflict, or ambivalent sexual or destructive drives. Instead, I seek to use our understanding of the dynamics of ambivalence, an understanding that has been informed by psychoanalytic and social scientific study, to explore very similar properties of Camus' concept of the absurd. I try to use ambivalence as an *analogy* to explicate the absurd, primarily by applying the mechanics of ambivalence, if you will, to the emotional material of the absurd. In the first section of the paper, I briefly review relevant approaches to ambivalence, in order to lay a foundation for the analogy with the absurd that follows.

A Brief History of the Concept of Ambivalence

Eugen Bleuler, a contemporary of Sigmund Freud, used the term 'ambivalence' in his *The Theory of Schizophrenic Negativism* (first published in 1910), but it is his *Dementia Praecox or the Group of Schizophrenias* (completed in 1908 but not published until 1911) that is widely credited as the first comprehensive psychoanalytic investigation of ambivalence (Graubert and Miller 1957, 458; Harrist 2006, 87; Lorenz-Meyer 2001, 3-4). In both of these works, Bleuler defined ambivalence as the simultaneous presence of contradictory thoughts, feelings, or volitions. As such, he found ambivalence to be present in 'healthy' and 'normal' individuals as well as in those whom he diagnosed with *dementia praecox*, or precocious dementia, otherwise known as schizophrenia.

Bleuler characterizes ambivalence as both a universal and potentially pathological phenomenon.

Even for the healthy everything has its two sides. The rose has its thorns. But in ninety-nine out of a hundred instances, the normal person compares the two aspects, subtracts the negative from the positive values. He appreciates the rose despite its thorns. The schizophrenic, with his weakened associative linkings does not necessarily bring the different aspects of a problem together. He loves the rose because of its beauty and hates it because of its thorns... Certainly even under normal conditions, synthesis may be omitted. The healthy, too, feels something like 'two souls in his breast'; and he, too, would be less inclined to speak so much of sin if it did not also have some pleasant connotations. (1950, 374-375)

The difference between ambivalence among 'healthy' individuals and 'sick' ones, therefore, was not precisely the presence of ambivalence, but rather

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the ability to hold it together, to sustain a consistent view of an object in spite of its ambivalent appraisals. Whereas the 'healthy' individual came to accept his or her ambivalence as a mixed stance toward an object, the schizophrenic in Bleuler's theory was forced either to oscillate between all-good and all-bad impressions, or to split the object in two, one loved and one hated.

Bleuler reminds us that, while certain expressions of, defenses against, and responses to ambivalence may be taken as a sign of illness, no one is exempt from ambivalence or from the pressures that it generates. Rather, Bleuler finds ambivalence at work even in ordinary life. Just as his patient tries to escape a locked ward moments after telling him (with what appears to be sincerity) that he has no further interest in escaping, when Bleuler enters a large store, he confesses that "I wish to get something at a particular counter; I carefully determine the one I do not wish to go to, but then it is that very one to which I go" (1950, 375).

While Bleuler applied 'ambivalence' broadly, in reference to any number of conflicting ideas, emotions, beliefs, affects, and volitions, Freud would narrow its reference but afford it an even greater significance. While it is not incorrect to say that Freud's operating definition of ambivalence was "the co-existence of [love and hate] simultaneously directed towards the same object" (Freud in Graubert and Miller 1957, 460), such a definition understates and over-specifies the profound ambivalences and conflicts that inform almost all of Freud's thought: ambivalences not only about love and hate, but about pleasure and pain, survival and the self, life and death. Freud's use of the concept of ambivalence is commonly traced to his *A Phobia in a Five-Year Old Boy* (1909), better known as the case of Little Hans, although ambivalence plays a role in earlier works like *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) as well as Breuer's and Freud's *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), where Freud saw the origin of psychoneurotic symptoms in the repression of traumatic "incompatible ideas" (Greenberg and Mitchell 1983, 27, 33).

