

Absurd Time: Understanding Camus' Quantitative Ethics Through Bergsonian Duration

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"Only through time time is conquered"
T.S. Eliot

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus tries to work through what he calls the "one truly serious philosophical problem": suicide (3). He begins by noting that the human experience is fundamentally marked by absurdity, which he defines as the opposition between the irrational nature of the world and man's innate desire to understand it. The absurd is not merely the passive indifference and irrationality of the world around us; it arises more specifically from our continual failure to make any kind of adequate sense of it. This is why Camus points out that "'It's absurd' means 'It's impossible' but also 'It's contradictory'" (29). The simplest way to deal with absurdity, then, is to remove one term from the equation by committing suicide. Camus resists this solution, because suicide fails to pay heed to the power that the absurd can give to our lives. By living in absurdity, and accepting its fundamental contradiction, we revolt against the temptation to shy away from existence— "that revolt gives life its value" (55). "Living is keeping the absurd alive," and it is this affirmation of the absurdity of our condition that allows us to live purposive and meaningful lives.

However Camus then makes a conclusion that seems quite troubling. He writes that, "belief in the meaning of life always implies a scale of values, a choice, our preferences. Belief in the

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absurd, according to our definitions, teaches the contrary" (60). That is to say, belief in the absurd necessarily cannot ground a value, for "the absurd merely confers an equivalence of the consequences of [our] actions" (67). To value something is to deem it better, greater, or 'more' than something else. If all the consequences of our actions are equivalent, how, then, can we decide what actions we should value? Camus asserts that "what counts is not the best living but the *most* living... Belief in the absurd is tantamount to substituting the quantity of experiences for the quality" (60-61, italics added). At first glance, Camus appears to be advocating a kind of nihilistic hedonism: it doesn't matter which experiences one has, since no meaningful difference can be made between different kinds of experience – what's really important is just to have a lot of them! This surface level interpretation seems well supported by the text, and yet the conclusions it draws are contrary to the existentialist project as such, which strives to give life a meaning and substance through fidelity to the absurd. The way through this apparent contradiction in Camus's 'ethics of quantity,' I argue, requires further investigation into the structure of temporality that *The Myth of Sisyphus* implies. What does Camus exactly mean by quantity, and how does it differ from the commonsense view of quantity? How does one engage in "the most living"? In what way does Camus conceive of temporality, especially in terms of our experience in/of it?

Camus writes that "during every day of an unillustrious life, time carries us. But a moment always comes when we have to carry it. We live on in the future... yet a day comes when a man notices or says that he is thirty. Thus he asserts his youth. But simultaneously he situates himself in relation to time. He takes his place in it" (13). Here, a clear distinction between being "carried by time" and "carrying time" is made. One can either be pushed along by the everyday flow of things, or one can assert oneself and make the choice to determine one's own course of actions. The major implication of this distinction is that time is not some impersonal, objective thing that flows along apart from us– it *is* only in the sense that it is experienced. Furthermore, my experience of time changes depending on whether it is me or

time that is doing the “carrying.” Though this may seem fairly obvious, this point is often obscured when time is thought of as a purely objective phenomenon. For the most part, we tend to think of time in terms of seconds, minutes, and hours, as something that exists independently from any given subject's experience of it. This way of thinking about time, which I call “everyday temporality,” conceals the phenomenological fact that temporality is, at base, a subjective and experiential phenomenon. Camus's ethics of quantity cannot be understood in terms of everyday temporality. Instead, it calls for a richer account of the phenomenology of temporality.

Henri Bergson's theory of the duration provides a useful way for us to do this. At the beginning of his essay, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Bergson contrasts two ways of knowing an entity: “The first implies that we move round the object; the second that we enter into it. The first depends on the point of view at which we are placed and on the symbols by which we express ourselves. The second neither depends on a point of view nor relies on any symbol. The first kind of knowledge may be said to stop at the *relative*; the second, in those cases where it is possible, to attain the *absolute*” (21).

