

The Philosophy of Communication as the Absurd: Albert Camus and the Ethics of Everyday

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Absurdity, for Albert Camus, represents 'the conclusion arrived at by those who had assumed the possibility of a total explanation of existence by the mind who discover instead an unabridged gulf between rationality and existence' (Cruikshank 49). Out of this tension between the way one desires the world to appear and the harsh truth of human existence emerges the metaphor of the absurd. The metaphor of the absurd is not exclusively found within the domain of philosophy since it is deeply tied to one's lived experience. But the reverse is true as well; absurdity is not merely a metaphor concerned with human existence having no philosophical justification. The interest that Albert Camus held in the idea of the absurd should not be surprising since he was both a philosopher and a participant in the ongoing tensions within his own culture resulting from his role in the French Resistance during World War II, and his work as a journalist, playwright, and novelist. This interaction between Albert Camus, the metaphor of the absurd, the philosophy of communication, and communication ethics provides the framework for the central question guiding the research of this essay: 'How can Albert Camus's use of the metaphor of the absurd assist a human communicator in engaging the historical moment from an ethical perspective?'

Introduction

The metaphor of the absurd emerges out of the interplay of philosophy and the ethical practices embodied by Camus, supporting the notion that he can serve as a model of a philosopher of communication for our postmodern age. During a time of intense involvement with the French Resistance during the German occupation of France during World War II, Camus worked as a journalist for an underground newspaper called *Combat*. Through his writings for this paper, Camus continually demonstrated his commitment to the communicative practices necessary to navigate the absurdity of everyday life in order to make an ethical difference. Camus demonstrated his commitment to engaging his moment from a philosophical perspective through the writing of the essays *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*, his novels *The Stranger* and *The Plague*, and his plays *Caligula*, *The Misunderstanding*, and *The Just Assassins*. Following the liberation of Paris by the Allied forces, Camus provided evidence of his commitment to ethical practice when he wrote on September 6, 1944, as he shared his vision for post-war France, '[W]e are determined to replace politics with morality' (*Combat* 28).

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The overwhelming burden that Camus felt for the future of post-war France did not immobilize him, leaving him incapable of making a decision about how to act in a given moment. Instead, he allowed the tensions of the moment to propel him to productivity, engaging his moment through a variety of communicative exchanges. He was keenly interested in the implications of deeply philosophical ideas revealed within everyday life and was not interested in a philosophy that was 'superficial, academic, and remote from life' (Kaufman 12). Camus sought the freedom to respond to the moment as was necessary and rejected being labeled by any one particular system of belief. He did not 'belong to any school of thought' and held, along with Franz Kafka, a 'marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy [which was] superficial, academic, and remote from life' (Kaufman 12). In attempting to distance himself from the label 'existentialist', in his correspondence with a Harvard student in 1956, Camus wrote, 'I am not an existentialist in the current sense of the term' (Todd 345).

While Camus repeatedly rejected the label of existentialist, one label that he did not publicly reject was that of philosopher. It is therefore understandable how Camus was deeply affected after his well-documented and public split with Jean Paul Sartre when he was derogatorily referred to as 'a poet' while Sartre was respectfully addressed as 'a critic' (Lottman 533). Camus's commitment to living out his ethical beliefs despite the absurdity of his historical moment, while contributing to his eventual split with Sartre, further demonstrates his belief that his words and actions should be consistent with one another. Aronson writes, 'In the end Camus and Sartre split not only because they took opposing sides but because each became his own side's intellectual leader' (2). Perhaps in less turbulent times the two could have remained friends, but the politics of their everyday lives and the situation in post-war France made that option impossible. In our current moment many would simply 'agree to disagree'; but within a moment possessing an 'unabridged gulf between rationality and existence' (Cruickshank 49), this split further accentuates the absurdity of their time.

'In an effort to answer the central research question of this project I first provide an introduction to Camus's personal meeting with the absurd. Within this overview I explore the absurdity of Camus's upbringing and historical moment and present some general observations about his engagement with the moment. Next, I establish how this question provides a hermeneutical entrance into an ongoing conversation within contemporary human communication by exploring the significance of the metaphor of the absurd as it relates to the work of Albert Camus. The following sections explore the connections between philosophical hermeneutics and the work of Camus. These sections provide the methodological approach for the project drawing upon the work of Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer, emphasizing the role of metaphor and how it connects the absurd as used by Camus to our current postmodern moment. The final section provides a summary conclusion as well as implications of this project. While many differences exist between the historical moment of Camus and the contemporary postmodern moment, both represent a time in which there is no longer paradigmatic certainty.

