

Albert Camus Society 2023 Conference Programme:

16-17 November 2023

Kimberly Baltzer-Jaray: 'Differently Alienated in Paris: Camus and Baldwin'

Abstract:

It was during his time living in Paris, France, from 1943 – 1957, that James Baldwin became a reader of Albert Camus. In his 1972 essay “Take me to the Water,” there is mention of *The Stranger* by name, attending Camus’ stage production of William Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun*, but the deepest engagement by far was with Camus’ articles in the WWII French resistance Newspaper, *Combat*, when he was editor-in-chief from 1943 – 1947. Specifically, the pieces Camus wrote about Algeria were of interest to Baldwin because he wanted to understand the conflict from a native son’s perspective. This 1972 essay details Baldwin’s experiences living impoverished in Paris among the Algerians and the horrific oppression and hate he witnessed them enduring. Baldwin, a gay African American, was no stranger to being crushed by the structural violence of authorities and everyday hatred of the citizenry but his living reality in Paris was one of freedom – much like his former friend and writing mentor, Richard Wright, who left America for Paris some years earlier, Baldwin found an escape from racism. It was not that Paris was completely free from racism, but that it had a tolerance for African Americans that it did not for Africans from countries France had colonized. Baldwin sympathized with the Algerians in Paris; he had been subjected to racism in his homeland and so he felt he could relate to their experiences with the French – he knew what it was like to live oppressed. Racism, however, is not the same as colonialism and, I argue here, this is precisely what led Baldwin to misunderstand Camus’ proposed solution to the conflict between Algeria and France. Additionally, it seems Baldwin was not aware that Camus was *pied noire*, a person of mixed race with one parent being European French and the other Algerian. This adds another layer, I argue, to how applying an exclusive lens of racism could fail: Camus’ comments about Algeria are sourced in experiences and struggles created by colonialism, where racism is only one head of the hydra. Both Baldwin and Camus have experienced alienation but differently, and the shades of difference correspond to the distinct ways racism and colonialism operate, oppress, and dominate people.

This paper will begin with a summary of Camus’ perspective about Algeria and his suggested solution before moving into Baldwin’s experiences in Paris and his critical thoughts on Camus’ position. Next, I will explore some differences between racism and colonialism utilizing Frantz Fanon and Bryan Brayboy, to assist with fleshing out Camus’ mindset and experienced

alienation and expounding how Baldwin's analysis missed its mark. Last, I will finish up with some reflections on Camus' proposed solution to the conflict, and its significance today.

Eric Berg: 'Dr Rieux is No Hero of *The Plague*'

Abstract:

In this paper I will make the case that Dr Rieux of *The Plague* is not a moral or medical hero, in fact he is best ethically characterized as an egoist that practices tribalism and medically a border-line incompetent doctor. Dr Rieux, the narrator of the text, has enjoyed a long-standing reputation as a moral and medical hero of the text and possibly the moral and medical hero of the text. Philosophers with distinguished reputations in Camus studies, professors of Literature and French Studies, degree medical professionals, journalists that have read and reviewed the text, and literary critics have all publicly declared Rieux as a moral and medical hero of the text. I disagree with this conclusion. I do, however, agree that he is an absurd hero.

Peter Francev: 'Camus, Beauvoir and the Ethics of the Absurd's Ambiguity'

Abstract:

Albert Camus (1913-1960) and Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) came to know one another during the German Occupation of Paris during the Second World War whilst they frequented the Café des Flores and Café Deux Maggots. Their often-spirited debates would sometimes turn into heated discussions, and Beauvoir satirized Camus in her novel *Les Mandarines*, as Henri Perron the leftist editor of the clandestine periodical *L'Espoir*, which, coincidentally, Camus himself edited during the war. Nevertheless, the objective of this paper is to examine the seemingly close-knit structure of Beauvoir's existentialist philosophy as posited in her seminal work[1] *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) with that of Camus's philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). Rather ironically both philosophers did not see themselves as 'philosophers', per se, and these works are necessarily important in the pantheon of twentieth century French philosophical literature. Camus saw himself as more of a writer than as a philosopher, and Beauvoir saw herself as a writer-philosopher who was tasked with trying to prove that existentialism had no concrete ethical and moral element; so, she decided to take up Jean-Paul Sartre's challenge and write a tract arguing as such and apply an ethical 'code' to the existentialism posited by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (1943). In the meantime, she would wind up doing the complete opposite. The purpose of this paper is to examine the overlapping ways in which Camus, Beauvoir, and their works are able to coincide together and actually supplement one another. One could argue that Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* compliments

Camus's philosophy of the absurd in a rather succinct way and, to my knowledge, this is the first work to examine the interconnectedness of their philosophies.