Everyday temporality (what Bergson calls “spatialized time”) is thus relative: we use certain symbols (second, minute, hour) to designate specific periods of time, and all clocks are relatively tuned to a central one in London. By describing everyday temporality as relative, Bergson hints at the disconnect between symbolic representations and actual lived experiences of time. For example, what exactly *is* an hour? 60 minutes, or 3600 seconds. This isn't a very satisfying answer, because immediately afterward we must ask: But what is a minute, or a second? Going all the way back to the atomic definition of a second (yearly agreed upon by a committee of French physicists) is not particularly elucidating, either— at the end of the day, to use the words “second,” “minute,” or “hour” is to, to use Bergson's words, “move round some object.” Yet, this object, *time* as such, is not an object that is, to put it crudely, 'out there in the world.' The relative under-

standing of time neglects the fundamentally subjective nature of time.

On the other hand, an absolute understanding of time comes out of the experience of being in time. When “I insert myself in [an object] by an effort of imagination,” then I gain absolute knowledge of it. “What I experience will depend neither on the point of view I may take up in regard to the object, since I am inside the object itself” (Bergson 21), nor on the way the experience is translated into symbols, because absolute knowledge is not expressed symbolically. Bergson's name for this 'insertion' is intuition, and an intuition of time yields what he calls duration, or pure time. Since duration is constantly evolving— one moment slips into the next with no clear division in between— intuition must also adjust with(in) the duration that is being examined. “This means that [whereas] analysis operates always on the immobile... intuition places itself in mobility, or, what comes to the same thing, in duration” (41). It is impossible to explain a duration in words, because to do so would fix it in place. A description of a duration cannot at all stand in for a duration itself. Again, this may seem plainly obvious, but as Bergson points out frequently, we tend to think that accurately formed concepts can adequately substitute for the things that they symbolise, which is plainly not the case with duration.

“Duration is a heterogeneous flux or becoming” (Bergson 12). This means that a duration is a heterogeneous multiplicity of unequal moments, and that it itself is unstable. Rather than an hour, which will always be comprised of sixty minutes, any particular duration expands or contracts depending on the intuitive experience that a self has within it. It is important to note that it is incorrect to posit a self that is given prior to its experience in duration, or *vice versa*— a subject is only in duration, but a duration is only as it is unfolded through a self. Duration is a becoming because it is not static— the durational self is always pushing forward, always moving towards new expressions of being. The heterogeneous character of duration implies that intuition of a duration can be directed in two directions, either “up” or “down”: “In the first we advance to a more and more attenuated

duration, the pulsations of which, being more rapid than ours, and dividing our simple sensation, dilute its quality into quantity... Advancing in the other direction, we approach a duration which *strains*, contracts, and intensifies itself more and more; at the limit would be... an eternity of life" (48-49).

The duration does not have some fixed quantity of time apportioned to it by an external symbolisation- rather, the intuition itself of a duration is what gives that duration its quantity. This is the first way in which Bergson's theory of temporality contributes to a radical reinterpretation of Camus's ethics of quantity: the quantity of a period of time is determined by an embodied experience within it. Camus writes, "Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm- this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement" (12-13). What he seems to be getting at here is that certain experiences free us from conceiving of time solely in terms of everyday temporality- Bergson calls these experiences intuitions. When I have an intuition of time, I realise that temporality, as duration, is heterogeneous, that its quantity is not at all fixed once and for all. "Above all, freedom means awareness of existence and a life of lucidity; quantity without awareness is worthless" (Sagi 85). It is this awareness that makes the ethics of quantity so powerful, for when I exercise freedom in a duration, I take control of our ability to determine the quantity of my experiences- this is not to say that I have complete freedom when it comes to the quantity of my duration. Since my experience in the world is absurd, it is not as helpful to talk about the quality of a duration; one duration is just as good as another. To think of duration in terms of its quantity, however, is to pay attention to its capacity for new modes of becoming, new possibilities of being. When Bergson writes that "quantity is always quality in a nascent state" (52), he lays out a vital consequence of an ethics of durational quantity: the quantity, or experience, of a duration is what gives the self that exists within it the freedom to become. Camus's ethical injunction, then, is to live each duration to the fullest quantity.

