

Philosophical Suicide in Education: What Camus can teach us

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Abstract

Camus takes suicide to be the most important of all philosophical questions. It is a bold starting point, one that has received much attention. Camus was, however, concerned with two types of suicide: physical and philosophical. I concentrate on the latter without neglecting the former, to bring out the relationship between them, and the implications this relationship holds for education; namely, the promise of the creation of lucid individuals.

Keywords: Albert Camus, David E Denton, Hank S Weddington, Lucidity, Philosophical Suicide, The Absurd, Transformative Education

Introduction

David E. Denton (1964) notes, 'it is true that the moral philosophy of Albert Camus has had considerable influence on literary and political thought. The question now becomes, does the moral philosophy of Camus have relevance for education?' (p. 99). By positing the absurd, as the unreasonable fit between epistemology and ontology, between what we think and how our thinking maps onto the world, Camus was in a sense getting to the heart of what it means to be human, and what it means to be human, arguably, is the question at the heart of educational philosophy. Embedded in the conflict of World War II, Camus (1991) saw the reduction of humanity to reason in the suffering that surrounded him; the suffering too often inflicted by those who were less than human, those that 'could not be persuaded to stop because they were so sure of themselves, because it is not possible to persuade an abstraction' (p. 118). He spoke of the need to counter the mechanistic certainty of rule-based systems of politics and ethics with human emotion. For 'who can weigh the greatest conquests of reason or of force against the

sufferings they represent, if his heart is blind to the simplest form of sympathy and his mind averse to all justice!’ (p. 13).

Just as Camus spoke of the need for emotion in politics and ethics, Denton spoke of the need for emotion in education. Drawing on Camus’ philosophy, Denton (1963) sought to expand the task of education from the development of humans to the development of moral humans; moral in the Camusian sense of the word, meaning recognition of limits.

The one major objective of education will no longer be to produce primarily a rational man or social animal; it will no longer be, as the Educational Policies Commission would have it, to discover the values inherent in rationality; rather, if we take our cue from Camus, education will have a new primary objective: to produce the moral individual—moral because, in the face of the absurd, he lucidly lives the philosophy of limits. (p. 127)

Denton concludes that to create such a person creates the need for a method, one to be found in Camus’ adaptation of Cartesian doubt; one ‘which demonstrates the necessary relationship between feeling and cognition’ (p. 127). Building on Denton, in this paper, I illustrate what I take to be Camus’ method; that of lucidity. I will explicate both what it is and what it is not.

Prior to Denton’s (1963, 1964, 1967) works there was a lack of attention given to the educational aspects of Camus’ philosophy, moral or otherwise. Since then, there has been a spate of publications,¹ including a special edition of *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Volume 45, Issue 11, entitled ‘Education, Ethics and Existence: Camus and the Human Condition’.² While the articles in this edition do not, as Roberts, Gibbons and Heraud (2013) point out, ‘pretend to present a unified picture of Camus and his significance for education’ (p. 1087), they do offer interesting educational perspectives on aspects of Camus’ individual works. All of the articles ‘address, either directly or indirectly, the problem of “existence”: the question of how we understand ourselves, give meaning to life and make our way in a seemingly absurd world’

¹ See also Oliver (1973), Greene (1973), Götz (1987), Marshall (2007, 2008), Roberts (2008a,b), Curzon-Hobson (2003, 2013, 2014, 2017), Roberts, Gibbons & Heraud (2013a).

² See Curzon-Hobson (2014); Gibbons (2013a,b,c,d); Heraud (2013), Roberts (2013a,b); Roberts, Gibbons & Heraud (2013b).

(p. 1087).³ In contrast, Denton was the first to consider the educational implications of Camus' philosophy writ large; firstly, and more extensively in his PhD thesis (1963), and later in his article 'Camus: Philosopher of moral concern' (1964), and finally in his book *The Philosophy of Albert Camus* (1967).⁴ A more recent example, is Hank S. Weddington's (2007) article, 'The Education of Sisyphus: Absurdity, Educative Transformation, and Suicide', in which he attempts to adapt the tenets of Camus' philosophy to education by examining the idea of suicide as a metaphor for transformative education.

In a recent article entitled 'The Experience of Strangeness in Education' (Curzon-Hobson, 2017), and book, *Albert Camus and Education* (Hobson, 2017a), Aidan (Curzon-)Hobson draws attention to an article I co-authored that offers 'guidelines for teachers to facilitate the education of lucid individuals' (Burgh & Thornton, 2016, p. 3); an article he links to the ideas in Weddington's article. He sums up our position as follows:

Their position is that strangeness, managed in a certain way and balanced within existing pedagogical frameworks, has a new potential to empower the learning space. An idea they cite from Weddington (2007) who talks of an education characterised by 'perpetual suicide'. (Curzon-Hobson, 2017, p. 125)

Hobson correctly identifies the overarching idea of our article, however, while we do acknowledge Weddington in the same way I have above, we do not draw on his ideas. Indeed, in this paper, I will argue that Weddington's adaptation of Camus' work is inherently problematic, before returning to the work of Denton to establish what I consider to be a more fruitful starting point for an educational adaptation of Camus' philosophy. I contend that Weddington's application of lucidity is, indeed, a misappropriation of the concept of lucidity that results in what Camus wanted to prevent, namely, 'philosophical suicide'. If Camus is correct that philosophical suicide is a fundamental choice that stands before all of us, and that the consequences of choosing it are severe, not only for the self but for society at large, then I argue, the concept of lucidity, the counterpoint to philosophical suicide, as Camus intended it, needs to be a goal of education.