George Heffernan: 'Meursault...'

Dominik Kulcsár: 'Albert Camus and Peter Kropotkin: An Unexplored Connection'

Abstract:

The aim of this presentation is to establish a connection between Albert Camus and Peter Kropotkin. In *L'Homme Révolté* Camus argues that the rebel affirms a value that is shared not just by him and the oppressor, but also by the rest of humanity. As such, recognition of a shared suffering awakens the spirit of revolt. In his pamphlet, *The Spirit of Revolt*, Kropotkin speaks of the ability of a people to come together in times of crisis and strive for change. In *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* Kropotkin argues that we are naturally endowed with social instinct, which serves as a foundation for moral decisions. In the course of evolution this instinct transforms into mutual aid, which goes beyond mere "love and sympathy". Its primordiality speaks to Camus' notion of a shared humanity. The hope of establishing this connection is that it will broaden the discussion of solidarity both in the field of anarchist studies and in current research focusing on Camus.

David Langwallner: 'Camus as a Mystical Predictor of Our Day and Age'

Abstract:

'There comes a time in human history when the man who dares says two and two makes 4 will be sentenced to death'. -- Camus. (*The Plague*)

At various points in time in *The Fall* (1956) in particular Camus references the holocaust comparing it to our in-effect Piranha fish society which destroys people in stages. The view of human nature many years after the Shoah is not sanguine. I believe that the city of Krakow is an ideal space to deal with his treatment of the Holocaust and the analogies he draws to European society in the 1950s a more pertinently to see how the book in effect mystically predicts many of the deterioration which today are leading to a more complex inchoate and multi-dimensional Shoah. In this respect I wish to focus in particular on *The Plague* (1947) as in hindsight much of what Camus fictionally represented as happening in the City of Oran were replicated during the

lockdown period where spin, disinformation, incompetence and casual brutality led to a cheapening of human life and the assertion of control. The channelling of wealth to what Varoufakis recently defines as techno feudalism evident in the profits going upwards to the drug companies in particular coupled with the wholesale destruction of civil liberties and the undermining of human freedom so integral to Camus. Hand in glove, we have the rise of the far right and fascism rebranded, the hatred and exclusion of the other and the migrant for which Camus has been unfairly criticised for his representation of the Arab in *The Outsider* by such as Edward Said. In a sense the fundamental thesis is to explore whether and to what extent Camus can be seen as a mystical writer and much of his books whether true of his age are accurate predictions of the future Our future as much as Huxley Orwell who he admired and once met or HG Wells.

Simon Lea: ‘Sisyphus with Fife and Drum: Imagining Sisyphus Happy’

Abstract:

Camus concludes *The Myth of Sisyphus* with: 'The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.' In this paper I explore both why one must and how one can imagine Sisyphus happy. However, my main focus will be on the how. That is: how can Sisyphus struggle towards the heights with a full heart? This is a reversal of the typical ordering of priorities; after all, Nietzsche, whom Camus tells us 'shows us the way of the absurd man', says that as long as we have the why for our life, we can get by with any how (TI 'Arrows' 12). But Nietzsche also points out a very particular way that his hero Zarathustra overcame his struggle on his own mountain: 'mit klingendem Spiel.' This curious phrase has proved difficult for translators, with each translation offering their own rendering. I look at two translations: 'with sounding brass' and 'with fife and drum'. Exploration of both of these shows us, I will argue, not only how we can imagine Sisyphus happy but how we are to receive Camus' Sisyphus myth as a whole.

Angelika Małek and Maciej Kaluża: ‘From “Sophrosyne” (σωφροσύνη) to “La Mesure” and Back’

Abstract:

Sophrosyne, “saving *phronesis*” – the earliest appearance of this term was in the Homeric poems. For ancient Greeks *sophrosyne* was the most important ethical feature – they defined it as a skill to find a middle way between two extremes. Plato contributed more generously to the

evolution of *this concept* than did any other author. The theme of *sophrosyne* in his multiple works is combined with other subjects, like the soul and the State, love, eschatology, or the universe. Following Plato, Aristotle contributed to the doctrine of *sophrosyne* in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. It results from three trends in his thought: the distinction between intellectual and moral virtue, the doctrine of the Mean, and his tendency to define as precisely as possible the scope of each virtue. In Camus studies, there has been a long-lasting debate about the nature of “La Mesure”, and the relation of his concept to Greek ethical conception. In our view, *sophrosyne* and *la mesure* share some similarities. But, given the extended line of thinking, that appeared after “The Rebel”, especially in Camus’ “Defense of The Rebel”, a simple identification of measure with the Greek concept raises several doubts. In our presentation, we will focus on the difficulty of understanding *la mesure* as a form of *sophrosyne* in regard to two, political notions of rebellion and revolution.

