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Article abstract

The world remains silent on the existential questions of human life. This existential silence is the defining moment both in the philosophy of Albert Camus and in the literary work of Franz Kafka. Silence manifests itself in the absurd as well as in the Kafkaesque, but those two perspectives differ in their implications with respect to hope. Kafka's main protagonists in his three big novels are marked by the fluctuation between hope and fear. The uncertainty of their fate contrasts with the relative stability of Camus's figures within his philosophy of the absurd. In contrast to prior research, the mythical figure of Sisyphus is here prominently considered. Sisyphus is without hope, whereas Josef K. (The Trial) is bound to it as to fear itself. The comparison of the two figures deviates from the classical analyses of Politzer (1960), Darzins (1960), Gillon (1961) and Bryant (1969), but also from newer approaches such as Viqez Jimenez (2017). Although the topic of hope has been analysed in some of these works, the article stresses the importance of hope in a terminological triplet. It examines hope, fear and silence in a philosophical perspective as a general approach to the Absurd and the Kafkaesque.

The Kafkaesque and the Absurd – Fear and Hope in the Writings of Franz Kafka and Albert Camus

Lars Straehler-Pohl

Introduction

Josef K., the protagonist in Franz Kafka's 1914/15 novel *The Trial,* awaits the outcome of his arrest and prosecution for an unknown crime. He searches in vain for information about his case, struggles with the situations of daily life, and must bide his time until, finally, he is summarily executed, little wiser to the mystery behind his fate.

Another man, another troubled fate: With great effort, the fallen king Sisyphus rolls an enormous stone up the side of a mountain. Shortly before he reaches the summit, gravity overcomes his effort and the stone rolls back down into the valley. Sisyphus begins his work again, constantly striving to fulfil the futile task that is his punishment by the gods — the never-ending task that is the role model of the absurd in the French-Algerian philosopher Albert Camus' essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, published in 1942.

Both figures are literary creations,[1] neither reaches the goal of his pursuits. As literary creations, there is a symbolic aspect to their lives, insofar as works of art always function as symbols; thus, the specific situations in which they find themselves must be symbolically explored. This aspect is crucial for Camus' work, both in terms of a work of art in general (Camus 2018, 10) and in his own interpretation of Kafka's work, which he remarks on in *The Myth* (Camus 2018, 90). With such clarity on a symbolic level, Camus simultaneously tries to separate the possibilities and limits of interpretation. Introducing the symbolic into the philosophy of the absurd increases the absurdity of an actual situation to absurdity on an existential level.

The need to know *why*[2] lies at the core of human desiderata. Its eternal thread courses through a wide range of literature, achieving a culmination in the stories of Josef K. and Sisyphus, in which existential silence comprises the basis of their actions. Against this background, I will primarily relate these two characters to each other, but will also draw out the similarities and differences between the authors where necessary. By focusing on the mythical figure of Sisyphus, my approach deviates from the work of Viquez Jimenez (2017), who observes Meursault and K. from *The Castle* with respect to *impatience* and *indolence*, and the influential work of Politzer (1960), who investigated the relationship between Meursault from Camus' *The Stranger* and Josef K.[3] and illustrated further possible patterns of explanation after the Second World War.

Two further approaches that directly compare Camus and Kafka should also be mentioned. Darzins (1960) examined the gestural language and the images used in their works. While touching on the concept of hope, Gillon (1961) addressed the idealism that connects the works of Kafka, Camus and Conrad. My approach focuses on a philosophical perspective based on the core terms of *silence*, *fear*, *hope* and how they create or lead to an inner *absurd* or *Kafkaesque* landscape. Some of these aspects have, of

1 Camus emphasises the recreation of myths as an important act. To remain a living and vital entity, Camus noted (2018, 96), the myth must be filled with contemporary life, and thus his rendering of the Ancient Greek figure of Sisyphus is set in the social environment of the 20th century.

2 This need to know why with which *The Myth of Sisyphus* opens is also evident in a practical dimension, when Camus states that the question of suicide is the basic question of philosophy (Camus 2018, 3).