³ For a detailed description of the recent use of Camus philosophy in education literature see Hobson (2017a,b).

⁴ 'No studies, however, have been written, prior to this one, on either the education of Camus or the bearings of his thought upon education' (Denton, 1963, p. v).

Denton (1967) utilised Camus' philosophy of the absurd to 'claim that the central purpose of education is to develop lucid individuals' (p. 99). For Camus, lucidity is the understanding of the world as divided between the human desire to find certainty in the world and the indifference to our desire we find there. Put simply, it is the *elucidation* of the absurd. Weddington (2007) also draws heavily on the idea of lucidity. However, unlike Denton, he argues against the human capacity for sustained lucidity as Camus envisioned it, instead opting for a 'rhythmic churning of tension and release, concern and complicity, suspension and resolution, lucidity and suicide as constituting a self-perpetuating form of education' (p. 122). Weddington admits that his interpretation of Camus' philosophy is in direct contradiction and justifies it on the basis that he does 'not think any of us, including Camus, are brave enough to live without reprieve from the absurd' (p. 122). I contend that his claim, and the line of reasoning that follows, is problematic and unnecessary for an effective adaptation of Camus' philosophy to education. As Weddington draws his understanding of Camus primarily from *The Myth of Sisyphus*, I begin by suggesting a possible reason why Camus famously started his exploration of the absurd with physical suicide. I follow with a critical analysis of Weddington's article, concluding that his adaptation of Camus leaves him open to the charge of Camusian philosophical suicide. To further explore the notion of philosophical suicide, the subsequent section delves into Camus' (1995) extended essay 'Reflections on the Guillotine'. I conclude with a brief explanation of the direction in which Denton pushed Camus and why I believe such a direction to be vital for education.

Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Suicide and the Absurd

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus (1977) illustrates absurdity in the plight of Sisyphus, a being condemned by the gods to struggle to push a boulder up a mountain, only to watch it roll back down again, and descending after it, to begin again, in an endless cycle of struggle and release. According to Camus, this cycle parallels the human struggle to find meaning or understanding of life's purpose; a struggle that is inevitably met with the disappointment of universal silence. Sisyphus knows his fate, he knows the why of his existence, an eternity of the same action is his punishment, and he can name his punisher. In this way, his situation differs from ours; we cannot know the why in the same way he could, we do not know our fate, and we have many

reasons to doubt that such a thing exists. Humans can, however, with some certainty expect to die sooner or later, but before that happens most of us may also expect to be happy at times and suffer at other times, and this is a fate of a kind.⁵ To make any sense of a topic such as the meaning of life, we must generalise, however, it is the everyday particulars that fill in the time between birth and death. Many people just get on with life; they focus on the everyday and leave the grander scheme of things to itself. Others search for meaning in direct contradiction to the knowns of existence, in the unknowable; following a desire to know the unknowable, to make finite sense of an infinite universe, they impose meaning on it. They have faith, or as Camus calls it, unfounded 'hope' that the universe will unfold along the lines of their beliefs and reasoning. Speaking of certain existential philosophers, he writes:

in a closed universe limited to the human, they deify what crushes them [the absurd] and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them. That forced hope is religious in all of them [...] Nothing logically prepares this reasoning. I can call it a leap. (p. 36)

Camus resists such hope to demonstrate to us the absurdity of our attempts to make the world reasonable: 'For me the sole datum is the absurd' (p. 34); the sole truth in a universe of constructed fictions. The absurd for Camus 'is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation' (p. 33). It is the gap between our desire to know the world, to find comfort, reason and certitude in it, and the indifference to our desires we find in the world when we look with lucid clarity upon existence.

Committed to the consequences of his method of extrapolating from the axiom of the absurd, Camus, in a sense, staked his life on the pursuit of an answer to what he thought was the only truly serious philosophical question, a question he deemed most urgent due to the severity of its consequences, that of 'whether life is or is not worth living' (p. 11).⁶ Both Matthew Sharpe (2015) and Matthew Lamb (2011) argue that Camus embodies the idea of 'philosophy as a way

⁵ We cannot know our fate with certainty, however, as we will see in the section entitled 'The Death Penalty as a Form of Philosophical Suicide', mechanist laws can leave us with greater certainty than normal, and this certainty can be a form of suffering.

