

Is it All for Nothing?

Dealing with Nihilism in Modernity

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Abstract

Throughout the course of this paper I build upon the foundations of William Desmond's philosophy in order to develop a rebuttal towards the nihilistic consequences brought about by many modern thinkers, for example: Albert Camus. These nihilistic consequences seem to play a significant role in the drastic increase of anxiety and depression seen throughout our current epoch. Ultimately, philosophies such as that of Camus cannot avoid this fall into nihilism. Nevertheless, these ramifications seem to stem from a misinterpretation of Camus' notion of the 'Absurd'. Thus, this confrontation with the absurd determines whether or not we can escape the consequences of nihilism that can be found throughout modernity.

Introduction

"When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in an eternity before and after, the little space I fill, and can even see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I am frightened...The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me (Pascal 2003, 61)." Modernity has been plagued with various forms of nihilism. This has often left modernity void of any innate value and meaning. The results of this plague have been bleeding through past and current generations, and it is beginning to reveal itself in the form of depression, anxiety, and suicide. There has been a drastic rise in depression, anxiety, and suicide rates across the globe (Fox 2018, Heid 2019). Current research, such as the previously mentioned articles, often puts the blame on various reasons. For instance, Heid and Fox point out that social media, technology, and long workdays, might play a major role in this rise of depression. I certainly do not disagree with these two authors. I am sure the reasons they mention throughout their articles play a major role in this increase of suicide and depression. Nonetheless, I believe this rise is caused by something much more primordial, which is ultimately highlighted in Pascal's abovementioned quote.

Technology, social media, long workdays often promote a culture that is obsessed with consumerism and 'payable joy'. This promotion can often lead to the realization of our finite nature. Once the fun and games technology can provide us with are over, we are left devoid of any

meaning. A post on social media or a video game might bring a moment of joy, but soon it fades, and we are only left with the realization that all the fun and games are temporary and eventually come to an end. This realization of finitude can lead to a revelation, or remind us of our place in the universe, that can and should bring about a certain amount of existential angst. Our modern-day culture is surrounded by technology and consumerism. This is of course great for many things and provides many spectacular phenomena; however, when faced with the question of meaning and purpose the rat race for constant innovation and expansion within this field is a futile act that is comparable to that of Sisyphus. Once we come to the realization that all the value that we have placed in this world comes to an end we can quickly become overwhelmed with existential angst, depression, anxiety, etc. I believe the current rise in depression and anxiety is ultimately caused by 1) the meaningless void technology and consumer culture can leave us with and 2) modernity's often abandonment of philosophies that have any hint of metaphysics within them, which unavoidably brings about nihilistic consequences.

So, when we are faced with the finite nature of our being, how can we avoid nihilism, depression, and anxiety? Philosophers such as Sartre and Camus believed they found the answer to this question by reestablishing value and meaning via the radical free will of the individual.¹ In other words, they believed the individual was solely responsible for creating and projecting their own meaning and value onto this world. This solution is a great one for giving your individual life meaning; however, this answer only projects our own axiological definitions onto the world and leaves the world itself valueless and meaningless. Thus, the question of nihilism remains at the frontlines throughout our being and the solutions proposed by these philosophers seem to be inadequate. More specifically, when we take into consideration our finite nature, we can see that nihilism not only haunts us throughout our lifetime, but it also carries on generation after generation. In other words, when the individual creates their own meaning and projects their own value onto a valueless world, the world itself becomes stripped of any type of value and the problem of nihilism remains. If we extrapolate this even further then when the individual inevitably dies, nihilism once again returns, and the next generation is again left with the same problem. This seems to be the vicious circle of nihilism that cannot be avoided by existential solutions. The main

¹ In Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus* (2018) Sisyphus found his 'peace' during his descent from the mountain. This is when the absurd man realizes that he shapes his own will. Camus writes the following on the matter: "It makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among men (6)." Likewise, in *Nausea* (2000) Roquentin asserts his freedom via artistic creation. His cure for his nausea is the realization that 'existence precedes essence'. This revelation allows him to define his own essence.

question I will be focusing on throughout this paper is the following: is there a way to avoid the vicious circle of axiological nihilism that strips the world of its value and only leaves us with our own hollow projections of meaning and value? In other words: is there ever some sort of innate value or meaning in the world that does not perish? Now this question might seem impossible to answer and it will require a certain appeal to metaphysics. This appeal to metaphysics might immediately cause some individuals to run away; however, I believe there is a logical way to appeal to metaphysics that can remedy modernity's attempt to escape such philosophy. In particular, I believe William Desmond's work, specifically *God and the Between* (2008), does the job of highlighting some of the faults of modernity's rationale and pointing out the need for metaphysics.