3 Politzer draws attention to the reference character of *The Myth* and *The Stranger* (Politzer 1960, 52).

course, already been addressed. Moeller (1958) looked at *hope* in Camus' *The Fall* from a theological background, underlining the role of the author's biography in his position as a novelist. Bryant (1969) coined the headline *The Delusion of Hope* for his analysis of Kafka's *The Trial*. My approach broadens this line of thinking to a more general understanding of the notions of the *absurd* and the *Kafkaesque* as based on the impulses of *hope* and *fear* as a result of *silence*.

1. The experience of silence

The existential silence is illustrated by everyday life, in general an experience of varying intensity. Our own ideal concept of life, as well as reality itself, does not necessarily allow for a lifetime of perfect happiness, but we do at least desire that our lives be individually understandable events. It is a truism that the lack of want does not necessarily bring eternal happiness. Even though the outside world does not conform to the longings of the inner world, the need to understand remains. It is not a matter of right or wrong answers to these basic, existential questions — they simply cannot be answered. We lack the necessary receptors, the meta-perspective, to understand our own relationship to the world, the universe at large. Our perception is narrowly framed by our own possibilities and subjective constraints. The unanswerable questions are formulated in a language to which we have no access. In the terminology of Albert Camus, we find in this mismatch the *absurd* — not in the world itself, but our relationship to it in its great and eternal silence. We seek rational answers to the totality of all entities and events, but these are only to be found in the irrational. Our questions are thus silenced. Camus introduces here two terms: *nostalgia for unity* and the *appetite for the absolute* (Camus 2018, 19), signifying the desire of the mind for unity with and understanding of the world. The absurd, however, divides, and at the same time, it is also our link, our connection, to the world; the absurd is always a bidirectional entity that only exists in a duality.

2. Patterns of behaviour

The symbolic dimension of the two figures, Josef K. and Sisyphus, must be examined in relation to their actions as human figures who define themselves through their responses and behaviour within specific situations.[4] Here the role of hope becomes a linchpin for Josef K. and Sisyphus in resolving their fundamental questions. While Camus introduces the term of hope in his research into the absurd, Kafka, in his novels, describes the relationship between the person and the world surrounding him. The human figure poses questions, but these are never answered. And yet, in a very "Kafkaesque" fashion, the answers seem to be very close. The literary world of Kafka is set in the circumstances of 20th-century social structures, in which we find that there are apparently principles designed to regulate human life as well as adherents to these principles (willing or otherwise). These principles are part of a greater bureaucracy that keeps its followers always some steps away from the possibility of a dynamically real relationship in which successful bidirectional communication is possible. Kafka's figures live in the courage of waiting, where patience has an enormously important meaning. Patience and simple waiting are connected to the hope that seemingly unresolvable problems will be cleared up and the protagonist freed from his current situation. The steps taken in achieving a goal seem to be few, which keeps the patience of Kafka's characters alive. Faced with unusual situations, his protagonists remain calm and follow routine. They see no reason to question the lack of simple answers from the authorities, as they are conditioned to function as members of human society. It is a natural human reflex to repeat the most

4 The relationship between concrete action and the development of oneself is a basic thought within the early philosophy of Existentialism, drawn by Sören Kierkegaard (Kierkegaard 1941).

important questions; Josef K., in fact, repeatedly inquires, both directly and indirectly, about the charges against him (Kafka 2009b, 2, 4, 6). Right up until the moment of his death, he expects the affair to turn out to be a matter of confusion or misunderstanding and not only to be freed from it, but also to be understood. He truly believes that a sensible and appropriate response to the situation will lead to a better outcome. He is bound to the burden of hope and this hope becomes his own burden, which he carries to the very end.

