



ABSURDITY AND EMPTINESS: A VOYAGE OF THOUGHT OF HUMAN EXISTENCE FROM WEST TO EAST

NANDANA.RR

RESEARCH ASSISTANT, SREE SANKARACHARYA UNIVERSITY OF SANSKRIT, KALADY.

ABSTRACT

The Search for the meaning of human existence is always been an intriguing factor in all philosophical schools. Every philosophical school approached the thought with a different strategy, though some succeeded in bringing out captivating ones, which led to the foundation of a man's major existential crisis. In the probe of finding the truth, the French existential philosopher, Albert Camus, came up with a discrete outlook of life, and called it 'absurd', which brought a lot of heed between the philosophers to inquire truth. For him life was absurd and man was living in a den of expectations which ultimately leads to a philosophical suicide. During the journey for the quest of meaning, from west, eastern philosophical traditions, also had clear-cut principles to make man's existence meaningful, though their approach towards the truth differed. Zen Buddhism had a very unique outlook on man's existential crisis, though the methods and comprehension were more towards man's inner self. The theory of 'emptiness' and various Buddhist principles make the school distinct and the question of man's quest to find the truth of life's existence takes a turn of ecstasy.

KEYWORDS

Absurdity, emptiness, existential, suicide, substantiality, nonsense, *sūnyatā*, *kōans*, *satori*.

INTRODUCTION

"What is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying"¹ says Albert Camus, in his work *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* on his thoughts of life, death and absurdity. Absurdity, for Camus, comes with the realization that the world is not rational. This irrational perspective arises from the fact that the human condition is characterized by the probability of suffering and certainty of death, which, humans cannot accept rationally. The word 'absurd' itself is elucidated in a very intricate manner in Camus's work. He, nevertheless, uses the biblical metaphor to define the notion of absurdity: "the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land"² which unfolds the profound revelation that man is being denied. His philosophical aim was to examine man's existential troubles and how man tends to strive for the meaning of life and if it is worth living for. His idea of absurdism begins from this single thought of life being a struggle where man's quest is to find the meaning of his existence. He reiterated that life is absurd and portrayed the world as unreasonable, as he says that there is a "...longing for happiness and reason. The absurd is born from this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."³ He examined concrete ontological arguments through his works and thereby questioned man's will to probe the meaning of his life. Camus's idea of absurdism can be juxtaposed with an Eastern philosophical principle put forth by Japanese Zen Buddhist tradition.

The Zen tradition goes back to the 5th century which began in China as Ch'an, and by the 13th century, it had spread to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. It flourished in Japan with various schools and great masters. Being an offshoot of Indian Mahayana Zen Buddhism highlights meditation, emptiness, liberation and many more sublime principles. According to Zen philosophy, all things in the universe are manifestations of the mind, and impermanent. The major causes of misery human beings are encircled by are no less than deep-rooted ignorance. When a man has ignorance, he is non-enlightened and he is bound to the cycle of birth and death. If man has to escape this cycle, he has to get enlightened by being aware of self-created ignorance. Zen tradition has therefore a unique structure compared to other Buddhist principles on the path of enlightenment. Each Zen school⁴ has a unique method to disseminate its philosophical standpoints through various literary genres such as *haiku*, *goroku*, and *kōans*.⁵

Zen's philosophy of how man can find answers to existential problems is always directed internally. Intrinsic therapy is what is necessary for a man to tackle life. Zen masters also address the problems of meaninglessness and purposelessness. Their pedagogical methods, however, lead one to achieve not a pre-destined goal but a world of contentment. All these issues have been beautifully depicted in Zen literature through several examples. The beauty of Zen is the way the spiritual connection is made through *koans* and stories which make the comprehension of the philosophy and culture sustainable. What follows in the discussion is why man blindly believes that the truth proposed is bi-valued propositional logic, which always depicts reality as either/or. We here explore the possibility to transcend the limitations of bi-valued propositional logic. We examine how absurdity and nonsense create a way-over

with one another and thereby, conduct a comparative study in both Western and Eastern tradition in philosophy and analyse how both traditions approach the ideas of absurdity and nonsense. We inspect which one will be beneficial for the existence of mankind.