In order to answer the abovementioned questions, I will firstly give an in-depth critique on, why and how existential philosophy cannot answer this question without ultimately crumbling upon its own foundation. To do this, I will use Camus' notion of the Absurd², as seen throughout *The Myth of Sisyphus* (2018). Once, we have a clear understanding of how this sort of philosophy cannot provide an answer to the above-mentioned question, then I will move on to peruse a possible alternative solution to the proposed question.³ This solution will be embedded within the texts of William Desmond. More specifically, I will refer to a very particular excerpt entitled, *God and the Between: First Hyperbole – The Idiocy of Being* (2008). Ultimately, I believe Desmond's philosophical approach can deal with the previously mentioned questions and put a halt to modernity's nihilistic ramifications.

1. Absurd Reasoning

As Camus said in *Nuptials*: "life's pleasures are inseparable from a keen awareness of these limits (Aronson, 2017)." At the forefront of these limits is life's finitude. The realization that all pleasures in this life inevitably come to an end can often be detrimental to an individual. Consumer culture, payable pleasure, and technology can often distract us from this inevitability; however, the truth of the fading moment which eventually leads to the perishing of self always haunts us. This seems to be the ultimate cause of negative feelings and bleak situations. Sartre's *Nausea* was about this

² I am of course aware that Camus himself rejected the label of being an existentialist; however, the main idea that I want to focus on within, what is often labeled his 'existential' philosophy is the Absurd. I believe this philosophy of the Absurd was missing a crucial aspect.

³ Traces of this line of reasoning can be seen in Dennis Vanden Auweele (2013).

specific feeling, or sickness, which will sooner or later confront an individual. This is the confrontation with the 'absurd'.

Camus' notion of the absurd can be understood as the unification between the human's will to find meaning and purpose, and the eternal silence of an infinite nature. For Camus, "there is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy (*MS* 2018, 1)." Now suicide seems to be deeply connected to his notion of the absurd. According to Camus the condition of our being is an absurd one. We often build our life upon contingent foundations. We live with the expectation that we will exist tomorrow and so we attempt to always build a brighter future. However, looking forward to our future is a bittersweet pill to swallow since our future always brings us closer to our inevitable death. Once we wake up to this reality, science and rationality seem to be some kind of twisted joke that is void of any meaning. Therefore, once the absurdity and meaninglessness of the universe become apparent to us the question of suicide can creep in. In other words: is life worth living if it is just absurd and pointless?

a) Camus' Sisyphus

One of the ways Camus answers this question is by giving us a unique outlook on the myth of Sisyphus.⁴ He compares Sisyphus' task and being to the absurd condition of man. He writes the following on the matter.

If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious. Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition; it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn (*MS* 2018, 4).

What interests Camus the most throughout this myth is Sisyphus' thoughts during his march back down the mountain. It is during his descent that he truly becomes aware of his miserable situation. Nevertheless, it is during this moment when "ancient wisdom confirms modern heroism (*MS* 2018, 5)." In the face of his wretched situation he makes a conscious decision to keep pushing through.

⁴ Jonathan Judaken and Robert Bernasconi (2012) point out that in the face of absurd reasoning the conclusion becomes apparent: one must live life fully conscious of the bitterness of our being. This bitterness is what must force us to rebel against the submissive forces of being. "Full consciousness, refusing to submit, and keeping on: these are the answers Camus gives to his question about suicide and constitute his alternative to a belief in God (267)."

He accepts his situation and this acceptance is where he finds his freedom. Ultimately, Sisyphus accepts and embraces living with the reality of his struggle and the inevitability of a death where the possibility of appealing to God might not be an option. “All Sisyphus’ silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, he silences all the idols (MS 2018, 6).”

For Camus the absurd man’s affirmation is a rebellion towards the absurd condition we find ourselves in. It is an absolute positive ‘yes’ towards being. This yes allows one to seal one’s own fate despite all the absurdity. Sisyphus did this by continuing to push the rock and recognizing that the rock was still rolling via his rebellion. His moment of contemplation during his descent allowed him to recognize that he is in control of his will and he is the creator of his fate. This is Sisyphus’ rebellion towards his absurd situation, and this is analogous to man’s ‘struggle’ for being. Despite man’s futile existence one’s affirmation and acknowledgement of the situation is the very rebellion that allows ‘free’ being.