⁶ 'There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide' (Camus, 1977, p. 11).

of life' (p. 561) and that his philosophy should be read in a way commensurate with an understanding of this conviction (p. 562). As Camus (1977) put it:

If I hold to be true that absurdity that determines my relationship with life, if I become thoroughly imbued with that sentiment that seizes me in face of the world's scenes, with that lucidity imposed on me by the pursuit of a science, I must sacrifice everything to these certainties and I must see them squarely to be able to maintain them. Above all, I must adapt my behavior to them and pursue them in all their consequences. (p. 26)

I say Camus 'staked his life' for if the result of his exploration was that life had no meaning, suicide would be a logical option, assuming one could not live without meaning. Of the absurd, Camus stated that it 'is essential to know whether one can live with it or whether, on the other hand, logic commands one to die of it' (p. 50). However, the argument turns on the assumption, and raises the question: 'Must we assume that life cannot be lived without meaning?' Camus' response is that although people have 'pretended to believe that refusing to grant a meaning to life necessarily leads to declaring that it is not worth living. In truth there is no necessary common measure between these two judgments' (p. 15). When we ask for a meaning of life, what we are usually asking for is a singular reply, an all-encompassing meaning, something to explain our existence, a key that will make the infinite finite. Camus thinks this cannot be found. But this is not enough to negate the value of life; our individual deaths alone can do this, and while there may not be one meaning, this does not necessarily exhaust all options, not one can also mean many. Our death alone can extinguish both value and meaning (in the pluralist sense) of our lives, because both meaning and value are dependent on there being someone to find meaning and to give value, hence, the common leap to an all-knowing God. In a universe free from such notions of all-knowing beings, life must be preserved for meaning to be preserved; the destruction of life then becomes tragic not only for the loss of life, but for the loss of meaning. The reasons both meaning and life are destroyed are Camus' starting points for inquiry.

In her search for what she calls ‘epistemic justice’, Miranda Fricker (2013) notes the importance of considering failure. The reasoning she employs for doing so can, I think, also be found in Camus’ work:

As a general point of philosophical method, I believe that taking failures as one’s starting point is a good strategy. If one wants to discover the conditions of a given positive social value (justice, freedom, independence, equality...), it tends to be instructive to look first at the various ways in which it is likely to fail. This method as applied to any kind of justice simply reflects the fact that just social systems, even in their most historically stable forms, are sustained under pressures toward collapse into injustice. (p. 1318)

When considering topics as all-encompassing as the meaning of life, starting from the negation, or ‘negative imprint’ as Fricker calls it, of the concept is instructive. Life, too, is sustained under pressure to collapse into death. Keeping oneself alive is a Sisyphean task, but unlike Sisyphus, we have the option to stop. There is, as Camus (1977) says, something to be learnt about living by asking why some people choose to take that ‘subtle step when the mind opt[s] for death?’ (p. 13). Rather than viewing suicide as a defect in the human psyche or as a crime that one ‘commits’,⁷ Camus takes the view that the possibility of opting out of life confers a value on choosing not to; it confers a value on living, one that is reaffirmed with each breath, and denied by those who choose to stop breathing. Absurdly, living is a value that can be undermined by other values. Camus explains:

Living, naturally, is never easy. You continue making the gestures commanded by existence for many reasons, the first of which is *habit*. Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the *ridiculous* character of that habit, the absence of profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation and the uselessness of suffering. What then is that incalculable feeling that deprives the mind of the sleep necessary to life? A world that can be

⁷ The expression ‘commits suicide’ is tied to suicide’s historical illegality. Suicide is still a crime in many countries. In Australia, suicide has been decriminalised, and in all jurisdictions, except the Northern Territory, attempted suicide is no longer a crime, although, it is still an offence for a person to assist another person to commit suicide or to attempt to commit suicide.

explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly *the feeling of absurdity*. All healthy men having thought of their own suicide, it can be seen, without further explanation, that there is a direct connection between this feeling and the longing for death. (p. 13, *italics mine*)

The value we place on life, divorced from any omniscient valuer, is of an individual nature and linked to our sense of meaning, which is shaken by the feeling of absurdity. When Camus talks of the sleep necessary to life, he speaks not just of the inability to sleep due to worry that most of us experience from time to time, but primarily of the illusions of meaning that keep our awareness of our impending end drowsy. The feeling of absurdity describes the restlessness and frustration of a mind grasping for meaning, searching for old narratives and yet finding none. The part of us that is aware of our existence cries out for acknowledgment, for approval, for certainty, for some reason for our existence. The world beyond the human, however, is indifferent to our calls.

The lack of a stable conception of meaning, Camus thinks can lead to the taking of one's own life, but equally he thinks it does not and should not do so, for 'even if one does not believe in God [ultimate meaning], suicide is not legitimate' (p. 7). Rather, the logic of the absurd can lead us to lucidity; sustained awareness of the absurd. It can lead to a fallibilistic understanding of knowledge as ultimately uncertain, and further, of life as unstable, finite, temporal and no less individually worth living for being so. Camus teaches us to question and confront uncomfortable answers rather than hide them from view, for doing so decreases our awareness of the world's limitations, which in turn decreases our ability to respond to situations that do not adhere to our illusions, thereby limiting our potential for creating and recreating meaning. Further, the insistence of holding onto meaning in the face of conflicting meaning, is a major source of violence. Lucidity, conversely leads to an increased ability to construct and reconstruct meaning; an increased ability to adapt. The individual and societal importance of meaning construction and its relation to violence is a topic to which I will return, but first, I

will take a closer look at the framework Weddington (2007) adopts for discussing the absurdity of education.

Weddington's Philosophical Suicide

Weddington (2007) explores Camus' idea of suicide, but as a metaphor for transformative education. Transformative education refers to learning via a process of critical reflection of interpretation and reinterpretation of underlying beliefs and values as a way of shifting perspectives and to *transform* student's experience and sense of self to guide future action. It is Weddington's contention that education undertaken whilst in lucid recognition of the absurd allows for a rhythmic transformative education, progressing on the movement from lucidity to comfort or from nostalgia to absurdity. Transformative moments of suicide, he holds, allow for moments of escape from the tension of lucidity, brought about by recognition of the absurd, which stimulate new periods of lucidity.