Everyday temporality posits an external flow of time that a self happens to be placed inside. This implies a particular image of time. "We tend to think of time as the connection of homogeneous or equivalent units within some already given whole; we think of a world in which there is time, or a world that then goes through time. We put being before becoming" (Colebrook 41). As we have seen, this is not really the way in which time is experienced. Rather than being an *extensive* connection of well-defined units, time actually is an *intensive* series of durations that are heterogeneous, and always becoming. A duration is an "inexhaustible source of freedom" (Bergson 13), it is always fluxing, flowing, transforming- not every duration is equivalent. The French post-modern philosopher Gilles Deleuze emphasises the ethical and political aspect of durational time. For him, self and duration "are strictly inseparable. Climate, wind, season, hour are not of another nature than the things, animals, or people that populate them, follow them, sleep and awaken within them" (Deleuze and Guattari 263). Again, the line between quality and quantity is blurred. What matters is not the *quality* of time that is being spent, as it might even be meaningless to make such a distinction. Instead, what is important is that the self becomes aware of its own possibilities of unfolding within a duration - in Camus's words, that the self accepts its absurdity in a meaningless world and yet still chooses to exercise freedom. "Experiencing the intensive time of specific durations... fosters intuitive awareness of the creative possibilities unique to those durations with their specific convergence of unfolding forces" (Lorraine 89). It is through an awareness of absurdity in duration that the self can be most free. Each duration contains within it many different paths of being that can be taken. Absurdity tells us that there is no qualitative difference between these paths- it is by *choosing* one in the face of absurdity, with an awareness of absurdity, that one can live with purpose and meaning in intensive time.

Rather than thinking of a present time that is static and divorced from our being in it, Deleuze urges us to see that "the present as durational whole carries with it virtual tendencies that

intensify toward thresholds of actualization in keeping with its dynamic unfolding" (Lorraine 9). To be aware of these thresholds of actualization is to be aware of the absurdity of existence, to tackle it face on instead of shying away from it. This is what Camus means when he claims that, "the absurd man is he who is not apart from time" (72). The opposite of being apart from time is being within it, unfolding intensively in it, being aware of the creative possibilities unique to any given duration. All this must be done with the awareness of absurdity. For Camus, the character of Don Juan exemplifies the absurd life by passionately living in the present. Interestingly enough, Don Juan is an absurd hero even though he acts just the same as any other seducer. "He is an ordinary seducer. Except for the difference that he is conscious, and that is why he is absurd... [He realises] an ethic of quantity... in action" (72). To be ethically in a duration is to affirm its absurdity, its infinite capacity for becoming.

The purpose of this inquiry was to attempt to understand Camus's assertion that "Belief in the absurd is tantamount to substituting the quantity of experiences for the quality." Absurdity dictates that it is pointless to talk about the quality of experiences. All we have left is the experiences themselves, and more importantly, the duration within which these experiences unfold. In the face of the absurd, one must unfold new possibilities of being within their own duration. In other words, we must pursue quantity of experience. To think that quantity is strictly given by a certain number of hours, or years, is a mistake. Bergson and Deleuze show us that it is our intuitive, intensive experience of unfolding within time that gives life its quantity, duration its weight. This explains how at the end of *The Stranger*, Meursault can feel "ready to start life all over again," even though his execution is imminent. By being acutely aware of the absurdity of his unfolding existence, he affirms his freedom, the fact that *he* determines the quantity of his own duration. He does all of this, in spite of that fact that he does not have much time left. We do not have much time either—our lifetimes, seen in spatialized time, are relatively short. However, our duration is as infinite as

our experience within it, and it is in there that we must passionately unfold.

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