DISCUSSION

In a bi-valued system of logic, there is always a set of rules we tend to follow in order to find the abstract truth. This is not the case always. Following a set of rules and reaching a particular truth is inadequate for those philosophers who pursue the multi-dimensions of truth and reality. A reader who analyses a fiction will always have a perspective of his/her own, and for him/her the truth might differ every single time and that truth will differ from person to person. This is the reason why human beings do not depend on certain rules and regulations to come up with a solution whenever they get entangled in difficult problems. Man has his own truth which may be different for each situation. Hence, while carrying our bi-valued system, we come across contexts in philosophy, where some doctrines transcend those limitations. Although we come across several philosophical ideas in both Western and Eastern schools, we have various philosophical thoughts which create a bridge between both the schools. Existential conjecture of Albert Camus's philosophy of absurdism arises from a single thought, what is the meaning of my existence? He begins his inquiry with the declaration, "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide."⁶ Rarely does suicide take place through reflection, sometimes it is not the obvious reasons that are the cause rather it is the non-plausible reasons. Consider suicide as a confession, a confession that life is too hard to understand and accept or, in other words, life is not worth living for. Deeply observing the fact that, Camus's thought of suicide is pin-pointing to the idea that, this confession arises due to the feeling of absurdity.

So how can we link suicide as a solution to absurdity? Life is profound and it has a meaning and purpose. We believe in this statement and we struggle to defend that life is meaningful. But, when we examine our daily actions, it has become habitual and pointless. As Camus said, "rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm."⁷ This shows how blank and mechanical one's life has become. Our desires, work, passion, enthusiasm, all turns instinctive as times encapsulates us and thereby, life becomes absurd from this perspective. Absurdity for a man is a feeling of exile. Man fills his life with dreams and hopes of a possible future and perseveres to make a path for it. But gradually when he understands that the world is not favouring for what he has been preparing, man suddenly begins to question his life. "But one day," Camus reminds us, "the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement."⁸ In fact, this is the beginning of philosophy. The meaning of life and the absurdity of life thus turn out to be a philosophical issue.

Camus analyses the philosophies of many existentialist thinkers who attacked the supremacy of reason. He was unhappy with their philosophies for they contain some sort of religious solutions towards which he maintained an apathetic feeling all the time. He discussed the views of Søren Kierkegaard, Edmund Husserl, Lev Shestov, Karl Jaspers, and Martin Heidegger and admitted their contributions to the analysis of reason but he proclaimed that all of them are tinged with escaping towards religion and hope. He calls it philosophical suicide. A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world and this worldly reciprocation is what makes man rethink his existence. Hence, when the world responds to his efforts negatively man's exile is without remedy. He is deprived of the memory of a lost home, a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and its setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity and this creates vagueness in man's understanding of life. This exile is what Camus brings out. This absurdity brings man out of his illusions. When man understands this absurdity and when he starts embracing it, the solution turns out to be a suicide. For Camus, man lives his life to the fullest in search of the answer of whether life is meaningless or not, in a quest to find meaning of life. Another way is suicide. Those who have committed it must have known the answer for this absurdism because the insane character of daily agitation and uselessness of suffering might have given them an outlook on this absurdity.

Albert Camus was a philosopher who was always in search of the profundity of absurdity in life. He analysed this theme in different literary mediums: through the novel *The Stranger*, through the play *Caligula*, and the Long Essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. For him a novel is "never anything but a philosophy expressed in images. And in a good novel the philosophy has disappeared into the images."⁹ *The Myth of Sisyphus* provides the foundation of his philosophical reflection on absurdity and its multiple consequences.

