

Absurdity and the Leap of Faith

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Abstract

Albert Camus described the absurd as the conflict between man's continual search for meaning and his inability to find any meaning in a cold, indifferent universe. The focus of Absurdism pertains to the qualities of existence as they are prevalent in the physical realm of being. While Absurdism doesn't reject the possibility of a divine being, it states that we simply cannot know if there is anything past what we can observe with our senses. In order to elude the absurd, an individual may take a leap of faith and seize upon the possibility of a divine nature. The discussion of the leap of faith and its rationality is the prime focus of this essay. Dealing with the implications and the grounds on which it is acceptable to make a leap of faith, we utilize philosophical arguments and ideas from William James, Soren Kierkegaard, and Albert Camus to analyze the legitimacy of such an action. The scope of this essay deals with societal as well as personal implications for living with, or eluding the absurd, as well as why such a leap is necessary in some capacity in every individual's life.

Keywords: absurdism, leap of faith, rationality, Albert Camus, Soren Kierkegaard

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“Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Heb 11:1

Faith and hope symbolize a tether that reaches out and attempts to attach itself to that which it cannot grasp, all the while keeping us grounded in our human condition in the physical realm. Faith allows us to transcend the unknown which we've filled with stories, myths, creatures, and all our imagined happy endings. This faith is the body of every individual's perpetual quest for meaning—our jobs, the liver; our family, the heart; our hobbies, the intestines; our subjectivities, the rib cage; our ambition, the legs. Faith, similar to our bodies, is at our disposal. It is what we act upon the world with. While hope and faith may not be identical twins, I hold

¹ In this essay, 'rational' will be utilized to describe that which can be examined scientifically. I recognize that there is much more which can be debated about rationality, but for the purposes of my argument, the view of rationality that I briefly have explain here is sufficient for my arguments, though I will enter into a further dialogue which examines the 'rationality' of 'passional' decisions.

the belief that they are at least fraternal. If one's faith is devoid of hope, then they have disillusioned themselves into a false sense of "knowing". One may have *faith* in God, but, ultimately, on their death bed, we can be assured that their fingers will most likely be crossed, *hoping* that there truly is a light into which they can walk, rather than the strange darkness of nothingness. Is this faith which so many humans possess warranted? Is it rational?¹ Or, is man's quest for meaning fruitless?

Camus (1955) states, "This heart within me I can feel, 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" (p.19). In order to satiate our endless thirst for meaning, we are inclined to utilize reason in our justification for our beliefs in spiritual reality, but reason isn't capable of justifying those beliefs—reason exists within our current human condition, and cannot extend itself any further.

It is my stance that having faith in a spiritual reality is irrational, as the choice cannot be made utilizing human reason derived from intellect or science, but, in conjunction with that belief, I maintain that faith and hope are the only things available for individuals to reaffirm their subjective sense of self which assists and guides their being. In order to enact subjective potentiality an individual must act in accordance with their internal perception of realizing their own subjective potentiality. Only in doing this—creating your own faith geared toward your own subjective reality—can an individual come to the realization of the euphoria of their being. This process, an essential aspect of the human condition, is one which assists in transcending our material conditions—a leap of faith and passional decision not only warranted, but necessary and inescapable.

The Absurd

Albert Camus describes the absurd as a conflict; an opposition that one comes to face in their search for meaning in a cold universe devoid of any: "man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus, 1955, p. 28).

We see here, then, an individual who is an active agent continuously searching for meaning in a silent universe that consists of only seemingly

² An example of an objective truth would be that water freezes at 32 degrees Fahrenheit. An example of a subjective truth may be an individual's belief in a spiritual reality beyond what is accessible through ordinary experiences. It will be important to note these differences within the context of my argument.

meaningless phenomena. In this situation, Camus and Kierkegaard both suggest that the individual actor has only three options: suicide, a leap of faith, or facing the absurdity. Camus rules out suicide and a leap of faith as viable answers to the absurd. To Camus, we must live within our realm of known being. Past this physical realm we are unable to truly know anything, thus; it is rational to act only on what is available to us through our human experience. Camus exclaimed, "I do not want to found anything on the incomprehensible. I want to know whether I can live with what I know and with that alone" (Camus, 1955, p. 5). To concern oneself with that outside of our human condition is to betray the present. We may be so concerned with the idea of appeasing God in order to ensure our place in the afterlife that we negate the here and now, and it is only this moment in the present that we can ever truly be sure of. Hope ties us to the future and is only a means of eluding the absurd. To Camus, that is a tragic sin.

