Camus’ Absurd and its Application to Existential Psychotherapy

Abstract

This essay will explore and critically evaluate Camus’ theory of the absurd and then discuss its relevance to the practice of existential psychotherapy. It is proposed that the concept of the absurd, whilst initially intimidating, can be beneficial to include in psychotherapeutic work. Helping others to move away from global concepts of meaning, to finding their own way through life, can initiate a process of experiential development, and ultimately liberation.

Keywords:

Albert Camus. The absurd. Existential psychotherapy. Acceptance processes. Behavioural change.

Main body

Albert Camus developed the concept of the absurd in his major works ‘The Outsider’ (Camus, 1942/2012) and ‘The Myth of Sisyphus’ (Camus, 1942/1955). Whilst other writers had explored the absurd previously (for example Kierkegaard, 1849/1989; Malraux, 1928/1992), it was Camus who would become synonymous with the absurd; to the extent that he would be labelled an absurdist rather than an existentialist; Camus himself rejected both labels.

Both books, published only a few months apart, can be seen as intrinsically linked together. The Outsider is a story of a man who comes to find a new attitude to life, The Myth of Sisyphus is an extended description of that attitude. In the Outsider the protagonist Meursault lives a life of monotony, although he is sincere in his approach to life, he seems to have little agency. Events unfold around him until he is on trial for murder; it is only at this point when he is facing death that he finally becomes aware of the absurd, experiences authenticity and feels a release.

The Myth of Sisyphus is a treatise on the absurd. It begins by asking if life really is worth living and then presents the importance of exploring the meaning of life. The distinction is made clear between ‘the meaning of life’ and ‘the meaning of one’s own life’. According to Camus the former cannot be answered authentically. A universal proclamation arising from science, rationality, or religion cannot be embraced as this would imply merely subscribing to another’s’ meaning. This state of inauthenticity adopts an external meaning of hope and hope is a future state which cannot be relied upon; Camus suggests that our present state is our only state. Subscribing to another’s definition of meaning is akin to ‘true world theories’ (Nietzsche, 1888/1968). There are thousands of these concepts from Plato’s ‘world of forms’, ‘Christianity’ to ‘Marxism’; all have a thread running through them, that there is something in this world we do not like and to feel better we construct an alternative; essentially true world theories can be seen as human inventions rather than truisms. Sartre (1943/1956) would describe these true world theories as living in bad faith, that they deny the inherent anxiety of existence and in turn our freedom. By believing in a true world theory people assimilate the ethics of the theory rather than thinking for themselves. Nietzsche (1887/1967) would say that by doing so people are adopting a ‘slave mentality’ which removes their individuality and stops them making changes in the world as they believe in concepts such as divine justice. Therefore, according to Nietzsche (1892/1966) ‘God is dead’; meaning that we can no longer hold onto religion or any other true world theory.

This leaves us adopting a more individualistic response to the question. However, when the question is asked the universe does not respond. This leaves us with a cold fear, and it is this juxtaposition between ‘mans’ desire for meaning and the universe’s silence in response that leads to the absurd. This notion of the absurd can also be seen from a Heideggerian position; as a clash between the self or *Mitwelt* and the world or *Umwelt* (Heidegger, 1962).

Awareness or consciousness of this absurd position can occur spontaneously: “At any street corner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face” (Camus, 1942/1955, p.9) or when weary of the monotony of existence. The state of awareness involves facing the idea that we are all condemned to die at some point. The reaction to the awareness can lead to a return to the prior state, akin to ‘plugging back into the matrix’; suicide (Camus put forward that this cannot be fully accepted, we cannot give in to the absurd and become despairing; suicide is not the answer to the absurd, it is escaping the vital question of existence) or recovery or as Camus would say ‘revolt’. Again, Camus’ discussions of the awareness of the absurd, how it occurs can be seen through the lens of Heidegger. In particular his writing on being ‘thrown’ into existence and a failure to find meaning, becoming aware of our limitations, becoming anxious. Similar to Camus, Heidegger puts forward that upon awareness of this anxiety one consequence is to return to the familiar and becoming inauthentic.