I believe that education conceptualized as a rhythmic progression pulsed by periods of comfort and discomfort or nostalgia and absurdity represents a potentially perpetual suicide. This suicide provides a means for human beings to rid themselves of old selves or identities and be transformed through interactions with others. (p. 125)

Whilst Weddington commences his article in a way commensurate with an understanding of Camus' body of work, he diverges from it in his adaptation of Camus' ideas of lucidity, the absurd, hope and suicide. On the one hand, he grapples with and explains well the ways in which Camus' philosophy differs from others, along with the alterations to our perception it entails, yet, on the other hand, he consistently goes beyond or negates the distance he has covered and falls back from lucidity. His error in reading Camus comes early on in his article. Camus (1977) wrote:

I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living (what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying). (pp. 11–12)

Weddington (2007) quotes only the words in parentheses and misunderstands Camus' use of paradox in the above context, and, therefore, misses the absurdity (i.e., Camus usage). In doing so, he reaches the conclusion that 'the paradoxical nature of suicide is once revealed, for it is through death that living gains value and through living that death is pursued for awarding value to life' (pp. 119–120). To this paradox, he attributes the absurdity of education and lucidity.

Camus uses the term absurdity, as I outlined earlier, to highlight the ridiculous and pointless nature of people's certainty in their reasoning, justifications, thoughts, ideas, beliefs and so forth. In 'Homage to an Exile', Camus (1988a) writes: 'Many men have sacrificed everything to errors, and I have always thought that heroism and sacrifice were not enough to justify a cause' (p. 99). Here he talks of heroism and sacrifice, whereas in the above block quote from *The Myth of Sisyphus* he is less specific, but in both he is pointing out that people die for absurd reasons. This is a fundamental point in Camus' (1977) philosophy, and one of the overarching reasons he argues for the importance of lucidity, for if one can see the absurdity of their justifications they would be less likely to be committed to them to the point of suicide or murder, as both require an absurd (i.e., common usage) depth of conviction.

The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. This must not be forgotten. This must be clung to because the whole consequence of a life can depend on it. (pp. 31–32)

Reasons for death are the very reasons Camus claims we must revolt against. Weddington (2007), thus, enters unaware into absurdity (i.e., common usage) by asking: 'shall I choose death because life is worth living and it is precisely through death that this worth is preserved?' (p. 119). Instead, Camus (1977) asks: 'Does [life's] absurdity require one to escape it through hope or suicide?' (p. 16). To put the question another way: Does living require meaning, and if so, given the absurd, does its lack of meaning require death? He answers this question with a resounding no, as explored earlier. Whilst Camus concludes that life is without ultimate and universal meaning, he contends that humans inevitably will construct meaning, but to avoid

leaping into faith we need to maintain a sustained awareness (lucidity) of the constructed nature of knowledge.

The power of Camus' philosophy is drained away by Weddington through a misappropriation of terms. By changing the definition of suicide, put forward by Camus, from the ending of one's life by one's own hand to that of a Jungian 'concept of death as a symbol of liberation and preparation for rebirth' (p. 132)—a concept more in line with Weddington's own idea of education as transformation of self rather than with that of suicide—he is fundamentally altering the terms of the argument in favour of his conclusions. Camus (1977) states clearly that he is 'not interested in philosophical suicide but rather in plain suicide' (p. 50). In direct contradiction to Camus' meaning, Weddington's (2007) notion of suicide is religious in nature; a 'ridding of self' to prepare for 'rebirth'.⁸ His appropriation of Camus' philosophy is in stark contrast also to Denton's understanding of Camus. Rather than a naturalist reinterpretation of values, we find an attempt to cast education as 'warden of the soul' (p. 125). To accomplish this, Weddington redefines not just suicide but also hope and lucidity; it 'is the religious attitude that Camus argues is a limit to lucidity, but that I argue is a necessity for lucidity' (p. 122). In doing so, he commits what Camus deemed philosophical suicide.

The following passage by Camus (1977), taken from *The Myth of Sisyphus*, could be read as a direct response to Weddington.

If it is admitted that all the power of that notion lies in the way it runs counter to our elementary hopes, if it is felt that to remain, the absurd requires not to be consented to, then it can be clearly seen that it has lost its true aspect, its human and relative character in order to enter an eternity that is both incomprehensible and satisfying. If there is an absurd, it is in man's universe. *The moment the notion transforms itself into eternity's springboard, it ceases to be linked to human lucidity.* The absurd is no longer that evidence that man ascertains without consenting to it.

⁸ In his lecture, 'The Unbeliever and the Christians', Camus (1988b) clearly states, 'I don't like priests who are anticlerical any more than philosophies that are ashamed of themselves. Hence, I shall not, as far as I am concerned, try to pass myself off as a Christian in your presence. I share with you the same revulsion from evil. But I do not share your hope, and I continue to struggle against this universe in which children suffer and die' (p. 71).

The struggle is eluded. Man integrates the absurd and in that communion causes to disappear its essential character, which is opposition, laceration, and divorce.

