

# Absurdism in Daoism\*

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The purpose of this paper is to establish strong common foundational elements between Daoism and Camus' absurdist philosophy. Daoist works will be compared with their ideals that relate to Camus' absurdist novel *The Stranger* and Camus' work *The Myth of Sisyphus*. This will be done by explaining what absurdist philosophy is, then by applying major themes of absurdism to Daoism. These include the meaninglessness of life, its valuelessness, and the realization of mortality.

Camus' absurdist philosophy is centered on the paradox that arises from conventional questions concerning life, such as 'What is the meaning of life?' and presumed answers to them (Aronson 1). Camus believes that life is meaningless, therefore answers to questions regarding its meaning cannot be found and, furthermore, questions concerning its meaning are illogical. Living in the absurd consists in the failure to recognize these truths; that life is meaningless and that answers regarding its meaning cannot be found.

Most people are living in the absurd but fail to notice it. Some may have moments in which they see they are living in the absurd, and others then may become fully aware of living in the absurd. Once a person is aware that life has no meaning and that questions that arise from this notion are futile, one essentially has two choices. One can reject this idea and go back to living in the absurd or one can start to comprehend that life is meaningless. This can be done by understanding mortality, which can occur by being close to death or by having serious suicidal thoughts. Here the person can once again reject the awareness of living in the absurd and go back to just living, can commit suicide, or can decide to exist conscious of the absurd (See appendix 1).

Ronald Aronson explains that "Camus takes the skeptical position that the natural world, the universe, and the human enterprise remain silent about any such purpose [of life]. Since existence itself has no meaning, we must learn to bear irresolvable emptiness" (Aronson 1). Although Daoism does not explicitly claim that life has no meaning, it still reflects the same principles that absurdism does. For example in *Dao Te Ching*, Lao Tsu writes, "Why do people think so little of death? Because the rulers demand too much of life. Therefore the people take

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death lightly. Having little to live on, they know better than to value life too highly” (Tsu 75). The statement does not suggest that life should not be valued, but that life should not be valued too highly. But what is ‘too highly’? Could it be the same amount of value Camus gives life? Camus, again, believes life is meaningless – but he never claims that life should not be valued. *The Myth of Sisyphus* suggests Camus does indeed value life to some extent.

*The Myth of Sisyphus* contains the legend of the Greek mythological figure, Sisyphus, who is doomed to repeat the action of pushing a boulder up a hill, only for it to roll back down each time. Camus uses this story to illustrate his philosophy of absurdism. Sisyphus becomes aware of living in the absurd and then is able to realize his own mortality. Sisyphus, in spite of his new-founded realization and his recognition that the boulder will only roll back again, continues to push the boulder up the hill (Camus, Ethics 432-440). Sisyphus’ actions are the best response to the human existential predicament. Rolling the boulder up the hill has no meaning yet he continues to do it anyway. Life has no meaning but our best response to this is to continue living anyway. One available response to this is suicide. So it is from the Sisyphusian predicament that the question on suicide also arises.

Although suicide is a response to the realization of the absurd, Camus does not believe suicide to be the ideal. Camus states suicide to be “extreme” (Camus, Ethics 435) because those who commit suicide do not fully face their mortality. While Camus does not see much value in suicide, he does see value in the contemplation of suicide. Just like suicidal thoughts and being close to death may result in the awareness of living in the absurd, it is as Lao Tsu’s earlier quote put it: ‘having little to live on’ allows people to take death ‘lightly.’

In a way Sisyphus is a hero of absurdist philosophy. He embraces his fate which allows him to bring value to his life, “[all] Sisyphus’ silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him” (Camus 440). Camus favors Sisyphus’ embrace of the realization of the absurd rather than favoring rejecting this realization, quitting his routine, or killing himself. This is because this act of realization of living in the absurd, or Revolt, can give life value. As Camus states, “[the] contrary of suicide, in fact, is the man condemned to death. That Revolt gives life value” (Camus, Ethics 435). Absurdist and Daoist philosophies show similar attitudes towards the meaninglessness of life, although they may differently assess how to respond to that meaninglessness. Absurdism claims life is meaningless but may have value when in Revolt; whereas Daoism does not assert life to have meaning but suggests that one should flow with life.