A radical acceptance of the meaningless of life, a nihilist and pessimistic perspective, such as the one proposed by Emil Cioran: “The pessimist has to invent new reasons to exist every day: he is a victim of the ‘meaning’ of life” (Cioran, 1952/1999, p.12) is one option. Indeed, this perspective can be liberating as it situates one in the here and now and denies true world theories. However, this position avoids the anxiety that goes hand in hand with life, we have to live with the ambiguity of existence (de Beauvoir, 1964). Nihilism is conscious of a meaningless existence but does nothing about it. We are all free, constrained by our physicality and social factors, but free nonetheless. Nihilism is a denial or avoidance of freedom.

Camus’ notion of revolt begins with an objection to the absurd, which in turn leads to freedom. Prior to awareness freedom is illusory “death is there as the only reality” (Camus, 1942/1955, p.57). Revolt rejects the future; revolt has a here and now perspective. Camus’ revolt, to live in spite of life is in some ways similar to Frankl and his meaning through suffering (Frankl, 1946/2004). Revolt is personal, it must be understood that our own revolt cannot be applied to others, as this would to lead to inauthenticity. In addition, we must understand that this revolt will not change our objective situation - Sisyphus will still push his rock - all revolt is doomed to fail, we will all die. Revolt is an attitude to our existence; “One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (Camus, 1942/1955, p.91).

Camus’ revolt is individualistic. Camus initially suggested that being authentic and revolting against the absurd involves taking one’s own path in life. It could be said that this is akin to abandoning conditions of worth (Rogers, 1959). There are claims of selfishness to made here due to adopting almost a hedonistic position. However, in Camus’ later work, La Peste/The Plague (Camus, 1947/2001), Camus does take a more collective stance on revolt, suggesting a maturing of his ideas.

When Camus rejects suicide as a response to the absurd he does so in part by claiming that life is precious, but Camus does not really explain why. Again, Camus seeks dignity and honour in the human condition but does not justify it philosophically. Perhaps this position says more about Camus and his own experiences, which would explain the lack of build up or justification within his writing. Camus was born into poverty and later had to fit into more bourgeois circles; he was also active in the French resistance to Nazi occupation. Camus fought for the underdog and for his own place against a class system. It could be said that Camus himself lived his life authentically with a clear moral perspective that guided his actions. It would make sense if these strongly held values leaked into his writing.

Camus famously fell out with John-Paul Sartre. Camus almost supported both sides in the Algerian revolution. Himself being a French national brought up in Algeria he was able to see the nuance of the situation. Sartre considered Camus’ approach as lacking conviction, to be sitting on the fence. Sartre’s position can be examined in relation to the concept of Camus’ revolt. If the authentic state of being is for Sisyphus to continue to push his rock, then this could lead to inaction. Perhaps Camus’ revolt is too passive. However, as a pacifist and disagreeing with Stalin’s communism (an ideology that Sartre advocated), it can be seen that Camus was being authentic in his rejection of revolution. Camus tried all he could towards a peaceful two state solution but found himself criticised and ultimately rejected by both sides. Taking a non-violent approach may seem passive and perhaps by seeing Sisyphus as ‘happy’ ignores systemic injustice. But maybe it is just the word ‘happy’ that creates this tension; maybe ‘defiant’ would be more accurate.

The question remains of how to apply Camus’ theory of the absurd to existential psychotherapy. This process is challenging as the absurd is a state of being that people are often not aware of. However, clients may seek psychotherapy when they are in intractable situations or having chronic issues; humans naturally strive for meaning (Vos, 2016). Perhaps it is these types of presentations that are most amendable to concepts of absurdity. This can be seen when thinking of the experiences of those in concentration camps. Bettleheim (1979) suggests those that survived such camps “"retained the last, if not the greatest, of the human freedoms: to choose their own attitude in any given circumstance” (p.158). This is echoed by Frankl (1946) "Everything can be taken from a man but … the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances … The sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone … Any man can … decide what shall become of him - mentally and spiritually" (p.75). From this we can put forward that clients have to accept that the process of confronting issues and solving problems is what counts, not the intended consequences or the success in doing so; by almost embracing the absurd we can paradoxically address our problems.