When we closely examine the work *The Myth of Sisyphus*, beginning of absurdism starts with a question and Camus want to provide another outcome in contrast with his starting point. A place where we do certain actions of our desires and if it never gets fulfilled, absurdism becomes a silhouette throughout our life, which makes us rethink every decision we took, leading to a pessimistic approach where suicide turns out to be as a solution. Here, Camus wants to say that, rather than accepting absurdism and drowning in its sanity, we could make differences in our perspective. Man can never deal all his life situations rationally. Rational outlook, though it sounds easy to understand, makes it more difficult to make it possible. Hence, performing any action, if man adds values into it, it is creation rather than running behind lucidity of every problem. Embodying value into our desire makes us look world in a different perspective and absurdity can be viewed differently. Hence, by giving value to the worldly matter we give meaning to the world. Rather than going behind the meaning of life and its consequences, it is how one creates a meaning to life. As Albert Camus fictionally represents the Greek tale of Sisyphus, where, his action of cheating death, made him roll up a boulder up the hill which only will roll back. But, finally, Sisyphus accepts the fact that, even though there is no meaning in pushing the boulder up the hill, he does that forever no matter what comes forth. That is what man makes out of his absurdism. Here, Camus's explanation of absurdity can be concluded into different levels of truth such as absurdity as a repository of the meaning of life, and suicide as an answer to the meaninglessness of life. But here also some questions remain unresolved: can suicide provide any guarantee that one would really overcome the meaninglessness of life? Can it be beneficial to either oneself or humanity or both? Here comes the relevance of Zen Buddhist analysis of sense and nonsense and the doctrine of emptiness.

Nyaya logicians in ancient India claimed that anything that we can think of can be portrayed in words.¹⁰ They even regarded universal or generality (*sāmānya*) as a distinct objective reality which necessitates the articulation of any particular thing. A cow, for instance, is called a cow because it inheres 'cow-ness' and before knowing the particular (*viśeṣa*) of a cow we must recognize it's universal. Having refuted this extreme realistic contention, Dignāga, the founder of Buddhist logic and his schoolmen state that

universals are mental constructs (*kalpanāpoḍham*) and hence cannot be accepted as real which is particular or thing-in-itself (*sva-lakṣaṇa*) existing only for a moment (*kṣaṇa*). What we call sense and nonsense are in fact not objective realities but mental constructs or thought-forms. One who claims that his assertion is sensible and its counter position is senseless does not know that both are stemming from imaginative faculties of different individuals. Zen masters thus often remind their students not to get tangled in the mesh of words, ideas, concepts, sense, and nonsense. D. T. Suzuki observes that rather than becoming a slave to these mental constructs one must be “aware of the role they play in human experience, and assigns them to the place to which they properly belong.”¹¹ It must be noted that reality for man is always projected. It is constructed with sentimentality, adhesions towards different circumstances, daily-life crisis, plethora of dogmas, the morality, the social behaviour and the list can go on and on. Man, after some time will explode with all those thoughts boiling inside of him.¹² All those frustrations, emotions, duties are bubbling up to the surface. As the Buddha states, “we are the products of our thoughts”¹³ and “the world is governed by our minds.”¹⁴ So, as his thoughts grow, the more he sinks into lunacy. Here, man develops different methods to overcome this stage, and when we provide a Buddhist outlook, the path to that will always be intrinsic.