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The metaphor of the absurd is evident throughout the entire life of Camus. While the following section is not an effort to make false connections between Camus's experiences and his use of the metaphor of the absurd, it is an effort to illustrate that Camus faced many situations of absurdity throughout his life.

Meeting the Absurd

Albert Camus was born on November 7, 1913 and died on January 4, 1960. Within a year of his birth his father was killed in the Battle of Marne during World War I in 1914. Left fatherless, Camus's mother moved him and his brother into the home of his grandmother. 'Grandmother Catherine Sintes was a harsh woman...the return of Catherine Camus with two infants, exceeded her understanding... The children's mother was a passive witness to the brawling and beating, restrained by fatigue, by fear of the old woman, and the inability to express herself sharply and effectively' (Lottman 21). The absurdity of losing one's father and being raised by an illiterate mother and grandmother (Lottman 18) formed the early years of Camus. If any opportunities were to come for Camus, he would have to overcome the family circumstances and create opportunities for himself, despite the absurdity of the situation. McBride writes, 'For Camus, then, it is not the world but the human condition that is absurd. The world itself is simply unintelligible' (5). A further example of the randomness of life impacted Camus when he was a teenager. He was an avid soccer player until he was struck with tuberculosis (Lottman 43). From this point on, 'Life in the sense he knew it seemed to come to an end, when it should just be beginning' (Lottman 45).

Until this point in his life, absurdity for Camus was seen only within his lived experience. As he continued his academic training this first-hand experience will be textured as he encounters ideas of many thinkers including St. Augustine and Dostoevsky. From 1918 through 1923 Camus attended primary school. Upon completion of this phase of his education he held various jobs including selling spare parts for cars, working in a marine broker's office, acting as a clerk, and 'taking post' in a meteorological office (Cruickshank 13). He completed his formal education in 1936 with a dissertation addressing the beliefs of Plotinus as they relate to the Christian faith of St. Augustine. While completing his education Camus was building a reputation for his skills and interest in the theater. In 1935 he founded the 'Theatre du Travail' (later organized into the Theatre de l'Equipe). Within this context Camus first adapted and performed works by Dostoevsky. Although it was not published until 1944 or performed until 1945, Camus wrote the play *Caligula* during this time of productivity in the theater as well.

As his own thought began to develop, he began to take an interest in items beyond his own thinking and experience as he began his journalistic work at the Algier-Republican in 1937 and worked with that publication until 1939. As part of his position he wrote reviews of Jean Paul Sartre work *Nausea* and *Le Mur*, further texturing his understanding of absurdity. The connection with Sartre will play a larger role in Camus's

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life after the two men meet in 1943 (Aronson 9). He was developing a constructive approach to engaging life as he sorted through the ideas of Sartre. Cruickshank writes, 'He found the short stories of Le Mur too negative, saying that to assert the absurdity of existence should not be an end in itself but rather should provide a point of departure for positive reconstruction' (15). This quote reveals the commitment Camus held throughout life to avoid philosophy that is academic and remote from life. The constructive approach taken by Camus can be distinguished from that of the post-structuralists who do not share his commitment to constructive criticism, instead working on a project of deconstruction. Eagleton provides a further distinction when he writes, "Deconstruction is the name given to the critical operation by which such oppositions can be partly undermined, or by which they can be shown partly to undermine each other in the process of textual meaning' (115). Among the philosophers representing a deconstructive approach are Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva (Eagleton 116).

Camus's famous works include the novels: *The Stranger* (1942), *The Plague* (1947), *The Fall* (1956), *A Happy Death* (1970, posthumously), and *The First Man* (1995, posthumously); the essays: 'Betwixt and Between' (1937), *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), and *The Rebel* (1951); the plays: *Caligula* (performed 1945, written 1938); *Cross Purpose* (1944); *The State of Siege* (1948), *The Just Assassins* (1949), and *The Misunderstanding* (1958); and the collection *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* (1961).