The therapist cannot ‘push the rock’ for clients or to act as a rescuer, no matter how tempting this may be. " No one can relieve him of his suffering or suffer in his place. His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden." (Frankl, 1946, p. 86). Therapists also have to ‘bracket’ their own assumptions and ideas and be aware of how these can influence the process of therapy; to be fully engaged with the client and their experiences (Milton, O Brien, Tipney & Turner, 2003). By taking a phenomenological stance therapists can capture the lived experience of clients (McLeod, 2013). This is achieved through questions that elicit rich, detailed descriptions of experience, rather than theorising about meaning. Bracketing can be seen as admirable, and to get as close to the lived experience of the client is important. But, bracketing involves suspending presuppositions and approaching each experience anew, which is of course unobtainable. Everyone has assumptions that are taken into all interactions. We can learn about these biases and reflect upon how they may impact our practice, but to completely suspend them is not viable. This is supported through a research perspective, with the concept of bracketing being said to be impossible (Langdridge, 2004) and that researchers’ interpretations of data will always be guided by their existing understandings (Hyaggman-Laitila, 1999). Clients have to take ultimate responsibility for their problems and in doing so may well suffer as a result. But this suffering then becomes the focus not the content of circumstances. This internal freedom despite the external environment is also implied by Sartre: “Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. It depends on you to give life a meaning” (1943/1956, p.491).

It is the approach to suffering therefore that needs to be examined in psychotherapy. One approach is suggested by Nagel (1971) that of a sense of irony regarding life and the absurd. Whilst Camus advocated the absurd arising from a clash between ourselves and the world, Nagel’s approach is based upon more of an internal clash, how we perceive our life. If we can perceive it to be truly absurd, without meaning then we can embrace a position of humour and laughter. Nietzsche had much earlier adopted the same position: “Perhaps I know best why man alone laughs: he alone suffers so deeply that he had to invent laughter” (1888/1968. p.56). Taking this approach can perhaps help one ‘move away’ from time consuming ‘fantasies’ concerning the meaning of life. Seeing the notion as a construct, or a ‘meme’ (Dawkins, 1976), something created by mankind rather than a universal truth. The concept of the meaning of life has existed for thousands of years; the ideas being passed down the generations and propagating amongst society. By holding onto these ideas people search for a meaning that doesn’t really exist (Binnie, 2010). We can see this approach as countering Camus’ ideas of revolt and defiance, but perhaps the two positions can be accommodated therapeutically. Nagel puts forward that although we can recognise the arbitrariness of life, we can still engage in it. It is how we engage with it that Camus’ revolt enters the stage. However, whatever act we engage with must remain without extrinsic meaning; having a superiority complex on how we live our lives as a means of escape is absurd in itself. Actual rebellion or being the absurd hero is again absurd, understanding there is no meaning can be more comforting than fighting an impossible battle that does not actually exist; being defiant is pointless if there is nothing to defy.

If we can discuss such matters therapeutically with clients, in a fashion that does not foster resignation, despair and ultimately disengagement, then perhaps clients can gain insight in accordance with Meursault during the closing of ‘The Outsider’ (Camus, 1942/2012. p.119-120): “And I, too, felt ready to start life all over again. It was as if that great rush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and, gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe. To feel it so like myself, indeed, so brotherly, made me realize that I’d been happy, and that I was happy still”. Meursault acknowledges that existence is meaningless but in doing so can appreciate the here and now and can at last rejoice being alive. But how to reach this insight? Merely encouraging clients to laugh at suffering may seem belittling and could demonstrate a non-compassionate approach.