I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I cannot know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms. What I touch, what resists me — that I understand. And these two certainties — my appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle — I also know that I cannot reconcile them. What other truth can I admit without lying, without bringing in a hope I lack and which means nothing within the limits of my conditions? (Camus, 1955, p. 51)

This is where Camus departs from Kierkegaard's earlier philosophy. Kierkegaard believed in the idea of subjective truths and taking a leap of faith to attain such truths. Subjective truths are internalized feelings and values that one commits oneself to live by. It is then that an individual's subjective truths become externalized and incorporated into their actions. According to Camus, once the leap of faith is made, that is, once an individual develops faith in a spiritual reality, the absurd ceases to be absurd. The absurd becomes nothingness when it encounters the realm of the spiritual world, or, the sphere of faith, because the individual has

transcended Sisyphus' perpetual act of rolling a rock up a hill only to watch it fall back down and then having to push it up again. They now derive meaning from their subjective truths which have led them to a complex series of beliefs in a deity which exists outside of our known physical realm—they have rejected the realm of 'rational' thought by embracing a powerful passional nature. Still, though, the absurd may make itself present at any moment; "At any street corner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face" (Camus, 1955, p. 10). Individuals then, in Camus' philosophy, must sustain their faith, lest the world once again becomes absurd—a meaningless universe in which we are cast and set adrift.

The Leap of Faith

In the reality of our everyday lives, we act in an objectified universe². Society is constructed of human externalizations, which are the sum total of various individual's subjectivities. In being that society's construction is dependent on the externalization of humans' subjective beliefs and truths, it is safe to say that, in regards to the development of subjective truths, one must hold their passions in check and evaluate the implications of their beliefs. But, on what grounds is this possible? Is it possible to evaluate one's own beliefs rationally when the object in which one's faith is put is irrational in and of itself, or, at the very least, something that the existence of which is impossible to prove? In the face of absurdity, these individuals who have decided to take the leap of faith into a belief in spiritual reality have only their passions as evidence for those beliefs—are these passions enough to justify such a "leap"?

William Clifford, in his essay entitled, *The Ethics of Belief*, argues this point and states that, "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" (Clifford, 1877/ 2001, p. 85). Our beliefs, as our duty to mankind demands, should undergo intense scrutiny and never be accepted at face value, lest we become credulous as a people in order to avoid the absurd by adorning our everyday reality with "trinkets" of existence which we truly didn't earn.

*If a man, holding a belief which he was taught in childhood
or persuaded of afterwards, keeps down and pushes away any
doubts which arise about it in his mind, purposely avoids the*

reading of books and the company of men that call in question or discuss it, and regards as impious those questions which cannot easily be asked without disturbing it—the life of that man is one long sin against mankind (Clifford, 1877/ 2001, p. 85).

These trinkets merely come to serve as a false sense of security to compensate for that which the universe lacks. It may be argued that this false sense of security begins to treat our lives as nothing more than a means to an end. There are some certainly, who treat their lives as merely the passageway to another, more sacred life. I though, can find no sin more unforgivable than reducing one's life to a journey toward a vague premonition. By living for what is *now* we open our lives to a plethora of potentialities and possibilities; these "potentabilities" are situations and experiences we may miss when skirting through life in a sort of tunnel vision. By being open and accessible to that which surrounds us—that which we can touch, feel, and be certain of—we, in my and Camus' opinion, acknowledge the present in its fullest, most natural form. It is all we can know, surely; therefore, it is what we as acting, social beings should be most submerged in.

Time is continuous, each moment bequeathing itself onto the next, and in our quest for inherent meaning in all of life's occurrences we are merely compounding incoherent bits of reality to shape a picture which justifies and symbolizes the ends of our faith, and ultimately, our existence. This justification is sought through reason in order to rationalize reality—but reason, as previously mentioned, can only be utilized to illustrate that which can be understood in the human condition—therefore spiritual reality is out of the reach of reason. Thus, it may be that no belief in a spiritual reality can truly be made on rational grounds, but, as William James argues, there are times when we are faced with genuine options—choices that are "living, forced, and momentous"—in the face of which we must choose to believe or disbelieve based off our "passional nature" (Basinger, D., Hasker, W., Peterson, M., & Reichenbach, B. 2001)

Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do

not decide but leave the question open,” is itself a passionate decision—just like deciding yes or no—and attended with the same risk of losing the truth. (James, 1896/2001, p. 87)

If choosing to make a leap of faith is a passionate decision, then surely choosing to live despite the absurdity of the world is also a passionate decision. Both these decisions include a dedication of oneself to a particular lifestyle, both, the acceptance of absurdity and the rejection of absurdity, imply a genuine option.

A genuine option is generally defined as “one in which the hypothesis has some plausibility for the potential believer, there is no possibility of not choosing (i.e. the choice to withhold judgment is, in effect, the same as a rejection of a belief), and the stakes are high” (Wildman, 1994). We see in our example of the leap of faith the “high stakes”, or grand implications, of such a genuine option. As James stated, when a decision is unable to be made on intellectual grounds, it is left to our passionate nature. Just as we may choose to make the leap of faith or not make the leap of faith; choosing neither is still a passionate decision, as each decision serves as a step toward constructing a subjective truth which then serves to define us as individuals. We can determine then that in the face of a genuine option, a decision will be made on behalf of the individual whether they decide or not.