In the short section of *The Interpretation of Dreams* rather fittingly devoted to "*Absurd Dreams*," Freud argues that dreams regularly reflect emotional conflict and that dreams of a dead loved one, for instance, are marked by an "especially profound ambivalence of feeling which controls the relation of the dreamer to the dead person" (1900, 295-296). Freud notes that it is common in such dreams for the deceased person to alternate, as it were, between being dead and alive; and he interprets this as a fantasized indifference. The purpose of this fantasized indifference, Freud explains, "is to help the dreamer to deny his very intense and often contradictory emotional attitudes, and so it becomes the dream-representation of his *ambivalence*" (1900, 296, emphasis in original). Here, dreamed indifference protects against ambivalent feelings, feelings that are especially intolerable when concerning a deceased loved one. Of course, Freud would return to many of these ideas and relate them to loss, identification, and melancholy in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917, 250-251, 256-258).

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For Freud, ambivalence is at the root of neurosis but it is not exactly its efficient cause. Rather, ambivalence, which is universal, is exaggerated and exacerbated to different degrees by different individual reactions to it. Freud understood neuroses as attempts to cope with ambivalence "while effectively preserving it and restraining behaviour" (Lorenz-Meyer 2001, 4), and in *The Dynamics of Transference* (1912) and *The Unconscious* (1915b), depicted the unconscious as a 'reservoir', a 'seething cauldron' for those intolerably intense or persistent ambivalences which must be held down by the organized personality (see Giovacchini 1982, 12)

While hatred remains in the unconscious, defensively intense conscious feelings of love must counteract them, contributing to a greater ambivalent conflict within the individual. This process of repressing one feeling and exaggerating its opposite compose part of Freud's concept of reaction-formation, elaborated in his later *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* (1925). With the cooperation of the unconscious, ambivalence can therefore divide ambivalent feelings, paralyze the will, or displace ambivalent conflict over any number of everyday matters. The compulsive individual, for instance, repeats his protective measures in order to compensate for the growing doubts he has displaced from his ambivalent love and hatred onto his memory, his observations, his intentions, and even the reliability of the physical world (Freud 1963, 74-77).

In *Repression* (1915) and the *Introductory Lectures* (1916-1917), Freud describes the incomplete or ineffective neutralization of ambivalence which permits the child or patient suffering from neurosis to ignore ambivalences that would otherwise generate conflict in the adult because of the development and unification of the adult personality (Graubert and Miller 1957, 460-461). In fact, Freud argued that the persistence of unreconciled ambivalent attitudes was apparent not only in children and patients but in groups and in so-called 'primitive societies' (see Freud 1959, 15-16n; Graubert and Miller 1957, 459). The "primordial ambivalence" at the root of Freud's concept of guilt in *Civilization and its Discontents*, for instance, is an about the conflicts at the root of collective life (1961, 94-95).

Throughout his various treatments of ambivalence, Freud is clear that conflict is a part of normal psychic life. And although we are not always consciously aware of our ambivalence (indeed, *because* we are not), we should not forget that "emotional life... is in general made up of pairs of contraries" (Freud 1909, 113). It is at least partly because Freud viewed the human experience as one of ambivalence, one in which our mental life is "perpetually agitated by conflicts which we have to settle" (Freud in Abel 1989, 39), that he often insisted that there was no clear line between neurosis and normality, that "an unbroken chain bridges the gap between the neuroses in all their manifestations and normality" (Abel 1989, xv).

Melanie Klein, by her own accounts a Freudian, but whose work diverged from Freud's in several ways (see Alford 1989, 23-26; Greenberg and Mitchell 1983, 120-121; Minsky 1998, 33), posited basic

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ambivalences at the heart of the psychological life of the child. For Klein, "the central conflict in human experience... is between love and hate, between the caring preservation and the malicious destruction of others" (Greenberg and Mitchell 1983, 142). One might say that, for Klein, we are ambivalent at birth, experiencing almost immediately a conflict between life and death instincts (see Segal 1964, 12-13). Even before children face conflicting desires and restrictions, Klein thinks ambivalence confronts infants who fear not reprisals from parents, but the consequences of aggression and the projections of their own anger and rage. Basic ambivalences exist, she argues, even at a very young age, between experiences of comfort and frustration, between feelings of love and gratitude and feelings of envy, anger, and fear.