To travel intrinsically, one must first acknowledge the fact that, life is always a puzzle. Some live through it with, some survive, and some just give up. In any case it appears so tiring. Why? If we look at this issue from the perspective of Buddhist doctrine of *śūnyatā* or emptiness, we will have a different approach. Emptiness does not mean nothingness or nihilism.¹⁵ It is non-substantialism or non-essentialism. Nagarjuna in his magnum opus, *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*, states that *śūnyatā* is nothing but dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*).¹⁶ The basic position of Nagarjuna is that there is no *svabhāva* or self-nature in the world since that would place everything in non-causal conditions:

“*Svabhāvād yadi bhāvānām sad-bhāvam anupaśyasi,
ahetu-pratyayān bhāvāms tvam evam sati paśyasi*”¹⁷

He explicitly states that *svabhāva* is *akṛtimah* (not created) and *nirapekṣa paratra* (nonrelative to others).¹⁸ That which is not created is substantial and thus has intrinsic property. So, everything that is causally generated is devoid of any intrinsic property or essence called *svabhāva*.¹⁹ We do not perceive anything in this world that arises without causal conditions (*hetu-pratyayas*); nor do we perceive anything which has substantiality. A table, for example, contains non-table elements like tree, cloud, sand, carpenter, and so on.²⁰ There is no table qua table. The ‘essence’ of table is thus an imagination, a mental construct. There is no table as ‘essence’. The Buddhist doctrine of *śūnyatā* does not endorse any such essences.

If this is the case, then no life situation is incompatible with anything whatsoever. Paradoxes, illogicality, and contradictions are therefore not to be treated as such since they do not implicate any substantiality. Human problems, in this sense, are emotional layers that do not contain any substantial stuff and an experiential understanding alone could resolve them. This is the reason why Bodhidharma, the First Patriarch of Zen Buddhism, when asked by his disciple Hui-k’o to pacify his mind, told him that he would pacify it if he brings it. Hui-k’o could not, because that mind had already gone!²¹

Nothing is absurd if it does not contain any substantiality. The dogmatic clinging of human mind itself is a kind of clinging to a supposed substantiality. The less the mind clings to the notion of substantiality the less the world appears to be absurd. An experiential understanding of the Buddhist doctrine of *śūnyatā* thus becomes an antidote to the problems of absurdity raised by Camus in his writings. A Zen master is said to be such an experienced person and is not at all reluctant to accommodate any seeming incongruity. Zen masters, in fact, want their listeners to overcome the pitfalls of substantiality through mind-blowing exercises like *kōans* and *mundos*; that is why Zen literature is a repository of seeming paradoxes and illogical statements.

Human beings are constantly intrigued with their thoughts. According to Zen, our mind should always be detached from the circumstances we undergo. It should never play with our mind. So when we live this life, in search of meaning, sometimes we have to interpret it in many different ways in order for us to survive. We always try to make a sense in life. We always try to prove a meaning or a purpose. Hence, like the cycle of life, waking, eating, working, sleep, the same pattern day by day, makes it mechanical. This mechanical life brings out depression, anxiety, and other pathological states. Zen reminds the modern man that all these issues arise from a deep rooted cognitive error that there is some substantial or essential meaning or purpose in life. If one had been free from the bewitchment of ‘essence’ in each moment of his life, there would have been no habitual pattern like “rising, streetcar, four hours in the office...”

The endless search for a meaning and purpose in life is in fact a search for a metaphysical essence/substance. Since everything is causally related to everything there cannot be a fixed purpose or meaning in life. One has to live each moment in its fullness without expecting any preordained essence or substance. Eihei Dōgen (1200-1253), the founder of Soto Zen Buddhism, had to confront an existential crisis when he was a Tendai novice in Japan. This was his problem: if all sentient beings are already enlightened why then did all Bodhisattvas practice so assiduously? This problem contains a subtle distinction between ends and means. Practice is the means; enlightenment is the end. The moment this Zen master realized that there is nothing to be attained he declared that “practice and realization are one and the same”.²² *Zazen* itself is *satori*.