This leap is an *escape*. (p. 38, *italics mine*)

With scant explanation, Weddington (2007) cites Sartrean bad faith to justify his claim for the need to escape from lucidity, moments ‘where we re-recognize the “why”’, because, not even Camus is ‘brave enough to live without reprieve from the absurd’ (p. 122). But if we understand Camus’ meaning of lucidity as recognition of the constructed nature of meaning due to the absurd, that is, as the elucidation of the absurd, then to forward the idea of ‘breaks from lucidity’ is tantamount to saying that we need to retreat from fallibilism, to retreat from the knowledge that our knowledge is limited and constructed—to retreat to ignorance, or, as Camus would put it, to unreasonable hope or faith.

Weddington’s attempt to fit Camus into the framework of transformative education is predicated upon this retreat to ignorance, a vacillation between ‘concern and complicity’ so that we may have a ‘reason for becoming lucid again’ (p. 122). This is highly problematic if we consider that one of Camus’ main reasons for positing the absurd was to prevent actual, not metaphorical death. To escape from lucidity would be to take a break from caring about the suffering of others, and to become complicit in their demise. Indeed, when Weddington asks how ‘can any humans who must be concerned with their own *security* ever make an ‘other’ the focus of their ultimate concern?’ (p. 125, *italics mine*) he is rebutting Camus’ insistence on standing with those who suffer, arguing that only those who are truly exceptional can care for others when they themselves are suffering. The reference to ‘ultimate concern’ is misleading; we do not have to be Jesus, Ghandi, or Martin Luther King, Jr., as Weddington suggests, to be concerned for our fellow human beings in adverse situations. Further, there is nothing in Camus’ philosophy that requires ultimate concern for us to be lucid. Concern is enough. From this erroneous reasoning, he derives the following: ‘So this suggests that to achieve the intellectual and moral lucidity of the absurd, one must first be secure’ (p. 125). Once more, in Camus we find the opposite. In fact, the absence of the security Weddington describes can act as a catalyst to lucidity, that is, lucidity can be reached through suffering.

Camus' (1954) description of Oscar Wilde's experience during his incarceration, in an article entitled 'The Artist in Prison', provides us with an example of this:

"Do you know," he said, years later, to Gide, "what prevented me from killing myself? It was pity." Pity from the privileged and *secure* means nothing to a man who is suffering. Only the pity of a fellow-sufferer can move him. In the prison yard, a man, a total stranger, who was walking behind him at exercise, suddenly whispered: "Oscar Wilde, I am sorry for you; it is harder for the likes of you than for the likes of us." And Wilde, overcome, replied: "No, my friend. Here we all suffer alike." (p. 27, *italics mine*)

The recognition of shared suffering, of continual concern for others, is an important part of being lucid and, moreover, an important part of being human, as Denton argues. I will return to Denton in the last section to illustrate this point further and to extrapolate its pedagogical significance, but first, in the next section I will explore Camus' (1977) claim that 'suffering exhausts hope and faith and then is left alone and unexplained. The toiling masses, worn out with suffering and death, are masses without God. Our place is henceforth at their side, far from teachers, old and new' (p. 267).

The Death Penalty as a Form of Philosophical Suicide

Far from teachers, old and new ... There are lessons to be learnt in the writings of Camus; lessons that he learned and sought to clarify through the act of writing, both for himself and for others. To understand Camus' perspective (or almost anyone's for that matter) it is helpful to understand his education, by which I mean not just his schooling ... In a review of *The Stranger*, written in 1946, Nicola Chiaramonte (2013) noted:

We were born at the beginning of the First World War. When we were adolescents, we had the Depression. When we were twenty, Hitler came. Then we had the Ethiopian war; the Spanish war; Munich. This is what we got, in the way of an education. (n.p)

Born in November 1913, less than a year before the First World War began, Camus was a young man during the Second World War. He lived in a period very much marked by death. For Camus, writing was a way of life. In his words, it was ‘an attempt to understand the time I live in’ (Camus, 1991, p. 11). If that time happened to be one rife with murder and suicide, then it was to these grim topics that he would turn his pen. Both of his major book-length philosophical essays, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*, were attempts to address the culture of death he witnessed. In this section, I will examine further this culture of death through Camus’ ‘Reflections on the Guillotine’. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, as we have seen, he tackles suicide as a response to nihilism, but in ‘Reflections on the Guillotine’, Camus (1995) examines the reasoning used to justify capital punishment. A reasoning process, all too often based on philosophical suicide.

Speaking of philosophical suicide, in 1957 Camus gave an address at the University of Uppsala entitled ‘Create Dangerously’, in which he broke into two camps those who commit it: the martyr and the lion. He said that ‘history’s amphitheatre has always contained the martyr and the lion. The former relies on eternal consolations and the latter on raw historical meat’ (Camus, 1964, p. 4). Both sides, he thought, were in error. By redefining terms in much the same way as Weddington did, both camps fail to establish useful ethical limits; both transgress the absurd. The lion relies on the notion of sacrificing the human of today for a single imagined future. The lion believes that acts of violence are necessary to bring about a better future. The lion’s care is not for people who live and suffer today, for they are willingly murdered for the betterment of those who are left tomorrow, usually those people who are in possession of a certain set of characteristics that suit or match those possessed by the lion. The martyr is likewise guilty of holding a belief in an imagined future, accepting the suffering and death of today as the will of a single God. The finite mind cannot know the infinite—the truth of all that supposedly lies in God requires a leap of faith, an unreasonable hope. As he says in *The Rebel*, ‘faith leads to immortal life, but faith presumes the acceptance of the mystery and of evil and resignation to injustice’ (Camus, 1991, p. 51). Hence, faith and hope are the antithesis to grounded reason.