Klein finds that the earliest and most radical solution to the presence of ambivalent feelings is to split the world, the parent, or even the self into two categories, absolutely good and absolutely bad. The goal of splitting is "to keep persecutory and ideal objects as far as possible from one another, while keeping both of them under control" (Segal 1964, 13-14). Splitting is a reaction to ambivalence in the sense that it seeks to prevent conflicting feelings from coming into contact with each other, so that the bad does not destroy the good. Thus, bad and good are separated and exaggerated, making both poles increasingly extreme. In the struggle to contend with ambivalent experience in both a loving and an anxiety-ridden environment, splitting is, at first, a *necessary* defense for the developing child. Splitting, like ambivalence itself, may serve first as a healthy protection against overwhelming threats to the self. But, if severe splitting continues, it becomes a regressive defense that precludes further development.

It is only after a certain security has been attained that ambivalence, which, itself, is "partly a safeguard against one's own hate and against the hated and terrifying objects," may gradually decrease (Klein 1975, 350). Successful tolerance and integration of ambivalence means that the child is able to see significant others as real persons, just as successive non-threatening experiences in reality permit the child to tolerate greater and greater degrees of ambivalence. The resulting 'depressive position' is the result of the gradual abandonment of radical splitting and the gradual integration of the good and the bad into whole people and a whole self, both of which may contain good and bad qualities.

The depressive position is therefore the announcement of a more mature, more moral, and more creative position: one in which the child seeks to manage his or her ambivalence, feels a growing responsibility, desires to make reparations to others, and constructs a more integrated identity on proto-moral grounds (see Minsky 1998, 41). Indeed, "the pain of mourning experienced in the depressive position, and the reparative drives developed to restore the loved internal and external objects, are the basis of creativity and sublimation... to recreate and to create" in the name of care, reparation, and preservation of the good (Segal 1964, 62).

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Thus, in Klein's theory, ambivalence is, itself, ambivalent. The agonal forces that increase the child's anxiety eventually permit the child to enter and work through (although never completely) the challenges of the depressive position. And the splitting reactions to them are at first developmentally adaptive, then regressive and destructive. Although Klein wrote almost exclusively of children, she thought that continued splitting "under the stress of ambivalence to some extent persists throughout life" (Klein 1975b, 75n), arguing even that "we have an example of this [splitting of imagos] in the phantastic belief in a God who would assist in the perpetration of every sort of atrocity (as lately as in the recent war) in order to destroy the enemy and his country" (Klein 1975, 203n). Her approach suggests that, with maturity, it is possible to contend with ambivalence through the gradual discovery of moral and creative resources in the personality.

While we should not overlook the dangers and limitations of psychiatric approaches, the concept of ambivalence is very closely related not only to the clinical work of Klein, but to what appears to be an increasingly prevalent set of behaviors and experiences known as the borderline personality. Almost all theorists of borderline personality emphasize that it presents with dis-integrated, contrary, or conflicting affects and behaviors. The typical symptoms of emotional lability and dis-integrated personality are thought to be rooted in a defense against unbearable conflict, in the taking of an extreme posture to protect the self from the terrifying threats of 'bad' self- and object-representations (see Kernberg 1975, 5-7; Kernberg 1984, 12-13; Cooper and Arnow 1984). Recent interpersonal theories have also argued that borderline symptoms suggest the presence of heightened psychological conflict (Benjamin 1993; Kiesler 1996), and a recent empirical study revealed that individuals with borderline diagnoses evinced a higher degree of ambivalence and inconsistency with respect to self-assessments of warmth, dominance, and other qualities (Hopwood and Morey 2007). This recent theory and research suggests that a non-integrated emotional conflict or ambivalence may be at the root of the constellation of affects and behaviors now most often classified as borderline.

Otto Kernberg emphasized the borderline tendency to revert to primary-process thinking and to rely on primitive defenses like splitting, denial, early forms of projection, projective identification, omnipotence, and devaluation (Kernberg 1984, 15-17). Splitting, as we have discussed, means essentially to deny ambivalence, conflict, or contradiction by dividing the world into separate and extreme categories of 'all good' and 'all bad'. The borderline personality tends to undertake and maintain such splits in order to protect itself from dangerous aspects of the self and others, in order to preserve a tenuous hold on the 'good'. Since the notion of giving up the split threatens to contaminate the 'good' with the 'bad', we may say that the borderline personality splits in order to avoid a kind of ambivalence, to avoid a situation in which good and bad might co-exist in the self or in others.