Zen theory of life, unlike Camus, is different. Life is absurd for Camus and this absurdity destroys all meaning in life. Absurdity is the acceptance of the togetherness of contradictory entities. Since no thing contains an ‘essence’ there would really be no contradiction or paradox, according to Zen. Meaning of life is as different as the ‘essence’ conceived by each individual and life is manifested in its abundant possibilities in him who comprehends this. This is the real freedom Zen Buddhism provides for its practitioners. It is not restrained by any logical principle and never contains any subtle trace of absurdity either. It rather fulfils each moment with laughter and dance. This is the secret behind the smile of the Buddha and the roaring laughter of Kaśyapa and other Zen masters. Zen calls it the experience of emptiness or *śūnyata*. Camus’s philosophy does not seem to comprehend this *śūnyata* dimension of life as is evident from Caligula’s declaration to terrifying Caesonia: “I know now that nothing, nothing lasts,”²³. This led him to the realization that the “process of becoming a man”²⁴ is so cruel and horrible experience!

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, comparing both Camus's absurdity and Zen theory, we can say that, Zen way of perceiving life and the internal well-being is better for mankind. Being an emotional being with thoughts and perceptions, man has to find a way out. Life would be worse as one tends to sink into absurdity. The meaning, purpose, and the destiny of everything can be viewed through a very different perspective through Zen teachings. Zen is only concerned with direct experience of man, which makes it more acceptable. Although both Camus and Zen do not see any inflexible essence or meaning in life the approach of the latter is conducive to happiness and contentment rather than the boredom and absurdity of the former. Even though the steps are difficult and it may take time to attain an outlook like Zen, if attained, that discipline will remain the solution of every existential crisis of man through his entire life time.

NOTES:

1. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, p. 4.
2. Ibid. p. 5.
3. Ibid. p. 21.
4. There are mainly three different schools of Buddhism, Soto, Rinzai, and Obaku. The first two are prominent; the latter is unpopular.
5. *Haiku* is a genre of Japanese poetry indirectly associated with Zen Buddhism; *Goroku* is the 'recorded sayings' of individual Zen masters; *Koans* are the pedagogic device of Zen masters to train the students in transcending the dualistic thinking patterns.
6. Albert Camus, Op. cit. p. 3.
7. Albert Camus, Op. cit. p. 10.
8. Albert Camus, Op. cit. p. 13.
9. Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, p. 199.
10. S. Kuppuswami Sastri, *A Primer of Indian Logic According to Annambhatta's Tarkasamgraha*, p. 5.
11. D.T. Suzuki, *Living By Zen*, p. 17.
12. That is why the Buddha compares it with fire in the 'Fire Sermon' of 'Adittapariyāya Sutta' of *Samyutta Nikāya* 35.28.
13. 'Manopubbangama dhammā manosettha manōmaya,' *Dhammapada* 1.
14. "Cittena niyati lōka," 'Cittasuttam', *Samyutta Nikāya* 1.39.
15. Unlike Friedrich Nietzsche's radical nihilism – "the conviction of an absolute untenability of existence" (*The Will to Power*, p. 9) – the Madhyamaka Buddhist account of *śūnyavāda* is not at all nihilism, even though many people including some great scholars have misconstrued it as such. A Madhyamika holds the Middle Way between eternalism (*śāsvatavāda*) and nihilism (*uccheda-vāda*) as Nagarjuna clearly asserts: "Astīti śāsvati dr̥ṣṭīr̥nāstītyucchedadar̥śanam tenantadvayanirmuktō dharmo 'yam deśitastvaya" (*Acintyāstava*, 22).
16. "Yah pratityasamutpādah śūnyatam tam pracakṣāmahe" *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24:18.
17. Nagarjuna. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24: 16.
18. Ibid. 15:2.
19. Everything is causally related: *idam sati, ayam bhavati*.
20. Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh explains this in his commentary on the *Prajnaparamita Hridaya Sutra*. See *The Heart of Understanding*, Full Circle, New Delhi (2005), 41.
21. *Mumonkan*, Case 41. Katsuki Sekida, trans.
22. Eihei Dogen, *Shobogenzo*, trans. Norman Waddell and Masao Abe, p.19.
23. Albert Camus, *Caligula and Other Three Plays*, p. 71.
24. Ibid. 25.

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