His existing work includes novels, book length philosophical essays, newspaper editorials and articles, personal notes, and correspondence. All of these writings connect Camus to the central question guiding the research of this essay which addresses the engagement of an absurd historical moment through an exploration of the interplay of Albert Camus, ethics and the study of the philosophy of communication. In the introduction to *The Rebel*, Camus meets the absurdity of his moment as he writes, 'The purpose of this essay is once again to face the reality of the present...it is an attempt to understand the times in which we live' (3). Camus, along with many others of his era, could have chosen to ignore 'a period which, in a space of fifty years, uproots, enslaves, or kills seventy million human beings' (*Rebel* 3). But instead of ignoring the moment, Camus believed he had no choice but to engage the moment as it actually appeared before him. Arnett and Arneson further connect Camus to the study of the philosophy of communication when they write, 'We are not saying that one must like or approve of a given historical moment. We are suggesting, however, that any historical moment must be taken seriously and responded to, rather than ignored' (37). *The Rebel* was Camus's entrance into the ongoing conversation of his historical moment and represents his best effort to 'face the reality of the present.'

Camus worked from a position situated within a larger context or narrative and he came to embody the narrative that he represented, as did Sartre. Eventually the two approaches to post-World War II France led to the split.

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In a philosophically intense and personally brutal argument, the two main voices of postwar France intellectual life publicly destroyed almost ten years of friendship. At first reluctantly and hesitantly, and then with a rush that seemed uncontrollable, Sartre and Camus also shattered their political milieu and any traces of what was once their common project of creating an independent Left (Aronson 2).

The focus of their conflict intensified around the publication of Camus's *The Rebel*. By this point in time Sartre had become one of many 'apologists for Stalin' (Lottman 523) while Camus was growing more and more hostile towards Communism. 'The author's [Camus's] unambiguous stand against Stalinism was bound to receive sympathy and approval from conservatives, from anti-Communists of all types' (Lottman 522). While either man could have compromised to save the relationship, each recognized that the conflicting narratives could not be resolved, so both chose to live consistently within his given position while living in tension with the other. While their debate was philosophically grounded, their concerns were communicated in a very public context. Camus's commitment to allowing philosophical ideas guide his communicative choices and actions, even when it required ending a close friendship, provides support of his functioning as a philosopher of communication. While one cannot psychologize (Arnett, *Dialogic Confession* 12) about how these personal experiences impacted Camus's philosophy and writing, what a person sees and hears rhetorically guides and influences the work one is able to accomplish.

When viewing events in everyday life within a postmodern moment it is necessary to recognize the limitations inherent in any given perspective. For Hans-Georg Gadamer this perspective is considered the 'horizon' which is 'the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point' (*Truth* 302). When a person recognizes the bias one holds and the perspective from which one views the world the fact that he or she is situated within a larger narrative framework becomes apparent. Arnett writes, 'We limit interpretive vision by our situatedness while we open possibilities due to our situatedness' (*Dialogic Confession* 182). Through the interplay between one's horizon and the given historical moment a new understanding of existence can come into view through the engagement with the metaphors that emerge.

The Absurd: Meeting Narrative Decline

The current postmodern moment is one in which a grand narrative of the past is in decline. Lyotard writes, 'The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation' (37). There is resonance between this moment of narrative uncertainty and Olivier Todd's explanation of the absurd for Camus, which may be understood in terms of the 'nonsensical,' 'contradictory,' 'false' and 'unreasonable' (144). Camus explores the notion of absurdity as 'born at the confrontation between the human cry and the world's unreasoning silence' (qtd. in Todd 143). Within this confrontation is an effort to discover whether life holds any meaning. This tension, and the quest for

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meaning, is extremely prevalent within the current postmodern moment that lacks an overriding metanarrative that guides both public and private communication. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* the realization that life has no meaning is illuminated by the explanation of the metaphor of the absurd. This essay was 'a formally perfect sketch, and sometimes a philosophical prose poem, falsely cold seeming and strongly autobiographical' (Todd 142). Todd further explains the metaphor of the absurd as 'a contradiction between the irrational character of the world and every thinking man's desire for clarity' (145). In an interview, Camus explains, 'Accepting the absurdity of everything around us is one step, a necessary experience: it should not become a dead end. It arouses a revolt that can become fruitful. An analysis of the idea of revolt can help discover ideas capable of restoring a relative meaning to existence, although a meaning that will always be in danger' (*Lyrical* 346). The metaphor of the absurd, and Camus's subsequent explorations of revolt, provides a commonplace for discussion and debate, a necessary ingredient for public dialogue (Arnett and Arneson 49). His use of revolt provides a necessary and rhetorical reaction to the changing historical moment and served as an embodiment of the metaphor of the absurd through his further engagement and action within an ever-changing moment.