David Platten: ‘Stranger Things. Meursault in Comix Mode’

Abstract:

This contribution will compare two comix adaptations of *The Stranger*, one created in 2013 by the French artist Jacques Ferrandez, and the other Ryota Kurumado’s manga version, which was translated into French in May 2023. It will focus primarily on visual affects in each case, especially innovations in framing and point-of-view, and how they render, or even enhance, literary features of the original text. If time allows, it will cast the net a little wider to capture the use of film references in the Ferrandez adaptation, and the extent to which Kurumado’s interpretation, emanating from a very different cultural environment, offers new perspectives on the novel. The talk will be accompanied by images taken from each adaptation.

Denise Schaeffer: ‘Hope and Tragedy in Camus’s *The Misunderstanding*’

Abstract:

Camus’s play *The Misunderstanding* revolves around murder, suicide and despair. Audiences have often found the plot unsettling, and some scholars describe the worldview of the play as thoroughly pessimistic. In his preface to the published version, Camus himself refers to the play’s “gloominess” and states that it presents a “dismal image of the human fate.” However, Camus also goes on to state that this dismal image can be “reconciled with a relative optimism as to man” and that the play’s morality “is not altogether negative.” This paper explores the basis for such “optimism” and even hope in *The Misunderstanding*. Some scholars argue that

the play underscores the need for human understanding by dramatizing the implications of its absence, thus pointing beyond the world of the play to more positive possibilities. But does the play remain open to optimism and hope only in the sense that it points to how things might have unfolded differently? If so, how can this be reconciled with the sister character's insistence that if she had recognized her brother, "it would have made no difference?" This suggests that human "misunderstanding" is not overcome by means of simple declarations or direct revelation. The play raises important questions about the difficulties as well as the possibilities of human communication and connection, against the backdrop of the absurd.

Matt Waldschlagel: Albert Camus and Error Theory'

Abstract:

As a rough approximation, it may be said that in *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus holds The Absurd to be the conflict between our impulse to ask after questions of meaning ("What is the meaning of my life?" or "How can I live meaningfully and deeply?") and the impossibility of achieving any answer from an indifferent universe. Camus is seen by some as a kind of sceptic about what we can call existential meaning. It seems that the position we occupy in response to The Absurd that Camus recommends we take has strong parallels with the error theory in metaethics. In his taxonomy, Russ Shafer-Landau identifies the error theory as a kind of moral nihilism. He explains that moral nihilism is itself a "form of moral skepticism that says that the world contains no moral features, and so there is nothing for moral claims to be true of." [2] According to Shafer-Landau, the error theory of morality is defined by three essential claims:

1. There are no moral features in this world.
2. No moral judgments are true.
3. Our sincere moral judgments try, and always fail, to describe the moral features of things.

It follows that:

4. There is no moral knowledge. [3]

While error theorists are preoccupied with the status of moral claims, Camus is preoccupied with the status of claims about existential meaning. But both moral claims and claims about existential meaning are normative claims; they concern what we *ought* to do or how we *should* be. As I read him, Camus is willing to grant that the universe provides answers to factual and scientific questions but fails to offer us any answers to normative questions about the meaning of life and how (or whether) to live. We might recast the third essential claim of the error theory

to be more acceptable to Camus: Our sincere *existential* judgments try, and always fail, to describe the *existential meaning* of things.

So, Camus, like the error theorist, has a skeptical view about normativity. This paper will explore whether Camus' view about normativity agrees with the position occupied by the error theorist. That is, can or should Camus be construed as an error theorist with respect to existential meaning? And regardless of the answer, how might this answer advance Camus studies?

Also, do error theorists implicitly hold a view about The Absurd? Put differently, if we suppose that The Absurd is understood relative to the domain that pertains to the error theory (i.e., the status of ethical claims, not the status of claims about existential meaning), do error theorists as moral nihilists tacitly assume The Absurd?

Lastly, while the error theory in metaethics may be motivated by scientism, Camus' position on what I call existential meaning clearly is not. Instead, Camus' motivations appear to come from his views about religion and politics. To what extent, if any, do these different motivations matter in assessing whether Camus can charitably be identified as holding an error theory?

[1] Beauvoir's seminal work on feminism is, ultimately, her *magnum opus*, *The Second Sex*.

[2] Russ Shafer-Landau, *The Fundamentals of Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2010) p. G-4 Glossary.

[3] See Russ Shafer-Landau, *The Fundamentals of Ethics*, p. 293.