Unfortunately, splitting is not only a result of a threatened or defensive self, but can be a cause of continued anxiety and instability.

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That is, the reversion to this type of defense against ambivalence does not help the individual develop the capacity to tolerate ambivalence or to integrate conflicting emotions or experiences. Rather, as Kernberg points out, "a vicious circle is created by which ego weakness and splitting reinforce each other" (Kernberg 1975, 29). This vicious circle manifests itself in continued splitting and dis-integration, as well as rapidly changing affects and emotions, radical shifts in thoughts and feelings about the self and others, and "sudden and complete reversals of all feelings and conceptualizations" about the self or others (Kernberg 1975, 29).

Integration of ambivalent or contradictory perceptions of others is made especially difficult due to the "constant projection of 'all bad' self and object images [which] perpetuates a world of dangerous, threatening objects, against which the 'all good' self images are used defensively, and megalomaniac ideal self images are built up" (Kernberg 1975, 36). That is, although borderline defenses are attempts to protect the self by splitting the world into impossible contraries, they perpetuate an experience of life in which the precarious and ephemeral 'good' inside is constantly threatened from both within and without. The fact that the borderline personality deals in such excessively abstract, extreme, and unreal images further precludes any realistic assessment and understanding of self and others, which perhaps only reinforces the tendency toward interpersonal emotional shallowness and paranoia (Kernberg 1975, 166-167). Thus, the tendency to split, to radically idealize, and to radically devalue makes any rapprochement with a stable social reality increasingly problematic.

As I hope to show now, both ambivalence and splitting are extremely important themes in Camus' reflections on the absurd. Sometimes Camus' own protests, such as "I want everything explained to me or nothing" (1955, 27), rely on a kind of splitting, an insistence on all or nothing. But, more often, Camus' thought on the morality of the absurd is an argument *against* the dangerous consequences of splitting the world into absolute good and absolute evil. Camus' absurd person, as we shall see, lives with profound ambivalences about losing him/herself in an 'all', asserting him/herself against a 'nothing', and affirming, rejecting, or remaining indifferent to good and evil. But Camus seeks to articulate and interpret these dangers (albeit without using psychological language) in order to avoid the facile solution of splitting the world and the self into absolute good and bad.

In spite of these connections, it is imperative that we not confuse the absurd, itself, with the borderline personality, or any other specific psychiatric category. For the purposes of this paper, I loosely refer to splits and related defenses as reactions to a kind of ambivalence, inasmuch as they defend the self against the threats and anxieties created by the mixing of highly-charged contraries. And yet, as we shall see, no particular defensive reaction exhausts the *many* possible responses one may have to ambivalence or to the absurd, nor is it the case that one must be suffering from any illness other than being human to experience such ambivalences. Camus will address the desire to be indifferent and the desire to be committed, to be univocal and to be silent, to be perfectly

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separate and to be inextricably linked, to be natural and to be intellectual, along with many other ambivalent emotions, none of which accord perfectly with any single psychoanalytic theory, but all of which may be informed by a broad understanding of the human dynamics of ambivalence.

Camus' Ambivalent Absurd

John Cruickshank finds that basic antagonisms run from Camus' early *Noces* through *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "*Le Mythe de Sisyphe* sharpens the dualism of *Noces* to such an extent that this dualism takes on all the discordancy of a paradox. Now it is clear that one can live less easily with a paradox than with a dualism" (1960, 46). By distinguishing between dualism and paradox, Cruickshank alludes to one of the central dilemmas facing the absurd: the difficulty of living with it. This difficulty, he explains, and the "recognition of a paradox, together with persistent thinking about it, gives to *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* some sort of double tension so that the book opens on a note of anxious inquiry" (Cruickshank 1960, 46). This double tension, this anxious inquiry, I argue, is comprehensible only in the context of the dynamic of ambivalence set out above.