Thus, when faced with a genuine option, how is one to react to such a pressing, monumental decision? The passion which drives the inquisitive nature of human beings to such depths must be complemented with a similar passion for truth—not just conjecture. An aspiration for truth necessitates an incredulous disposition in the aspiring persons. Not only must we explore the realm of faith incredulously, we must do so as we are and with what is available to us. In a collection of letters compiled by Alexander Dru (2003), Kierkegaard states;

In order to swim one takes off all one's clothes--in order to aspire to the truth one must undress in a far more inward sense, divest oneself of all one's inward clothes, of thoughts, conceptions, selfishness etc., before one is sufficiently naked. (no. 1395)

Kierkegaard suggests here the importance of such a journey. Kierkegaard wisely implies that the “truth” we so adamantly search for lies outside our ready-made conceptions of our understanding of the world in which we exist. Subjective truths are continuous and always in the process of becoming so long as a person continues to exist. These truths are what we use to construct our reality, but I argue that when said truths are used as a platform to propel one into the realm of absolute truths, they are insufficient. This, I argue, is because “the truth”—if ever ascertainable to human beings—is something that will only be understandable in human terms. We experience the “truth” through primary, lived everyday human experience. We are unable to comprehend the “truth” as it may exist outside the absurdity of our world. If one is to aspire to the truth, their lens and daily narration—which are shaped and guided by internalized subjectivities—are the only sources of experience through which any truth could be understood. These lenses are arbitrary, subjected to human reason and naïve justifications of why that which exists *exists*.

With that, is there any truth outside of our absurd world which is worth aspiring to? The construction of a “truth” or “inherent meaning” based on an agglomeration of bits of incoherent reality which we sort out and assign meaning to seems outlandish. The divine truths we seek to create are extensions of our everyday human experiences and feelings of despair. The “truth” is a *justification* for what we experience, rather than an *acceptance* of what we experience. The search betrays the absurd—it transcends us into an idealistic interpretation of our seemingly meaningless existence, an interpretation that eases our anxieties and anguish. In Alexander Dru’s (2003) compilation of Kierkegaard’s letters, Kierkegaard notes, “You cannot have the truth in such a way that you catch it, but only in such a way that it catches you” (no. 1395). If an absolute truth is not something that our inquisitions can ever bring about, is it worth searching so obstinately for? In the following, I answer both yes and no.

Conclusion

I, as an acting social agent, understand and sympathize with those desperate for a truth which transcends their physical existence. My rationale for encouraging a continual search for a divine truth and

making a leap of faith into such truths is embedded in this sympathy. It is here that I re-state my belief that having faith in a spiritual reality is irrational, as the choice cannot be made utilizing human reason derived from intellect or science, but; if one is compelled by a passion they cannot quell—a passion which through rumination, they have come to know well—then a leap of faith is justifiable in that it brings one happiness and meaning that the *absurd* cannot. As long as individuals construct the basis of their beliefs on incredulous grounds, rather than accepting blindly that which should scrupulously be examined, and as long as their leap of faith does not encroach on the rights and freedoms of others, then such a passional decision, in my opinion, is not only warranted, but necessary and inescapable.

In answering “no” to whether or not a divine truth is worth searching for even if it is unattainable, I examine a statement by author Douglas Adams: “Isn’t it enough to see that a garden is beautiful without having to believe that there are fairies at the bottom of it too?” (Adams, 1997, p. 107) As humans, we tend to have a propensity for chalking up that which is beautiful to the creation of the Divine. As we subjectively interpret the world, we find that our interpretations are not enough to justify the existence of something as beautiful, as say, a garden. We find it necessary to fill in the blanks, rather than just living within the blanks. It is here where I find great significance in the argument against a leap of faith. This obstinate task of assigning meaning to everything that we cannot understand betrays the essence of what I argue to be our very existence. It is not acts of wondering I oppose (it is in wondering that we find anything at all), but rather the interruption of those sublime acts that occur when we continually attempt to construct a meaning that transcends us and what we can understand through human reason. I believe that it is of utmost importance for humans to live and act in order to expand our accumulation of experiences, which help us to further understand the world in which we live—or, at least our place in it in accordance with the rest of society. And, as equally important, it helps us further the construction of our subjective experience and being.

Therefore, I take the stance that the leap of faith into a spiritual world can act as a hindrance to our lived human experience, as well as a fitting complement to our journey. If one’s faith removes an individual from

being cognizant of the absurdity of their current condition and directs their lives in such a way to appease a vague premonition, they are, in my opinion, committing a grave sin. If, on the other hand, an individual utilizes their faith to enrich their experience here on Earth because they are unable to look at a beautiful garden without believing that there are fairies at the bottom of it (Adams, 1997), I find the leap of faith to be acceptable as it brings that individual meaning that the absurd cannot.

My promotion of the construction of subjective realities and truths is one which shouldn't be regarded as a means to transcend the absurd, but a manner in which one can *live* despite and along with the absurd. Subjective truths should act in such a way to inform that which we can act immediately upon in our physical realm. I do not believe as Camus did that a leap of faith negates the absurd; rather, a leap of faith necessitates a subjective construct in which one may live along with the absurd, but on and within their own subjective frameworks.

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