In ‘Reflections on the Guillotine’, Camus (1995) claims that in a world free from knowledge of ultimate truth, ‘capital punishment upsets the only indisputable human solidarity – our

solidarity against death – and it can be legitimized only by a truth or a principle that is superior to man’ (p. 222). Camus described his father’s reaction to experiencing, as a witness, the reality that the idea of capital punishment created. His father, we are told, agreed with the punishment prescribed, given the particularities of the case in question, so much so that for the first time,

[h]e got up in the dark to go to the place of execution at the other end of town amid a great crowd of people. What he saw that morning he never told anyone. My mother relates merely that he came rushing home, his face distorted, refused to talk, lay down for a moment on the bed, and suddenly began to vomit. *He had just discovered the reality hidden under the noble phrases with which it was masked.* (p. 175, italics mine)

His father had in a sense discovered the absurd. What he discovered was not the reality he had expected; his sense of justice was not satisfied, and his sense of morality, the same that drove him to get up in the dark to witness such an event, was not vindicated. Instead, he witnessed ‘the obscenity hidden under the verbal cloak’ (p. 177), the gap between the reasoning that leads to the event and the reality that arises once said reasoning is translated into action.

Camus (2006) stressed the importance of understanding the reality we create beyond the bounds of the imagined reality we think we are creating, beyond the abstract ideal. For just ‘as we now love one another by telephone and work not on matter but on machines, we kill and are killed nowadays by proxy. What is gained in cleanliness is lost in understanding’ (p. 260). It is easy for us to judge based on abstract concepts, beliefs, thoughts, before we have experienced the reality that our judgment helps to create if we do not have to witness or directly bear the consequences, for this judgement is without the feeling that such a reality could stir, and in the case of the death sentence, without an understanding of the horror of the created reality. Camus (1995) argues that far from having the effect that the initial reasons for the instantiation of the death penalty should dictate, according to the logic of those who advocated for it—one of fear of death as a deterrent to murder—witnessing death (or rather institutionalised murder) in such a way only serves to increase the desire to murder in those already so inclined and to make nauseous those who are not. As he put it, somewhat sarcastically, it

is already possible to follow the exemplary effects of such ceremonies on public opinion, the manifestations of sadism they arouse, the hideous vainglory they excite in certain criminals. No nobility in the vicinity of the gallows, but disgust, contempt, or the vilest indulgence of the senses. These effects are well known.
(p. 195)

Camus further argues that it is impossible to tell how many people, if any, have been deterred from committing murder by the threat of the death penalty, whereas there is plenty of anecdotal evidence on the contrary.⁹ He cites a lack of awareness of the human impulse toward destruction as another fault in the proponent's reasoning; the threat of death is no threat to one who seeks it. Given the variation in the individual psychology of those who kill, the death penalty could likewise entice some people to murder. This is yet another reason we are far from being logically able to claim its exemplary status, as those who defend its use wish to. The result we do know is that 'the State is consequently led to multiply very real murders in the hope of avoiding a possible murder which, as far as it knows or ever will know, may never be perpetrated' (p. 194). Even if we use the logic of revenge, a murder for a murder, the sum does not add up. For the law 'adds to death a rule, a public premeditation known to the future victim, an organization, in short, which is in itself a source of moral sufferings more terrible than death. Hence there is no equivalence' (p. 199). Such a law strips from the person their humanity long before it strips their breath. Camus writes that from the moment the sentence is passed, the human is no longer viewed as human, 'but a thing waiting to be handled by the executioners' (p. 201). The person becomes nothing more than an object to the external world they now inhabit, but internally they are still conscious, and like Sisyphus, all too consciously, painfully, aware of their fate: 'The parcel is no longer subject to the laws of chance that hang over the living creature but to mechanical laws that allow him to foresee accurately the day of his beheading' (pp. 201–202).

⁹ The anecdote Camus cites is from Arthur Koehler, but similar is found in Thomas More (1684): 'one of the English lawyers, who took occasion to run out in a high commendation of the severe execution of justice upon thieves, who, as he said, were then hanged so fast that there were sometimes twenty on one gibbet; and upon that he said he could not wonder enough how it came to pass, that since so few escaped, there were yet so many thieves left who were still robbing in all places. Upon this, I [...] said there was no reason to wonder at the matter, since this way of punishing thieves was neither just in itself nor good for the public; for as the severity was too great, so the remedy was not effectual; simple theft not being so great a crime that it ought to cost a man his life, no punishment how severe soever being able to restrain those from robbing who can find out no other way of livelihood.' (p. 15)

Camus' critique of the death penalty shows that the outcomes conceived of and used as justification for the action are absurd (common usage) when compared to the actual outcome. He goes to lengths to explicate the gaps in logic, the illogical leaps the proponents of the death penalty take in defending it; evidence of their philosophical suicide. If capital punishment were a scientific experiment, the hypothesis would fail.