For Camus, absurdity is the tension between two sets of powerful desires. Some of Camus' most memorable passages are his descriptions of a deeply-felt desire for unity, for clarity, for wholeness. At times, this desire is expressed in terms of a longing for transcendent meaning and values, or for the passion and intensity that absolute beliefs and principles would permit. At other times, it is expressed in naturalistic or romantic imagery, as a fusion with the world, an immersion in water, a merger with a landscape or climate. On the other hand, Camus also effectively conveys a profound revulsion for this ideal of merger or unity. He offers memorable denunciations of the consolations of certainty, God, eternal truths, 'leaps of faith', and absolute values, repudiating overly-reconciled actions as a kind of rationalized crime. Camus often makes dramatic refusals of unity and wholeness in favor of the realities of suffering, revolt, and exile. He disparages 'escapes', along with anything that smacks of the inhuman or the superhuman, on the grounds that they do violence to the self and to individual experience.

In this section of the paper, I briefly examine these two general categories, the desire for and the rejection of unity, as the constituent elements of an ambivalent absurd position. Understanding the absurd in this way dramatically changes its most traditional interpretations as meaninglessness, evil, or the brutality of nature. Absurdity is perhaps related to these notions, but, at best, they only represent *parts* of its ambivalent composition. If we must speak about the absurd in terms of meaning, evil, and nature, I propose that we learn to speak of the absurd as comprising *both* terms (good and evil, meaning and meaninglessness, nature and humanity) along with the complex tensions between them. For Camus, I hope to make clear that the most relevant ambivalence is between unity and individuality, wholeness and independence, selflessness and the self.

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The Desire for Unity

Camus is at his most passionate when he describes what may be called his desire for unity, for clarity, for wholeness. But, as with other areas of his thought, Camus describes this desire in a daunting variety of ways. He refers to it as the "desire for unity" (1955, 51), a "wild longing for clarity" (21), an "insistence upon familiarity" (17), a "longing to solve" (51), an "appetite for the absolute" (17, 51), a "longing for happiness and reason" (28), a "nostalgia for unity" (17, 50), and an "impulse that endlessly pursues its form" (1956b, 262).

One thing that unites these various expressions of the desire for unity is that Camus presents them all as essentially human, irreducible, and undeniable. Camus persuades us of the presence of this desire, but he does not speculate about any deeper biological, psychological, or spiritual origins. "The mind's deepest desire," Camus writes, "even in its most elaborate operations, parallels man's unconscious feeling in the face of his universe: it is an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity" (1955, 17). Camus claims that our profound desire for unity is the primary psychological force shaping human life: "That nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute illustrates the essential impulse of the human drama" (1955, 17).

In ways that continue to inspire comparisons to Pascal, Camus persuades us that the knowledge of eternal or absolute principles would provide us with a kind of intellectual beatitude. "If thought discovered in the shimmering mirrors of phenomena eternal relations capable of summing them up and summing themselves up in a single principle, then would be seen an intellectual joy of which the myth of the blessed would be but a ridiculous imitation" (1955, 17). In fact, "all would be saved," Camus writes, "if one could only say just once: 'This is clear'" (1955, 27). With language that seems intended to evoke themes of enlightenment, Camus describes the experience of being "divested of illusions and lights" (1955, 6), lost in darkness, outside of the familiar, and disconnected from ourselves and others. In this murky and mystified condition, we see no past and no future, we are "deprived of the memory of a lost home" just as we are denied "the hope of a promised land" (1955, 6).

But in responding to this desperate situation, we see that the drive for intellectual clarity really expresses a deeper desire for unity. The real object of Camus' demand for explanations and reasons is to become one with the world. In one case, it is the fantasy of a world with human properties that permits a feeling of identity: "If man realized that the universe like him can love and suffer, he would be reconciled" (Camus 1955, 17). In another case, this craving for identity requires a self-dehumanization, so as to become elemental and thus identical with the natural world: "If I were a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this life would have a meaning, or rather this problem would not arise, for I should belong to this world. I should *be* this world" (Camus 1955, 51, emphasis in original). Both of these visions of identity suggest that the joy of clarity, to which Camus compared the myth of the blessed, may really

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be a joy of oneness, a joy of living in a world without difference, and perhaps, a joy of living without the demands of individuation.