Daoist and absurdist works mirror each other both in structure and in meaning. In *Chuang Tzu's Basic Writings*, Chuang Tzu states: "What's more, we go around telling each other, I do this, I do that-but how do we know that this 'I' we talk about has any 'I' to it?" (Tzu 85). Camus in contrast stated in the *Myth of Sisyphus*: "But after the absurd, everything is upset. That idea that 'I am,' my way of acting as if everything has a meaning" (Camus, Ethics 455). Both Chuang Tzu and Camus are questioning the meaning of the self and therefore the meaning of life within a person. The quotation from Camus asserts what the quotation from *Chang Tzu's Basic Writings* suggests, that there is no 'I' and therefore no meaning in life.

In Daoist philosophy, there is the idea of a True Man, a person who others should be like or aspire to be like. Chuang Tzu describes him as follows:

The True Man of ancient times slept without dreaming and woke without care; he ate without savoring... [he] knew nothing of loving life, knew nothing of hating death. He emerged without delight; he went back in without a fuss. He came briskly, he went briskly, and that was all. He didn't forget where he began; he didn't try to find out where he would end (Tzu 74).

Chuang Tzu's True Man seems to possess the same qualities as Camus' Meursault, the protagonist in Camus' novel *The Stranger*. Camus does not intend for one to be like Meursault, rather he is illustrating his absurdist theory through Meursault. In a way the True Man describes Meursault. This is illustrated during the first part of the novel. Here, Meursault is aware of living in the absurd, but has not accepted the idea nor has he been able to realize his own mortality – he is in a limbo.

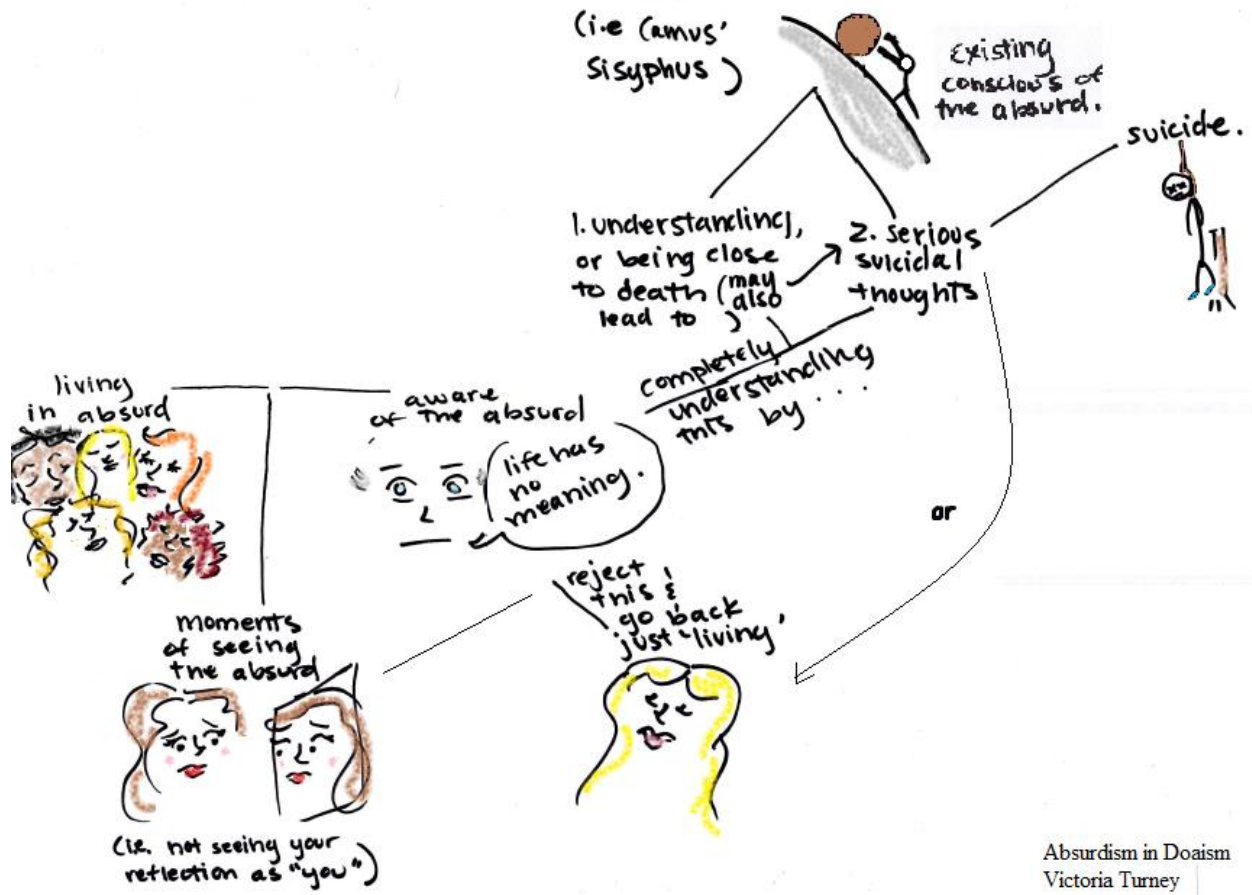
I slept until ten. After that I stayed in bed until noon, smoking cigarettes. I decided not to lunch at Celeste's restaurant as I usually did; they'd be sure to pester me with questions, and I dislike being questioned. So I fried some eggs and ate them off the pan. I did without bread as there wasn't any left, and I couldn't be bothered going down to buy it (Camus, Stranger 15).