The absurd teaches that morality is a human enterprise for which the world cares not. Even if there were an ultimate morality, we would not have access to it. For Camus, the existence of suffering constitutes empirical evidence that the world is not inherently just, that it is not inherently good, and that it is not reasonable. The world is unreasonable in that it does not conform to our notions of reason, and by extension to our abstract moral concepts, such as good and justice. At the same time, it is not inherently bad, not inherently unjust, not ultimately nihilistic, as the existence of the sun, the sea, the experience of joy, of love, attest to that. Teaching a child to navigate through such a world, Denton thought, requires teaching them moral reasoning. However, he is quick to point out, as Camus did, that not all forms of morality are desirable. As previously noted, Denton's (1963) 'moral individual' is 'moral because, in the face of the absurd, he lucidly lives the philosophy of limits' (p. 127). In the next section, I explore the basis of Denton's theory, concluding with Camus' notion of the limits of reason.

Denton's use of Camus: Values education in a pluralist society

Denton formed his views on education in America at a time when the separation of church and state, facilitated by the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, was extended to the separation of church and public education through the 1947 *Everson v. Board of Education* and 1962 *Engel v. Vitale* rulings of the United States Supreme Court. He noted that the shift in education from a 'religious base to a secular, naturalistic one' (p. 1) included a shift away from religious-based moral education. This shift was characterised at the classroom level by the transition 'from an emphasis on values to an emphasis on techniques of teaching Skills' (p. 1), as skills, it was thought, were value-neutral. However, Denton counters that decisions of content and methodology, of what and how we teach, are themselves laden with values as 'norms constitute the nature of those decisions' (p. 2). Viewed in this light, skills training did not replace values education, it made it implicit, unexamined and

unintended (Thornton & Burgh, 2017, p. 58). The general result is that values are taught, but not well. As it stands, young people are, as Denton (1963) says,

inducted into a system of ethical decisions which, in the main, have already been made for them. In addition, the teacher is almost invariably concerned, not only with facts, but with goods and preferences and desires and “shoulds” which eventually reveal the kind of Universe the teacher feels ought to be. (p. 4)

Values education becomes the realm of the individual teachers in which their beliefs are transmitted uncritically and often unwittingly to their students. This generational unconscious transmission of values goes some way toward providing an explanation of Christopher Hodgson’s (2004) lament in the following quote.

If we take seriously the analogy bestowed by our heritage that nature is to be conceived as our mother and that God the Father is our source for Reason, Truth, and Justice then given Nietzsche's claim that we are a generation of fatherless children we should be a generation of naturalists. But the latter has yet to develop a strong following or even a consciousness about this cosmic divorce. (p. iii)

To address this problem, Denton (1963) argues education needs a methodology. To start, he suggests we take note of terms commonly used in the philosophy of education literature to describe values, educational terms like:

moral enterprise, norm-acquisitions, worthy-ends, valuational boldness, the school as an axiological institution, moral behavior—and not be afraid to grapple with the most basic question: In a democratic, pluralistic society what shall be the philosophical ground for these terms? What gives them meaning and substance? (p. 5)

In other words, we must rethink values education as naturalists. Not to wittingly transmit a single, uniform ‘Universe’¹⁰ to students, but to teach them how to discern between ‘Universes’, that is, how to recognise, evaluate, and consciously choose which values to keep and which to discard from their personal ‘Universes’ or value systems. This is a task for which Denton employs Camus’ philosophy. He points out that education

has no *a priori* commitment to method, but, rather, has as its primary activity involvement with developing human beings. Education is committed, therefore, by the nature of this involvement, to concerning itself with the problem of feeling and its relation to knowledge and knowing. (p. 125)

Following this, he argues that education needs a methodology ‘which demonstrates the necessary relationship between feeling and cognition’ (p. 127). To Denton, this can be found in lucidity.

Lucidity lies at the end of a sequence of steps, a method.¹¹ The first step is to recognise absurdity. According to Camus (1977), we *recognise* absurdity in the solipsistic universes surrounding us, that is in the lives of others. To recognise this absurdity is to recognise the ‘ridiculous character of [...] habit’, to recognise that the ‘mechanical aspect of [...] gestures, make silly everything that surrounds them’ (p. 21). We see such absurdity when we witness the contradictory actions of others, in relation to their environment: ‘If I see a man armed only with a sword attack a group of machine-guns, I shall consider his act to be absurd’ (p. 33). But this absurdity has not yet touched the heart. The next step takes us inward. The *feeling* of absurdity is an ‘elusive feeling’ (p. 18). It is phenomenological; we experience it first hand as happening in our own solipsistic universe. It is the ‘worm’ in the ‘heart’ (p. 13) that can strike at any moment, ‘on a street-corner or in a restaurant’s revolving door’ (pp. 18–19). It is ‘the void’ that is felt when connections with the world and others are lost. It is ‘that odd state of

¹⁰ Camus (1977) talks of the importance of Universes: ‘Great feelings take with them their own universe, splendid or abject. They light up with their passion an exclusive world in which they recognize their climate. There is a universe of jealousy, of ambition, of selfishness, or of generosity. A universe in other words, a metaphysic and an attitude of mind. What is true of already specialized feelings will be even more so of emotions basically as indeterminate, simultaneously as vague and as “definite,” as remote and as “present” as those furnished us by beauty or aroused by absurdity’ (p. 17).