In a slight variation, Camus' describes the longing for clarity in a way not entirely dissimilar to the critique of reason offered by Frankfurt theorists. "Understanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human, stamping it with his seal... The truism 'All thought is anthropomorphic' has no other meaning. Likewise, the mind that aims to understand reality can consider itself satisfied only by reducing it to terms of thought" (1955, 17). Here, Camus speaks explicitly about 'reducing' and deforming phenomena by 'stamping' them into images of himself, molding them to fit his intellectual categories. These manipulations allow the individual to master, to grasp, to comprehend what he encounters. Thus, the longing for clarity is presented not only as a longing for unity and non-difference, but as a desire for control and possession.

Whether one craves clarity, identity, or control, the desire for unity appears throughout Camus' early work as both an intellectual demand and an emotional impulse. By the time he writes *The Rebel*, Camus has not clarified the nature of this desire, calling it variously an idea, a passion, and a demand for form, reconciliation, and finality. What is clear, however, is the fact that the desire for unity remains unsatisfied, which only serves to heighten absurd ambivalence and tension. Camus explains:

[Life] is only an impulse that endlessly pursues its form without ever finding it. Man, tortured by this, tries in vain to find the form that will impose certain limits between which he can be king. If only one single living thing had definite form, he would be reconciled!... Appearance and action, the dandy and the revolutionary, all demand unity in order to exist, and in order to exist on this earth... It is not sufficient to live, there must be a destiny that does not have to wait for death. It is therefore justifiable to say that man has an idea of a better world than this. But better does not mean different, it means unified. This passion which lifts the mind above the commonplaces of a dispersed world, from which it nevertheless cannot free itself, is the passion for unity... Religion or crime, every human endeavor in fact, finally obeys this unreasonable desire and claims to give life a form it does not have. (1956b, 262)

The Desire for Selfhood

While Camus convincingly describes the power of our desire for unity, he simultaneously argues that the fulfillment of this desire is both impossible and repugnant. It is difficult to find an appropriate name for this desire that contrasts so sharply with the 'desire for unity'. A kind of *principium individuationis*, one would like to call it the desire for 'self-preservation', but the connotations of that term in the sense of *physically surviving* are a bit too strong for Camus' subtler concerns. Camus wishes to preserve the intellect, the memory, and a kind of personal relationship to these things that can only be characterized as a 'desire for selfhood', a desire to preserve individuality and experience accompanied by a rejection of the loss of self implied by the desire for unity.

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Camus claims that the existential philosophies he reviews in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, without exception, "suggest escape" (1955, 32). They suggest escape from the very dilemma they set out to solve, by "deify[ing] what crushes them and find[ing] reason to hope in what impoverishes them" (1955, 32). But from what, exactly, do these philosophers seek escape and why, exactly, should they not? The answers to these questions form the content of the second half of the ambivalence of the absurd.

Perhaps Camus' most famous rejection of unity is his demand "to live solely with what he knows, to accommodate himself to what is, to bring in nothing that is not certain... to find out if it is possible to live *without appeal*" (1955, 53, emphasis in original). In spite of our desire for unity, he writes, "we fall into the ridiculous contradiction of a mind that asserts total unity and proves by its very assertion its own difference and the diversity it claimed to resolve" (1955, 18).

Reason fails us in our attempts to unify experience. In fact, it begins to deny experience when it refuses to acknowledge that one of the few things of which we feel certain is our own, simple, unreasonable existence. "This heart within me I can feel," Camus writes, "and I judge that it exists. This world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction. For if I try to seize this self of which I feel sure, if I try to define it and to summarize it, it is nothing but water slipping through my fingers... Between the certainty I have of my existence and the content I try to give to that assurance, the gap will never be filled" (1955, 19).

Faced with this contradiction, this gap, the absurd individual is thrust back upon himself. He comes to realize that he will never find the clarity and unity he seeks, that he will never "apprehend the world" (1955, 20). Yet this is not an easy discovery for Camus; rather, it represents a devastating insult, a terrible defeat, for "there is no happiness if I cannot know" (1955, 21). If we fail to find the reasonable, clear understanding we seek, Camus argues that this failure does *not* suggest that we should negate the desire for unity that prompted our quest. Instead, Camus claims that we can "negate everything of that part of [us] that lives on vague nostalgias, except this desire for unity, this longing to solve, this need for clarity and cohesion" (Camus 1955, 51).