Sisyphus' burden, on the other hand, is a reoccurring one. He will never be at rest; the arc will never bend; the stone will always roll into the valley and Sisyphus will always follow. He does not repeatedly question himself or others. His relationship to the world is as with the stone, fully insensible to questions or negotiations. If, one evening, things were to turn out differently and the stone did not roll back down the hill, it is possible to imagine that he would be shaken in surprise. Thus, it is possible to imagine that a certain degree of *happiness*[5] may arise within the absurd. Josef K., on the other hand, moves in a one-directional world of adversity.

3. Camus reads Kafka

Camus read Kafka. This does not change the way we relate the two figures of Josef K. and Sisyphus, but it deepens our insight into Camus' relation to Kafka. Camus is writing as both philosopher and novelist.[6] Although stressing that he is not an existentialist, Camus deals with typical existentialist topics and likewise fulfils the double role we see in the biographies of existentialists such as Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, whose essays, novels and plays complement one another and serve to address philosophical questions on various levels. In this context, the role of literature in one's own philosophical work becomes essential. Literature and literary figures become manifestations of philosophical reflection and prototypes of human thinking and behaviour. Through the whole of *The Myth of Sisyphus,* Camus' thinking is reflected in his literary figure of the mythical Sisyphus. While Kafka played an important role in his early thinking, he finds his way into Camus' telling of the myth quite late, in the 1948 edition, in which he titles an additional chapter *Hope and the Absurd in the Work of Franz Kafka*. Historically, it would seem unlikely that the reference to a Jewish author would have been published in France under the National Socialists. The inclusion in the third edition is not a coincidental later adaptation, but the utilization of an opportunity whose necessity was not previously feasible. Evidence of Kafka's significance for Camus is reflected not only in his desire to visit Prague while on his European trip,[7] but in his diaries as well (Camus 2008). Wernicke reports Camus' interpretation of Kafka as typical of the French reception of Kafka in the 1940s (1994, 55). Camus integrates Kafka into his essay to point out the role of hope, the connection between the expected and the unexpected in Kafka's literature – the *fantastic moment*, if you will.

Camus attacks the existentialists by arguing that they share the same foundations in their view of the absurd, but suffer from a lack of consistency. The basic position of existentialism, with its roots in Sören Kierkegaard in the 19th century and the German philosophers Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger in the 20th century, is characterised by Camus as the ability to always find a way out of the absurd. Camus describes this *leap*

5 (Camus 2018, 96)

6 In the early 1940s, Camus was simultaneously writing *The Myth of Sisyphus* and working on his novel *The Stranger,* which was published in 1942.

7 The numerous biographical parallels between Camus and Kafka are described by Horst Wernicke. Both suffered from tuberculosis, died in their forties and left behind fragments of their work, which was not only widely interpreted, but also led to various school of thoughts (Wernicke 1994, 54).

(Camus 2018, 30), in which hope often plays the primary role, as philosophical suicide.[8] The latter reasons are not taken from life itself, but are found in eternal resources. Kierkegaard relates this to faith in God, Heidegger to metaphysics (Camus 2018, 23).

Contrarily, Camus chose to implement a philosophy of the absurd. It is based on the same premise as existentialism, but stays close to the absurd without finding an external metaphysical cause. The existential silence remains in its ontological shape. The ontological status of the absurd is a final cause (Camus 2018, 44). Camus derives two consequences from his philosophy on human action and the question of how humans should lead their lives: intensity and revolt. Revolt is an inner state, but also has to be understood from the perspective of political implications. The trust in hope and the *leap* out of absurdity, in the political dimension, entails the danger of passivity.