As existential psychotherapy is technically flexible with practitioners drawing upon other models of therapy (Deurzen, 2007), then aspects of Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction/Cognitive Therapy (Kabat-Zinn & Hanh, 2009; Segal, Teasdale, & Williams, 2002), such as the present moment focus can help clients ground themselves in the here and now; to be aware of their thoughts and feelings but to focus upon their lived experience. There are also parallels between other third wave therapies such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT - Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson, 1999) and existential approaches (Claessens, 2010; Binnie & Spada, 2018). Deurzen-Smith (1988) contrasts existential psychotherapy to aspects of cognitive behavioural therapy, in that when working existentially anxiety is acknowledged and experienced rather than being seen as something to reduce through disputing thoughts. This is exactly the same approach taken in ACT; one of the central tenets is that problems are maintained through experiential avoidance, another is that the content of cognition is superfluous. Within ACT there a focus on the client’s value system, what is intrinsically important to them and how to actualise this in terms of planned action; this can be compared to the process of ‘valuing’ proposed by Rollo May in that whilst the content of values are subjective, it is the act of valuing that is vital (May, 1967); this is the C in ACT – committed action. These ‘techniques’ move the client away from focusing on the content of cognition to the process of being and if in tune with the client’s value system the client can adopt a defiant outlook and engage in associated behaviours as a form of revolt. This is very in keeping with Camus’ response to the absurd.

But what of the self? The internal representation of meaning, how we relate meaning to who we are. Heidegger (1927/1962) proposes that there is no self, that there is no intrinsic meaning other than being in the world. Being conscious of this lack of meaning is being authentic, the only truism in life is death. Sartre (1943/1956) suggests that the self is artificially generated, it is illusionary. The assumptions we have concerning the self are created through our speculations of what others think of us. It is these that drive our behaviour, how we respond to the perceived desires of other people, not an underlying true self. This has been echoed by van Deurzen (2015): “I adopt things from the outside world in order to create a sense of fullness and avoid the openness and hollowness that is me (…) this is when I can say that I have created a self” (pp. 62-63). This notion of the self as a creation of being in the world and a response to being with others is suggestive of relational constructivism (Neimeyer, 2000). In that meaning making is seen as an interpretative, linguistic process that is a result of people being with other people, an interpersonal, contextual and temporal perspective. This leads to one’s self-concept or identity not being a purely private process, but one based upon internalising relations with others; a polyphonic chorus of voices (McNamee, 2004). It can therefore be said that if the self is externally constructed via our interactions with others, then it is our experiences, the outside world, that creates our internal notion of selfhood or the meaning we give to our existence.

Although the search for meaning has been postulated as an external process it does not prevent people looking inwards and seeking a simplistic answer. As a very broad church, psychotherapy can supply a medley of appealing oversimplifications. Finding meaning has become a commodity, a process of McDonaldization (Ritzer, 1993; Strawbridge & Woolfe, 2009). Not only restricted to the self-help industry, some models of psychotherapy are also guilty of adopting a philosophically naïve approach. Structuralist ontologies can be seen within Beck’s cognitive therapy (Beck, Rush, Shaw & Emery, 1979), with the assumption of core beliefs. Likewise, Freud’s theory of personality (Freud, 1923/1964) posits the id, ego, and superego as distinct entities. This can also be inferred within person centred therapy with the concept of the core sense of self (Rogers, 1959). Freud was deterministic, believing people are controlled by a combination of unconscious drives, for example sex (Freud, 1905/1964) or death (Freud, 1920/1964), and resulting defence mechanisms (Freud, 1894/1964). Freud believed it was the therapists’ role to ‘cure’ the patient (Rizq, 2012). The actualising tendency (Maslow, 1943/1954) can also said to be deterministic, but the role of humanistic therapists differs: “…it is the client who knows what hurts, what directions to go, what problems are crucial, what experiences have been deeply buried.” (Rogers, 1961, p.11). The psychological structuralism of Beckian cognitive therapy, or the concept of the true self within Rogerian person-centred therapy, both advocate that fundamental change to selfhood is possible. This possibility is alluring and often people can become caught on the treadwheel of perpetual introspection.

From exploring Camus’ concept of the absurd it can be put forward that it is not a nihilistic vision of the human condition. Helping clients to explore the concept of the absurd can be the beginning of a journey of self-discovery and, as has been demonstrated, different therapeutic approaches can be applied to help clients reach their destination. It has been proposed that the focus of intervention can fluctuate between internal and external systems. Beginning with an internal examination of meaning, moving away from a universal truth to the acceptance of a subjective understanding. The focus can then move to the external. How purposeful actions can be undertaken in keeping with the person’s value system. Doing what is important and making a commitment to change. From engaging in new experiences, a new concept of the self will be constructed. Whilst this is not the primary aim of this intervention, this by-product is ironically the goal originally sought.

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