The metaphor of the absurd, and its connection to our present moment, is further textured when interpreted through the lens of this moment of metanarrative decline and narrative tension. In such a moment there is always an inherent risk in attempting to implement a template that is appropriate in one narrative within another, very different, narrative structure. It is not uncommon to find many people within our American culture to become overly concerned with convenience and finding a 'quick fix' while a willingness to take the time to find an appropriate and ethical response to even basic decisions is often lacking. These unreflective decisions often emerge out of a desire to satisfy personal desires and are motivated by nothing more than personal preference, lacking any connection to or consideration of a larger life narrative. These decisions could be considered groundless, thus leaving one with only personal preference. If someone does not work from a grounded standpoint, in future moments he or she will be tempted to either implement the previous successful model or he/she will again be tempted to work from personal preference. Alasdair MacIntyre uses the term 'emotivism' to indicate decision making that is '*nothing* but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling' (*After Virtue* 12). Either way, one will lack the coherence and fidelity suggested by Walter R. Fisher that gives meaning to one's personal narrative and in turn, his or her life. The attempt of Albert Camus was to engage life through the lens of a metaphor that both expressed his own foundation as well as provided a framework in which he could find meaning for his own existence.

Camus's philosophical commitments keep his ideas grounded in everyday living as he works out the implications of the metaphor of the absurd. Through an understanding of the metaphor of the absurd, as it is evidenced in the writings of Albert Camus, one can be better prepared to

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appropriately engage the current postmodern moment, and thus avoid becoming an anachronism.

The Role of Metaphor: Engaging the Absurd

Albert Camus recognized the inherent limits of the human condition and his work reflects his desire to engage his moment in a manner that was faithful to his embodied tradition, or story, and was also appropriate for the moment before him. Arnett writes, 'Philosophical hermeneutics provides interpretive freedom with horizon or story limits. As one takes a communicative text seriously, one brings a story-rich tradition to the text' (*Dialogical Confession* 182). The philosophy of communication, as used within this project, is directly tied to Gadamer's notion of *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Gadamer writes,

Philosophical hermeneutics takes as its task the opening up of the hermeneutical dimension in its full scope, showing its fundamental significance for our entire understanding of the world and thus for all its various forms in which this understanding manifests itself; from interhuman communication to manipulation for society; from personal experience by the individual in society to the way in which he encounters society (*Philosophical* 18).

While Camus was writing before the work of either Gadamer or Paul Ricoeur was published, overall the critical approach taken within his work consistently demonstrates a commitment to philosophical hermeneutics.

As stated earlier, Camus's engagement with his historical moment eventually led a conflict of philosophical positions with celebrated individuals like Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. A given philosophy of communication can assist in providing insight into 'how' a person lives life and engages a given moment. Camus's friendship-ending disagreement with Sartre was driven by a difference in philosophical beliefs that were more theoretical in nature. But it was also driven by a difference in political and ethical beliefs that played out in the everyday life and politics of post-World War II France. This concern for ethics demonstrates how a study of philosophically driven communication ethics is not about process, but is deeply concerned for the content of communicative exchanges. Along with the contributors to *Communication Ethics in an Age of Diversity*, Camus sought to 'develop constructive responses to the challenges of [his] unique age' (viii). The interplay of the philosophy of communication and communication ethics is evidenced through an analysis of the life of Albert Camus. In an effort to appropriately engage the moment in which he was situated, Camus worked out the implications of the metaphor of the absurd. It was through this metaphor that the world made sense to Camus. As his moment changed, he also began working with the metaphor of revolt. This should not be viewed as moving away from using the absurd but as adding further texture to his understanding of absurdity.