Camus' assertions about matters of knowledge, doubt, certainty, and the reality of sensory and emotional experience have annoyed certain philosophical critics. But, to be fair, Camus is not interested in speculating about the reliability or verifiability of senses, emotions, or perceptions. Nor is he, as some have thought, defending a Cartesian method or advancing a skeptical philosophy. Rather, Camus seems to be trying to describe, in unfortunately abstract and philosophical terms, the ambivalence of absurdity. Camus is claiming that, in spite of himself, he is unwilling to discredit his experience. He feels unwilling to forget the limits,

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boundaries, and flaws in his fantastic desires. He is unwilling to escape his "raison dérisoire" (1955, 51), which, rather than "ridiculous reason," might be better translated as 'ridiculing reason' or 'derisive reason' because it mocks our hopes and fantasies. This ridiculing reason stubbornly refuses to be carried away by wishes for unity or wholeness, setting the absurd person in opposition to himself. This condition in which one is opposed to oneself, torn between desires, caught between feelings of integrity and estrangement, is one of profound ambivalence, which, perhaps understandably, feels very much like being set "in opposition to all creation" (1955, 51).

Many critics have mistaken Camus' absurd because Camus, himself, often either pretended or mistakenly believed that his investigation of absurdity was guided by a commitment to pure logic and methodical reasoning. Camus pretends to dedicate himself to a rigorous "method" in both *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel* (1955, 11, 30). Throughout the opening essay of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, for example, Camus proclaims that he will conduct his pursuit "without reckless passion, in the sole light of evidence" (1955, 9), maintaining the "lucidity imposed on [him] by the pursuit of a science" (1955, 21). He uses language like "evidence" (1955, 6), "logic" (1955, 9), and "data" (1955, 30-31), as if there were a scientific method at work in his speculations about the absurd.

But even casual readers should notice that Camus' insistence upon logic and rationality is not based upon a sober commitment to objectivity or a disinterested analysis of his subject. There is not, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* or *The Rebel*, a reasoned or grounded defense of a skeptical method, or of uncertainty or doubt. Rather, Camus presents us with appeals, evocations of desire, and persuasive metaphors and images. Contrasting sharply with the longing for absolutes, Camus describes his desire to return to "what I touch, what resists me" (1955, 51), to feel not the joy of unity but the boundaries and edges of the self. He longs not only to lose himself in the wind at Djemila, but to return to his body even with all of its limits and frailties. "The important thing," to continue the bodily metaphor, "as Abbé Galiani said to Mme. d'Epinay, is not to be cured, but to live with one's ailments" (Camus 1955, 38).

While Camus defines the rebel as "a man who is on the point of accepting or rejecting the sacred and determined on laying claim to a human situation in which all the answers are human — in other words, formulated in reasonable terms" (1956b, 21), what he is trying to express is a kind of outrage at the idea of impoverishing, sacrificing, or losing the self amidst the sacred. Camus argues that unbalanced efforts to find ephemeral clarity "impoverish that reality whose inhumanity constitutes man's majesty [and are] tantamount to impoverishing him himself. I understand then why the doctrines that explain everything to me also debilitate me at the same time" (1955, 55). Camus thus refuses unity *not* on rational or skeptical grounds, but on behalf of an intense and opposing desire to preserve his own integrity and experience, which would be lost in unity, and which the clarity of the absolute could only 'impoverish' and 'debilitate'.

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When asked what possible grounds an absurd person could have for critiquing existential, religious, or revolutionary doctrines, Camus claims that the absurd person rejects 'leaps' because he recognizes that they substitute false and contrived categories for 'truth'. But this invocation of 'truth', like earlier invocations of reason, doubt, and uncertainty, really serves to cover over an essentially emotional appeal. When Camus detects a leap, he rejects it not exactly because it offends his logic, but because, for him, it requires "forgetting just what I do not want to forget" (1955, 46). While perhaps less philosophically rigorous, that is, at least, a more understandable stance.