4. Kafka writes in absurdity

Kafka lived during a period when our ability to understand and explain old patterns was heavily inhibited by many changes. After the European experience of the First World War and its harbingers, the general problem of understanding becomes a category that is often abstract and can also be experienced in broad terms. Kafka does not treat this in a philosophical way in the strict academic sense, but he does so by means of his art, in which he certainly takes a philosophical stance. Kafka places his characters in a world that seems normal. His characters have regular jobs, human relationships and face common challenges. Looking at the main characters of his three major novels, we find Josef K. (Kafka 2009b) working in a bank, Karl Rossmann[9] (Kafka 2008) finding his way across the USA, and K., a land surveyor waiting to start the job for which he has obviously been engaged (Kafka 2009a). In each of these developments, there is a point where something fantastic, irregular occurs. This happens in such a way that one senses the need for a perceptual correction — it is not a troubled or confused situation that needs to be cleared up, but rather our clouded perception. Over and over, mundane events occur in parallel to and become linked with fantastic ones. Much like the connecting element in the absurd, such Kafkaesque situations form the glue between the realistic and the fantastic. In such a moment, Josef K. awakes and is suddenly confronted with an investigation based on unknown allegations. There may be something that legitimizes the injustice that he faces at that moment, but at the same time there are principles to be upheld and adhered to that make it possible for the next steps to be taken in an old and familiar way. In these moments, hope is not something ecstatically far removed from reality, but rather something very close to the everyday life-as-normal experience. Thus, the surprise for the protagonist as well as the reader when the situation unexpectedly changes. The detention of Josef K. by the two men who eventually kill him, thus follows a semblance of situational logic. Cruel though it here would seem to be, a trial, with all its evidence gathering and argumentation, is naturally followed by a verdict.

5. Silence, Hope and Fear

In both absurdity and the Kafkaesque, we face the silence. The quality of this silence is crucial for its consequences. In any case, the desired connection to the world is not given. The silence leads to a discontent, the feeling of a mismatch, but does not necessarily create a feeling of fear. Silence can be connected to a feeling of hope – the hope for fulfilment – but also to an awareness of a very real situation of fear. It is a question of the expectations and consequences to be drawn from the silence. These differ in the works of Kafka and Camus.

8 The term of the *leap* first appears in Kierkegaard. (Ferreira 1998, 207 ff).

9 The article uses the English notation *Rossmann* that is used in the translations, instead of the original German *Roßmann*.

5.1 Hope

Hope remains close to Kafka's characters; it haunts them like their fear. In *The Trial,* hope exists right up until the very last moment of Josef K.'s life, in the last line of the novel:

> Who was that? A friend? A good person? Somebody who was taking part? Somebody who wanted to help? Was he alone? Was it everyone? Would anyone help? Were there objections that had been forgotten? There must have been some. (Kafka 2009, 127).

Why this hope in Kafka's characters? Because they have good reason to hope. They fulfil the demands of systems built for humans and human needs, systems with defined processes and goals. Kafka's protagonists are overwhelmed by their situations, but these are situations that presumably can be solved by means of the regular tools of daily living: patience, assertiveness, courtesy and so on. It is interesting to see that even in the fantastic moments in his novels, the trust in existing systems still functions and still relies on the familiar portfolio of human interactions. When Gregor Samsa, in the novella *Metamorphosis,* awakens as an oversized insect, his first reaction is minor astonishment at his changed body, yet, in the next instant, his main concern is not to be late for work (Kafka 2013, 7).

Looking at Kafka's three most important novels, *The Trial, The Castle,* and *Amerika,* in each case we find three young men bound to principles that they share. Josef K. works as an officer within the familiar bureaucracy of a bank. Faith in the legitimacy of court proceedings and trial, with its various steps of investigations, interviews and evidence-gathering, is a familiar part of his world. In *The Castle,* K. is offered a position within the central administration — the Castle. Despite an initial miscommunication with the castle authorities, he anticipates facing the usual sequence of events and routines associated with starting a new job. Karl Rossmann (Kafka 2008) is punished for nothing more than conforming to the rules of social decorum — he is offered and accepts an invitation.