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one’s burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself towards the height is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy (MS 2018, 7).

b) The Primordial ‘Yes’ and Affirmation that All is Well

There are two key points within Camus’ presentation of *The Myth of Sisyphus* that are extremely pertinent for the issues put forth throughout this text; namely, 1) the ‘primordial yes’ and 2) the affirmation that all is well. For Camus the absurd and happiness go hand in hand. With the discovery of the absurd there is a revelation that ‘all is well’. Camus writes the following:

One does not discover the absurd without being tempted to write a manual of happiness. “What! By such narrow ways--?” There is but one world, however. Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable. It would be a mistake to say that happiness necessarily springs from the absurd discovery. It happens as well that the feeling of the absurd springs from happiness. “I conclude that all is well,” says Oedipus, and that remark is sacred. It echoes in the wild and limited universe of man. It teaches that all is not, has not been, exhausted. It drives out of this world a god who had come into it with dissatisfaction and a preference for futile sufferings. It makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among men (MS 2018, 5-6).

With the discovery and confrontation with the absurd one might be completely overwhelmed with existential angst, or as Sartre puts it *nausea*. However, there is a silver lining so to speak. With the

discovery of the absurd we can also discover happiness. The two are intertwined in the most primordial sense. These two terms completely coexist. Without darkness there is no light and without the absurd there is no happiness. These concepts exist in the same realm together and codependently. This codependence is what allows the absurd man to say 'yes' and ultimately conclude that all is well. The futility of existence no longer matters with this revelation. The absurd gives light to happiness and vice versa. Once this is revealed to an individual, they can push forward through the absurd, Sisyphus returns to his rock, with the realization that their fate is in their hands.

Now Camus' example of Sisyphus may seem very abstract; however, I believe it is applicable to the real world and comparable to anybody that enjoys exercise. Let us take into consideration the following example. For anyone that has ever experienced a 'runner's high' they understand the brief moment where all the struggle was worth it. They can look back at their struggle and comprehend the reason why they struggle. This comprehension allows them to return to the struggle. Take a marathon runner for example. All the training and struggle that goes into preparation for a race is ultimately a futile practice. Yes, one may win the race and have a moment to look back at it with a smile and gratitude, but if the runner wants to continue winning, they must quickly return to the struggle of training. If one were to extrapolate such an act for eternity the act would seem completely absurd and futile, unless we imagine the runner to be happy at all moments of their practice. One wins a race only to enter the next. The happiness does not only come from the win, the futile struggle of the rigorous training goes hand in hand with the happiness of the win. This is exactly like Sisyphus after his descent and moment of happiness, he still has to return to his torment. Nevertheless, the torment is fundamentally a part of the happiness. We must imagine both the runner and Sisyphus happy with the struggle. We must see that their 'yes' towards returning to their struggle is a 'primordial yes' for, being and life itself. The question that remains for us to peruse is this: Does this 'primordial yes' arise from the absurd and is it truly absurd?

2. Not so Absurd!

Why would something struggle for something without first being endowed with passion for that struggle? No matter how dark or deep the struggle may be, the passion for that struggle always precedes the struggle itself. Recall Sisyphus, for Camus his moment of freedom came from his moment of recollection during his march back down the hill. During that time, he believed himself

to be in control of his fate and gave his absurd condition meaning. Now before he is able to give his situation meaning he has already been gifted with being, which seems to have value in itself. There seems to be a sort of passion for being that is hardwired into being itself and it ultimately reveals itself in an overdeterminate fashion. In other words, before you can determine life as absurd, life has already given you something that you cannot determine, namely being itself, and the fact that it has given you being means that this giving stems from an agapeic origin that has a sort of *passio essendi*. I will return to the idea of why this is agapeic later.

In order to better comprehend this concept, let us take a look at an excerpt from William Desmond entitled: *God and the Between: First Hyperbole – The Idiocy of Being*.

There is something surd about the “that it is,” for it is not self-explanatory. It happens, and does not explain itself. The question is whether this surd is absurd. If it were a mere surd, we would say, it is finally absurd. It is there, and either it makes no sense, or there is no further sense to be made. Either way, there is given being, finally in itself senseless and groundless. But what if there were a surd not absurd? Suppose the “that it is at all” is such a surd? Suppose God, as source of that surd happening, might also be a surd not absurd, and hyperbolic to the surd of finite happening as such? Of course, the language of the surd is deficient language, the language of a remainder, a residue. In fact, the “that it is” is no mere residue but given being as gloriously rich and enigmatic. It is this surplus of finite being that puts us in mind of the source of the given. What gives the surplus of happening of the between? This cannot be defined in terms of any determinate being within the happening of the given between; the source is other, but not other as such as to destroy the intimacy with the gift of being itself (Desmond 2008, 128-129).