It is not clear whether Camus actually believed that his arguments about the rejection of unity were logically sound or whether he dressed them up for effect. It is tempting to speculate that Camus' descriptions of these refusals may be so elusive because they had to mask a complex ambivalence that he either could not or would not fully articulate. What is clear is that Camus' efforts to frame the contrast between the desire for and the rejection of unity in philosophical language are often belied by the underlying emotional logic with which he thought we experienced and responded to those contrasts. We hear the painful tension of being neither refused nor reunited, neither fully alone nor fully with others, neither absolutely unified nor absolutely separate. And while we are told that the absurd person is opposed by a world that refuses him, we continue to see him opposed by himself, torn between contrary desires within, and engaged in a difficult resistance against himself that will form the cornerstone of absurd rebellion.

Conclusion

What is the absurd person to do when faced with this conflicted condition? If he or she refuses to yield to either desire, then what course of action remains? While the answer to these questions must form the subject of another paper, for now, I will merely reflect upon Camus' reply and suggest its relationship to the management of ambivalence discussed in the paper's first section:

The first, and after all, the only condition of my inquiry is to preserve the very thing that crushes me, consequently to respect what I consider essential in it. I have just defined it as a confrontation and an unceasing struggle. And carrying this absurd logic to its conclusion, I must admit that that struggle implies a total absence of hope (which has nothing to do with despair), a continual rejection (which must not be confused with renunciation), and a conscious dissatisfaction (which must not be compared to immature unrest). Everything that destroys, conjures away, or exorcises these requirements (and to begin with, consent which overthrows divorce) ruins the absurd and devaluates the attitude that may then be proposed. The absurd has meaning only in so far as it is not agreed to. (1955, 31)

Here, we notice not only the precise qualification of the *emotions* of absurdity (an absence of hope that is not despair and a rejection that is not renunciation), but that the ambivalence of the absurd entails an

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ambivalent attitude toward absurdity, itself. The absurd must be 'preserved' even though it crushes us. It must be 'struggled against', but never 'ruined'. It must 'have meaning', but must not be 'agreed to'. Elsewhere, Camus will tell us that the absurd rebel must be "faithful to the absurd commandments" (1955, 34), while, at the same time, "the absurd requires not to be consented to" (1955, 35). Eventually, the absurd rebel must undertake the "discipline the mind imposes upon itself, that will conjured up out of nothing, that face-to-face struggle" (1955, 55), which is a struggle against himself and against the temptations of yielding to either one of his ambivalent desires. The absurd rebel's mental discipline, his struggle against himself, is analogous to the developmental ideal of mature integration of ambivalence, and that the first step of absurd morality is being able to remain in what Camus calls "extreme tension" (1955, 55), which we may imagine as a kind of 'absurd position' with respect to ambivalence.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus' central question is whether we can survive absurdity, or if the experience is so painful that it must end in suicide. Of course, his answer is that we must never choose suicide, neither the physical nor the metaphorical 'intellectual' kind, but must seek to remain in perpetual ambivalence. Rebellion, he says, is "a matter of living and thinking with those dislocations, of knowing whether one had to accept or refuse. There can be no question of masking the evidence, of suppressing the absurd by denying one of the terms of the equation. It is essential to know whether one can live with it or whether, on the other hand, logic commands one to die of it... The danger... lies in the subtle instant that precedes the leap. Being able to remain on that dizzying crest — that is integrity" (Camus 1955, 50).

Absurd rebellion, then, is ambivalent rebellion, a complex, integrative activity that "expresses an aspiration to order" (Camus 1956b, 23), while at the same time, denying and refusing order by living "without appeal" (Camus 1955, 53). The absurd rebel "attacks a shattered world in order to demand unity from it" (1956b, 23-24), while simultaneously insisting that the world remain shattered by living "solely with what he knows" (1955, 53). Thus, rebellion is a mature and creative response to absurdity, seeking both unity and limits in an attempt to contain the destructive potential of conflicting impulses. In the absurd context, we rebel best when we recognize our ambivalence and act responsibly upon that recognition, when we neither crush it nor allow it to crush us, when as Germaine Brée put it, "our consciousness of [the absurd's] existence is followed by the refusal to be obsessed and paralyzed by it" (Brée 1964, 210-211). In this way, Camus' philosophy of the absurd addresses itself to the persistent human problems of emotional conflict, our appetite for absolutes, and the attraction of extremes, ultimately recommending a combination of maturity, reflexive awareness, and the acceptance of ambivalence to contend with them.

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