The expectations of these three figures are conformant with the social and behavioural systems and conventions within which they function. A well-defined, routine process should by nature not lead to any surprises. It is essential that Josef K. and Karl in *Amerika* do not anticipate needing any help from outside the system at the beginning of their journeys, but instead try to maintain their status and position by means of the logic within the system. K. begins an affair with a woman who is already well-connected with the inner circles of the Castle. Despite his attraction to her, it is her access to the Castle that he seeks. The pleasure is less in the moment together with her, but more so in the investment in an opportunity for his future.[10]

It would seem that Kafka's protagonists must recognise that they are pursuing an illusion[11] and that their activities do not carry them forward. From our perspective, the steps they take are small indeed, especially compared to the time they spend waiting. Although always in motion, the end state is stagnation. *The Trial* follows Josef K. over the course of an entire year, from his 30th birthday until his death, the day before his 31st birthday. In that time, he talks to many people and builds up various strategic and personal relationships, all in an effort to gain any kind of knowledge about his pending

10 The role of women in Kafka's work is remarkable in general. Much has been published on this topic. The analysis by Deleuze and Guattari provides a brief overview (Deleuze, Guattari 2003).

11 The question of whether the Castle exists or is just a figment of K.'s imagination has been discussed with its consequences by Viquez Jimenez (2014).

fate. In the end, he has learned nothing which will guide or inform him and remains to the very end without the slightest insight whatsoever into the reason for his trial.

Kafka's characters live in doubt and in abeyance. They are close, too close, to a solution and, yet, live in fear. And what awaits them is a threat. They require a certain dynamic to maintain order; their goal is too close to ignore. Still, in the end — and not even dying is the major event — when they finally collapse, there might still be a moment of regret. Why do they wait —for their trial, or the next assignment, instead of choosing to live something more closely resembling a happy life? Other than hope, what they fear are substantial threats that make it impossible to achieve inner or outer stability.

The lack of hope for Camus' Sisyphus initially underscores the tragic nature of this figure,

> If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? (Camus 2018, 87).

but at the same time it gives him stability as a basis for his *Absurd Freedom*.[12] Hope offers possibilities, variants and constant internal discussions about our relationship to our own environment. Sisyphus as a mythical figure is an extreme, idealistic figure, particularly with respect to his awareness of his own hopelessness and the consequences, about which he remains indifferent. In contrast, the hopeless Meursault of *The Stranger* is merely resigned.

5.2 Fear and Anxiety

Kafka's characters suffer from both anxiety and fear. They face physical harm, but also the unknown. Hope is the antagonistic power in the psychodynamics of Kafka's protagonists. The burden of the future weighs on them. Kafka shows them no mercy.[13] Inconsistency and threat must be faced. Not only do Josef K. and Karl Rossman not know how or why certain things happen, they must always reckon with the worst happening.

Perhaps K. is the happiest of the three protagonists, as the anxiety faced by the inhabitants of the Castle and the surrounding valley affects him only indirectly. Kafka has an ability to stir up this fear within the reader, who sometimes wants to shake the characters and shout "wake up"! His protagonists face specific fears, but are primarily affected by anxiety and a sense of a fundamental uncertainty.

We must also examine the main characters in Camus' novels. Their reactions to their environment logically relate to their actions and fit into familiar structures. They are confronted with difficult fates, but they are not surprised by this, as their fate follows a familiar path. They are aware of their situation. Dr. Rieux is fighting the spread of the plague (Camus 2011). He is aware of the way the disease is transmitted, its symptoms, and its causes. In *The Stranger,* Meursault has killed a human and knows the consequences and that he will be punished. His capture, trial, time in prison and even his future execution are all part of a familiar structure. He is indifferent about the time spent in prison. Only at the very end of the novel is he finally emotionally effected by what he did and what is about to happen. Josef K.'s world, on the other hand, is affected surprisingly unreal. The course of logic has been disrupted. The unpredictable world in

12 In the paragraph he writes: *But at the same time the absurd man realizes that hitherto he was bound to that postulate of freedom on the illusion of which he was living*. (Camus 2018, 43) and stresses the chances of an absurd life: *The absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end and deplete himself*. (Camus 2018, 41).

13 The unfinished novels *Amerika* and *The Castle* have a clear ending described by Kafka in his diaries: Rossmann and K., the innocent and the guilty, both executed without distinction in the end, the guilty one with a gentle hand, rather pushed aside than struck down. (Kafka 1988, 343)

which he sees himself transformed into an insect does not correspond to one in which humans die of the plague.