The superfluity of being may lead us to conclude that being itself is totally absurd and arbitrary. Nonetheless, it is this very surplus of being that brings back to mind the origin of given being. Before we can conclude that it is absurd being has been gifted to us. The fact that we cannot fully make sense of the situation we find ourselves in, might indeed lead us to conclude that this is all just absurd. However, we do not have the first or last word when it comes to trying to make sense of it all. We are thrown into being and throughout our finite lives we try to make sense of it. Then soon enough all of our conclusions and definitions are quickly wiped away by our finitude. The fundamental point here is this: before we can create all of our determinations, theories, definitions, etc. we have been given something that is beyond our determinations and because it is beyond our capabilities of reason, we might call it absurd. We will get back to this idea in the following section, where we will see how existentialism cannot deal with the vicious circle of nihilism.

3. Modernity's Failure to Cope with Nihilism

The idea of redefining value and meaning via our own self-determinations is brilliant for giving your own life purpose and meaning; however, this does not escape the vice grip of nihilism. Ultimately, this is where philosophies such as that of Camus and Sartre fall short. They bring forth the notion of the absurd in an ingenious fashion. Nonetheless, they cannot remedy the nihilistic consequences that come from their philosophies. The redefinition of meaning via self-determinations ultimately gives way to nihilism by engulfing the other within the self. When we project our concepts of axiology onto the world, we begin defining nature. This often gives us the tendency to believe that we as a part of nature can define the whole of nature with concepts like Camus' absurdism. However, this is an audacious attempt to say the least, for what seems to be truly absurd is the idea that something that is a part of nature can define the whole of nature.

“For we are given to be before we give ourselves to be (Desmond 2008, 21).” Again, before we can begin to define nature as something absurd, we have been given something, namely being, that we cannot define. Attempting to define the whole of nature simply seems to be beyond our rational capabilities, and that is why we may come to the conclusion that nature is absurd and arbitrary. It is these types of attempts that create a sort of idolization of our own self-determinations. This idolization is what leads us back to nihilism. It strips the other and nature of its value and redefines it within its own self-determinations and ‘will to power’. Nature begins to be viewed as absurd when mediated through the idol of self-determination and we begin to show signs of amnesia towards the original givenness of being. The rebuilding of the world via our own projections of meaning and value is a slippery slope. It annihilates the value of the other, of nature, and of given being in one swift swoop. The outcome of this type of reasoning is always nihilism.

The last question I will address here is this: how can we remedy this without becoming ‘uncritically metaphysical’,⁵ so to speak, so that modernity may accept a conclusion that does not strip the world of its innate value? I believe the answer lies in a reinterpretation of Camus' primordial ‘yes’ and affirmation that all is well.

⁵ Vanden Auweele (2013) highlights modern philosophy's resistance towards metaphysics. “Modern philosophy has, according to Desmond, lost its porosity to a wondering and amazement that initially fueled its quest for truth. This has occurred as a consequence of a philosophical investigative strategy, mirrored to the positive sciences, that would only deal with questions that invite univocal answers, while all others are discarded as nonsensical (3).” Discarding these equivocal questions as nonsensical results in a philosophy that cannot avoid nihilism. Therefore, we must critically take into account these equivocal questions without simply writing them off as nonsensical.

4. Agapeic Yes! Why Agape?

Before I continue with exploring the agapeic yes and Desmond's solution to the problems at hand, I want to make it clear why I chose to remedy these problems with language that clearly has religious connotations. This connection between the agapeic yes and affirmation that all is well is a vital one, and at a primordial level I believe both authors are describing the same thing, namely; an elemental energy that has a sort of passion for being that is emanated throughout all being. Desmond certainly uses the agapeic yes in a religious context and one might say that this yes is a sort of leap of faith. Nonetheless, Camus' conclusion that all is well seems to share this leap in the sense that this conclusion arises from the confrontation with the absurd, or overdeterminacy of being, and via this confrontation makes a jump to concluding that all is well. Now one might think that this leap is irrational and cannot be reached via deductive reasoning; however, this does not seem to be a sound conclusion. Yes, the language of Desmond, and in my opinion even that of Camus' absurdism, appeals to metaphysics. Nevertheless, there is a route to speaking intelligibly about the absurdity of being that resists univocal and dialectical self-mediation. This route involves accepting the porous nature of our rationality. When we speak of the agapeic yes or come to the conclusion that 'all is well', what we seem to be doing is accepting a minimal credo of an energy that is overdeterminate and passionate for being. In other words, simply by being we accept, or rather, we participate in given being that is already full of value and meaning. Not only my value, but the value of the other and nature itself. By participating in being we project our own meaning onto the world, and we witness others doing the same. Everyone seems to participate in this game of projection, but we forget that before we can project any meaning, we are given a passionately charged primordial energy that exceeds our will to confine and univocally determine it.