Meursault, like the True Man, is going through the motions of life. They both have a careless quality to them. Meursault 'wakes without care' by sleeping until noon and smoking cigarettes straight after. He 'ate without savoring' by eating eggs straight off a pan. Meursault comes and goes 'briskly' as he doesn't want to be bothered, nor does he ever question his future in this first part of the novel- he 'didn't try to figure where he would end'. Meursault never talks about loving life but it is apparent that he 'doesn't hate death'. This is shown through his stoic reaction to his mother's death (Camus, Stranger 15).

Meursault acts casually when he hears of his mother's death. He goes about his day adding in whatever is necessary to the funeral, but nothing more. When he is mentioned as a companion to his mother, Meursault begins to think of her time in the nursing home. "That's why, during the last year, I seldom went to see her. Also, it would have meant losing my Sunday- not to mention the trouble of going to the bus, getting my ticket, and spending two hours on the journey each way" (Camus, *Stranger* 5). Her death does not bother Meursault. Rather he brushes it off as an everyday event. Meursault's reaction to his mother's death is the same as Meng-sun's reaction to his mother's death. "When Meng-sun Ts'ai's mother died, he wailed without shedding any tears, he did not grieve in his heart, and he conducted the funeral without any look of sorrow" (Tzu 84). Daoism regards this way of handling death as correct, as Chuang Tzu remarks, "Meng-sun did all there was to do. He advanced beyond ordinary understanding and he would have simplified things even more...Meng-sun doesn't know why he lives and doesn't know why he dies" (Tzu 84). Camus' Meursault is comparable to both Chuang Tzu's True Man and Meng-sun because he acts in a way that is without meaning. They don't question life, death, or try to give any meaning to the two.

This paper has sought out to establish common foundational elements of Daoism and Camus' absurdist philosophy. It has noted, that these foundational elements center on questioning the meaning of life. Absurdism strongly claims there is no meaning to life, whereas Daoism neither asserts nor denies such meaning. Despite their respective abnegation and ambivalence regarding life's meaning, both agree that life has some sort of value. As Daoism sees it life seems to have an inherent value; while as Camus sees it life can be given value by existing in Revolt, by existing with full consciousness of living in the absurd. They agree that the realization of mortality can result in knowing or giving life value. The common foundational elements in Chuang Tzu's Daoism and Camus' absurdism thus reflect two fundamentally similar philosophical attempts to find value where meaning is unclear or absent.

Appendix 1: Timeline



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