Camus functioned as a philosopher of communication by working out the ethical implications of his unique historical moment through the use of the metaphor of the absurd. For the purposes of this essay the

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absurd can be considered as a time in which there is a loss of hope in paradigmatic predictiveness. Camus writes, '[N]ever perhaps at any time has the attack on reason been more violent than in ours' (*Myth* 22). The metaphor of the absurd emerged as Camus engaged his particular historical moment of narrative and virtue contention while at the same time being unpredictable, irrational, and violent – a time much like our own postmodern moment. Within this project, the significance of the absurd, and therefore the significance of Camus's work, is explored as it relates to the contemporary study of the philosophy of communication.

The primary methodological framework for this project is informed by an understanding of a constructive hermeneutic and draws upon the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and the work addressing metaphor by Paul Ricoeur. Within the work of Paul Ricoeur, metaphor serves as a sort of interruption to the routine of daily living. Ricoeur writes, 'For this is the function of metaphor, to instruct by suddenly combining elements that have not been put together before' (33). Michael Hyde, in his work addressing 'rhetorical interruptions', suggests '[S]hould it not be the case that when conscience calls, rhetoric ought to answer, even if the word of the poet is yet to come and even if what one has to say is out of step with the party line' (77)? Combining these ideas, one can come to the conclusion that an understanding of metaphor can allow the world to be reinterpreted in a new and different fashion.

One can better interpret Camus's engagement of the historical moment through an understanding of Gadamer's use of the term 'horizon' which indicates 'the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point' (302). Recognizing the horizon of Camus assists us in attempting to situate him within a specific historical moment. To fully understand how he engaged his moment in history 'we must place ourselves in the other situation in order to understand it' (Gadamer 303). By understanding Camus's historical moment we can draw at least two conclusions. First, we evaluate the appropriateness of the metaphor based upon the historical circumstances. Second, we can recognize his ability to provide a metaphor that engaged his contemporary moment with coherence and fidelity (Fisher).

The historical moment within which Camus found himself was at the twilight of the modern era. While some may worry about the loss of universals, through the connection of the ideas of several central theorists, one can provide a basic understanding of how to navigate through the postmodern era. The work of Lyotard points toward an understanding of how the decline of metanarratives in the twentieth century has created both problems and opportunities for effective communication. With the decline of a universal metanarrative, one can learn from Gadamer the importance of recognizing our own situatedness within a given tradition. Alasdair MacIntyre develops this theme further as he reveals in *After Virtue* how a tradition can be constructed through the emergence of consistent patterns of social practices. Fisher indicates the value-laden nature of these practices as well as how the MacIntyrean virtues are connected to private values.

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It is evident from the above description that narrative and tradition play central roles within understanding in a postmodern era. Much of what contributed to the decline of the modern era was a questioning of whether meaning was found within metanarratives or within human experience. While Albert Camus sought to challenge previously held notions of meaning (i.e. the metanarrative of religion) he did not make a postmodern turn and believe that meaning was found by situating oneself in a story or narrative tradition. While he sought to challenge previously held assumptions, he ultimately placed his trust in the self and not in stories. Therefore, it can be said that Camus was asking the right questions (where is meaning found?) but discovered the wrong answer (the self as opposed to narratives or stories).

Throughout his life's work, Albert Camus made use of metaphorical distinctions to emphasize the general themes of his writings. These metaphors emerged at a relevant moment in history in which they connected Camus's own experience with historical circumstances. Using the idea of rhetorical interruption discussed earlier in the context of the work of Michael Hyde, one could say that the various events of Camus's historical moment could be viewed as a rhetorical interruption between the modern era and the emerging postmodern era.

Conclusion & Implications

The metaphor of the absurd provides a lens through which one can engage the current postmodern moment permitting him or her to make ethically informed choices when confronted with a multiplicity of options. Approaching this moment from the standpoint of the philosophy of communication allows for a reflective choice to be made by an informed participant of the moment. This project has provided an introductory exploration of a research question representing a crisis within contemporary human communication. In the essay, 'Communication Ethics: The Dialogic Turn', Arnett, Arneson, and Bell, provide a hermeneutic entrance to the ongoing discussion of communication ethics through the use of categories and context. The hermeneutic entrance of this project is through a given metaphor. The overall contribution of this project is that it provides an introduction to the metaphorical entrance into an ongoing conversation about the philosophy of communication as well as communication ethics. This project is an example of the explication of one word, absurd.

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