"The agapeic 'yes' not only blesses with being, it blesses being: it is good to be (Desmond 2012, 139)." Before we can make any judgments or determinations about being, being has hurled itself onto us. Being has affirmed its own value and meaning that is beyond our determinations. It throws itself onto us via an agapeic yes. The agapeic yes is an affirmation towards the gift of being hardwired into being itself. Before we can make sense of it and judge whether we love or hate being in general it provides us with a drive and energy that we cannot fully comprehend. One can see given being as a sort of gift. We are given the gift of being that is beyond our rationale and before we can open the gift and judge whether we like it, hate it, or think it is absurd, it has been given to us in agapeic fashion from an agapeic origin.

“I conclude that all is well, says Oedipus, and that remark is sacred. It echoes in the wild and limited universe of man (*MS* 2018, 5).” This is indeed a sacred remark that bring us back to the agapeic origin. It opens the doors towards a porosity that is beyond oneself. When modern thought tries to shut off this porosity through self-mediation it creates a circle that engulfs the other through one’s own self-determinations. No gaps are allowed for other being. Transcendence and the other are dissolved in the radical affirmation of self. The self becomes the sole dictator and determining factor of being. The result of this is a world stripped of value and meaning. The only meaning that is left is that of the individual.

Wiping the world of its innate meaning seems to be an ‘absurd’ fall into nihilism. Nietzsche (1998) seems to have hit the nail on the head when he wrote: “man would rather will nothingness than not will (67).” In the case of Camus, it seems as though man would rather will to define something as absurd than accept it as being beyond our determinations. This seems to give them some sort of comfort and in turn allows them to absolve themselves from not knowing. Reasoning in this manner strips the world of all its value and meaning and defines the unknown and beyond through ourselves. The outcome is a circle that starts with the self and ends with self. This is the fatal flaw of these philosophies. There is no escaping nihilism in this way.

The ‘agapeic yes’ does not close off this circle or try to consume the world in self-determinations and univocity. It is not only a yes towards being it is an acceptance that allows the other to truly be without dissolving it in the self. It does not strip the world of its innate value, rather it gives value in being itself and recognizes the fact that we are ‘given to be before we can give ourselves to being’.

Conclusion

In the end, the source of the rise of depression and anxiety we are witnessing within our epoch seems to be mainly caused by 1) the endless void of meaninglessness brought forth by modernity's obsession with consumerism and payable pleasure, and 2) the search for answers that only permit univocal solutions⁶. Nonetheless, as we have seen this void of nihilism does not seem to be void of value and meaning at all.

⁶ “Modernity pushed a framework of scientific rationality upon philosophical reflection that invites discarding questions that resist univocal answers, such as the nature of the good and absolute transcendence (Vanden Auweele 2013, 4).”

Camus presented us with his notion of the absurd. The absurd allowed us to see the bizarre reality we find ourselves in. By acknowledging this absurdity, we can rebel and create our own purpose and reason in a world, that for Camus, remains silent in such matters. This is exactly what Camus' Sisyphus did with his futile situation. He rebelled against the gods and found happiness in his eternal 'punishment'. This happiness was a sort of 'yes' towards being that eventually allowed him to conclude that 'all is well'. However, the yes we saw from Camus seemed to be an incomplete, or rather too complete yes. It is a yes that started from the self and ended with the self. The result was a self-determination of the overdeterminate. It created a world devoid of innate meaning and value. The start and end point of this philosophy is nihilism.

In order to try to put a halt to this vicious nihilism we turned to Desmond's notion of the 'agapeic yes'. The outcome of this yes was not an annihilation of the other that simply engulfed the other within self. Rather, it was a yes that left open the equivocal other without stripping it of its value. This means being is not just put in the framework of our own definitions. There is a recognition of our porous nature that is respected and not self-mediated. The agapeic yes reminds us that we do not have the first or last say when it comes to defining nature. It allows us to see that a part of being cannot determine the whole of being. This gives way to an overdeterminate transcendence that has value and meaning in itself. The result is an abrupt halting of nihilism.

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