There is one obvious difference between Meursault and Josef K., both of whom are condemned to death: one knows his fate and has no reason to hope, the other does not and wavers between hope and fear. Meursault is fully aware of his crimes. He has murdered someone. Camus's characters all have reasons to fear the future, but are unaffected by this, and are sometimes even close to enjoying a certain peace of mind. Kafka, however, despite the difficult fate he leaves his characters to face, does mean well with them. Reflecting on the fact that he did not help a drowning woman, Camus' Jean-Baptiste Clamence says in *The Fall*:

> Young woman! Throw yourself in the water again so that I might have once more the opportunity to save us both! A second time – huh! That would be rash! Just imagine, dear colleague, if someone were to take us at our word. You'd have to do it. Brrr…The water's so cold! But don't worry. It's too late now, it will always be too late. Thank goodness! (Camus 2006, 90)

6. The Kafkaesque and the Absurd

The term *Kafkaesque* is commonly used to characterize a senseless or seemingly absurd situation. This subtle misuse is often not necessarily (or not only) due to a lack of understanding of his literature, but also to the need for a term to fittingly describe the overwhelming sense of confusion and absurdity that we often face, particular when swept up in the gears of officious bureaucracy. The misunderstanding is based on the commonplace confusion we face when familiar routines and processes suddenly stop functioning. Ivana Edwards, cites the example in the *New York Times* of Frederik R. Karl watching people waiting for a bus that never comes (Edwards 1991) — an unfulfilled expectation, certainly, but nothing (really) out of the ordinary, neither illogical, nor impossible or unusual. The distinction between logical processes (no matter how illogical they may seem) and the truly unanswerable, the eternal questions for which we lack the language, let alone the understanding and necessary perspective, is crucial for understanding the absurd. It is the level of fear that separates the *absurd* from the *Kafkaesque*.

The Kafkaesque fear is the dread, the apprehension, that we face in a specific situation at a specific moment. The unfathomability of this dread, this unknowing, however, is not resolved by hope. The absurd can be a spontaneous discovery *on any street corner* (Camus 2018, 14), but the Kafkaesque is associated with the thought that there should at least be a chance that a particular situation is going to be resolved. That life will have its absurd moments, generally, is something that we can accept; that we will die without the answers to the most fundamental questions about life is not a surprise. The philosophy of the absurd offers a basis for inner revolt. The Kafkaesque equips its uncomprehending protagonists with hope, but also an inability to accept.

7. Concluding Remarks

Camus ends *The Myth* with a final view on Sisyphus (2018, 98):

> The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

Camus speaks of the hero who has accepted his fate in an absurd relationship with the world. He has no further illusions, but can only profit from the power of (inner) revolt. It is astounding that the Kafkaesque view of the world is so much darker than Camus's philosophy of the absurd with its meagre postulation of happiness. Perhaps this is the result of a certain stability or fundament in the absurd that is missing in the

Kafkaesque. Josef K. exists in a state of permanent discomfort. In *The Fall,* written years after *The Myth* and published in 1956, a description appears that physically visualises the instability of Kafka's world:

> That's right: you don't know about the dungeon known in the Middle Ages as 'little ease`. Usually, they left you there for life. It was different from other prison cells because of its clever dimension: it was not high enough to stand up in, but not wide enough to lie down. You had to adopt an awkward position and live diagonally. Asleep, you slumped, awake you squatted. (Camus 2006, 68)

The darkness grows out of this instability, this permanent confinement, but also out of the lack of knowledge of what lies beyond. The silence leaves open possibilities that Camus defines in his *Philosophy of the Absurd* (2018). In Kafka's *The Trial*, even the silence is unpredictable. Josef K. listens intently to the very last for a response, a sound, that might be an answer to one of his questions, unable to discern whether even the possibility for such still exists. Is there room for happiness in the life of Josef K.? Clearly not. He would in fact have been happy with much less than Sisyphus, but when I look at him, he is dying in the stone pit: "Like a dog!" (Kafka 2009b, 127).

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