¹¹ Camus (1977) says: ‘It is clear in this way that I am defining a method [...] The method defined here acknowledges the feeling that all true knowledge is impossible’ (p. 18).

soul in which the void becomes eloquent, in which the chain of daily gestures is broken, in which the heart vainly seeks the link that will connect it again ...' (p. 19). This step concludes in a 'revolt of the flesh', but the absurd has 'not been exhausted' and a 'step lower and strangeness creeps in' (p. 20). Once absurdity is felt, 'the primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia' (p. 20). It is then that we witness the world's raw sense data without translation into the familiar, the conceptual and the habitual.¹² The feeling of absurdity strips from the world 'the images and designs that we had attributed to it beforehand', and the world then 'evades us because it becomes itself again' (p. 20). Seeing the world as itself we recognise absurdity, we perceive 'that the world is "dense", sensing to what degree a stone is foreign and irreducible to us, with what intensity nature or a landscape can negate us' (p. 20); we sense the absurd.

The absurd, once felt, leaves us with a choice, either to remain with the feeling, reflect upon it, recognise the absurd and in so doing, translate it into lucidity, or we can choose to leap out of discomfort into hope or despair. The experience of absurdity can lead to lucidity, but equally it can lead us to philosophical suicide; a leap into old habits, hope or nihilism, if we do not translate such experience into an intellectual understanding of the absurd, that is, if we do not become lucid. One may come as far as sensing the absurd, but fail to translate the experience into conscious awareness of the fallibility of one's own narratives; to fail to become lucid. Becoming lucid means understanding the absurd, which means recognising the limits of reason. Such a recognition, however, does not mean that reason is useless or non-existent, or as Camus put it: 'if I recognize the limits of the reason, I do not therefore negate it' (p. 42). Negating it is an illogical leap; just like absence of ultimate meaning to life does not necessarily negate life, absence of ultimate reason does not necessarily negate all reason. The method Camus sought was the one that would create a path between 'the opposite paths of humiliated reason and triumphal reason' (p. 48), to create an absurd reason. The absurd reduces reason to the human, and so doing it becomes, again, 'an instrument of thought and not thought itself' (p. 49).

In the absence of ultimate reason, Camus could be said to reason from the breath. With each breath, he understands that his life is valuable, at least to him. Casting his thoughts outward, he

¹² According to Camus (1977), 'The feel of the absurd is not, for all that, the notion of the absurd' (p. 32).

understands that while they also breathe, other's lives are valuable to them; he forms his sense of value on that which he deems most fundamental and irreducible: life.

The only truth that might seem instructive to him is not formal: it comes to life and unfolds in men. The absurd mind cannot so much expect ethical rules at the end of its reasoning as, rather, illustrations and the breath of human lives. (p. 65)

Camus turns his critique to the ways in which suffering is hastened upon us, and declares, contra Descartes, 'I rebel, therefore we exist'. When individually we rebel against suffering in all its forms, collectively we flourish. Awareness of the limits of our life and mortality can lead to a newfound appreciation of life in all its naked glory, stripped bare of delusion and crying out for exploration.

As a writer, I have always loathed avoiding the issue; as a man, I believe that the repulsive aspects of our condition, if they are inevitable, must merely be faced in silence. But when silence or tricks of language contribute to maintaining an abuse that must be reformed or a suffering that can be relieved, then there is no other solution but to speak out and show the obscenity hidden under the verbal cloak. (p. 133)

Instead of silence or escapism in the face of suffering, oppression and adversity, Camus' work teaches the philosophical attitude needed to keep our shared struggle for existence in plain sight to most effectively rebel against all forms of oppression. As Camus says: 'Having started from an anguished awareness of the inhuman, the meditation on the absurd returns at the end of its itinerary to the very heart of the passionate flames of human revolt' (p. 62).

Conclusion

The struggle to become lucid is at the heart of *The Myth of Sisyphus*. According to Weddington, Camus is too hard a task master, allowing no reprieve from lucidity. However, this view demonstrates a misunderstanding of Camus' original meaning of lucidity. Such a misunderstanding severely limits the application of one of Camus' most important possible contributions to education. To understand the absurd is to understand that the fit between our conception of the world and the world itself is fraught with uncertainty. Lucidity is the

elucidation of the absurd. To reiterate, there are three main steps to reaching lucidity: first we see, then feel, then we understand, or as Camus (1977) put it: ‘I draw from the absurd three consequences, which are my revolt, my freedom, and my passion’ (p. 62). To be lucid is to revolt against the type of certainty that leads to suffering; the certainty of the martyr and the lion. It is to revolt against philosophical suicide, which I have argued, Weddington himself commits. But it is also as Denton argues, to be aware of the connection between cognition and emotion, to understand as Camus puts it, passion. Such awareness collapses the historically prevalent dualism between emotion and reason. In this paper, I have only briefly touched on freedom through its ‘negative imprint’, that of incarceration and the mechanistic rules that emerge from both ‘triumphant’ and ‘humiliated’ reason. The main point I wish to drive home, is that focusing on lucidity can strengthen the philosophical content of inquiry by providing a method to counter philosophical suicide, or to put it another way, to prevent inoculation against wonder (Burgh & Thornton, 2016).

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