

Camus' Feeling of the Absurd

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In recent years an increasing number of analytic philosophers have become interested in the issue of the meaning of life (e.g., Cottingham 2003; Metz 2014; Wolf 2010; for an overview see Metz 2013). The majority of these philosophers have assumed that some lives are in fact meaningful. One among many conditions that have been claimed to be necessary and sometimes even sufficient for achieving meaning are certain affective mental states, such as emotions or feelings. Harry Frankfurt, for example, has argued that our lives are meaningful to the extent to which we care for or love things (1982a, b, 2004). And according to Susan Wolf, meaning requires both that we pursue objectively worthwhile projects and that we emotionally identify with or take pride in these projects (2010).

In contrast to such non-nihilistic approaches, a number of contemporary analytic philosophers have also denied that meaning can be or at least actually is ever achieved at all (e.g., Martin 1993; Murphy 1982; Nagel 1986; Smith 2003). In the context of these views affective mental states have received far less attention. For example, nihilists have failed to investigate in detail which of these states (if any) promote recognizing the fact of life's meaninglessness or which of these states result from this recognition. In advancing our understanding of these issues it therefore seems helpful to consider corresponding (typically more detailed and elaborated) debates in continental philosophy (e.g., Heidegger 1962; Sartre 1969, 2000). A particularly promising conception of nihilism's affective dimension, and one that is particularly compatible with analytic approaches, has been provided by the French existentialist philosopher Albert Camus.¹

¹ Camus himself explicitly denied that he was a philosopher, and an existentialist in particular; see 1965: 1427, 1995: 113, 2005: 30. On an ordinary understanding of these terms, however, the above classification is surely appropriate.

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For Camus the fact that we cannot achieve meaning is part of what constitutes the so called absurd. He hence mainly discusses meaninglessness-related affective states under the heading of the “feeling of the absurd”. Most clearly and thoroughly, this feeling is addressed in his earlier works, in particular in the *Myth of Sisyphus* (2005).² Here Camus introduces an important distinction. He distinguishes between (1) the feeling of the absurd in a narrow sense and (2) the “appearances” of this feeling (also called “feelings of the absurd”), by which he means the ways in which the feeling of the absurd manifests itself (2005: 9–10). Moreover, he discusses weariness, anxiety, strangeness, nausea, and horror in the face of one’s mortality as forms of such appearances (2005: 11–14).

Camus-scholars have so far paid little attention to his thoughts about the feeling of the absurd (for notable exceptions see Bowker 2013; Carroll 2007; Reiff 1999). This non-consideration presumably traces back to two facts. First, the above mentioned remarks in the *Myth of Sisyphus* are rather brief. It therefore seems as if Camus did not ascribe much significance to the feeling of the absurd. And second, in examining this feeling Camus also repeatedly stressed that it is too “indeterminate”, “vague”, and “elusive” to allow of characterizations (2005: 9–10), and that it therefore cannot be appropriately analyzed at all (2005: 10).

On closer consideration, however, the above facts do not warrant the feeling of the absurd’s non-consideration. Camus only said so little about this feeling because in his view it had already been helpfully examined by other philosophers and is well-known to ordinary people (2005: 14). He left no doubt that he actually regarded the feeling as highly significant (2005: 10–11, 27). Moreover, Camus’ claim that the feeling of the absurd cannot be characterized must be qualified as well. For one thing he only intended this claim to apply to the feeling of the absurd in the narrow sense, and not to the appearances of this feeling (which, as mentioned above, he actually characterized himself). For another thing, Camus also granted that even the feeling of the absurd in its narrow sense can at least be defined in terms of its function (as will be shown in this paper).

If the above considerations are correct then a detailed philosophical analysis of the feeling of the absurd is both valuable as a piece of Camus scholarship and may also helpfully inform and complement nihilistic accounts of the meaning of life in analytic philosophy. This paper aims at providing such an analysis. It will investigate Camus’ conception of the feeling of the absurd in three steps. First, I will examine what Camus meant by the term “feeling” (Sec. 1). Second, I will investigate his notion of the “absurd” (Sec. 2). And third, based on the results of these considerations, I will determine the particular relation in which a feeling must stand to the absurd in order to qualify as a “feeling of the absurd” (Sec. 3).

² The relation between Camus’ early and late philosophy is controversial. Some commentators have argued that his early and late philosophy form a “unity” (Schlette 1975: 181), or that they are at least linked by an “intellectual continuum” (Foley 2008: 4; see also Hochberg 1965: 96; Pieper 1984: 9). But this is most likely wrong (see, e.g., Mairhofer 1989: 89–98, 1999: 7; Pözlner 2014: 99; Sagi 2002: 46, 113; van der Poel 2007: 19). There is a significant gap between Camus’ views about the nature and normative consequences of the absurd before the last years of World War II (e.g., 1946, 2005, 2008) and his views after this time (e.g. 1989, 1991). One reason why Camus mainly addressed the feeling of the absurd in his early work is that this work focuses more on the individual rather than on society.

There are different legitimate approaches to interpreting Camus. Here I will take a rather conservative approach. This means that I will try to reconstruct Camus' conception of the feeling of the absurd in a way that is as faithful to his own statements as possible. Only where taking these statements at face value would introduce severe implausibility or incoherence will I resort more strongly to what he *should* have (rather than to what he actually) said. Note that more liberal approaches (see, e.g., Bowker 2013, 2014; Sagi 2002) may yield valid and interesting conceptions of the feeling of the absurd as well, and are hence no less worthy of being pursued. They just do not yield the kind of conception that I am interested in here.

Assuming my conservative approach, it will turn out that the feeling of the absurd is not, strictly speaking, a feeling. It is rather a conjunction of a mood (feeling of the absurd in the narrow sense) and of emotions that this mood tends to give rise to (appearances of the feeling of the absurd). Moreover, both moods and emotions qualify as absurd in virtue of their promoting the discovery of the absurd, i.e., the discovery that humans search for meaning, but the world does not answer this search.

1 Feelings

Let us begin by asking what Camus meant when he talked about the feeling of the absurd as a particular kind of feeling.

English-speaking psychologists and philosophers typically distinguish between different kinds of affective mental states, such as feelings, emotions and moods (e.g., de Sousa 2013; Johnson 2009). In the *Myth of Sisyphus* Camus used the term “feeling” in a sense that appears to be ambiguous with regard to this differentiation (as a result of his general lack of conceptual rigor, and maybe also as a result of the fact that the differentiation does not straightforwardly translate into French terms; see 1942). To my mind, an important step in illuminating Camus' conception of the feeling of the absurd is to reconstruct it in the more fine-grained affective vocabulary just mentioned. So which particular kind of affective mental state had Camus in mind when he characterized the feeling of the absurd? Did he mean a feeling, an emotion or a mood?

The first hypothesis to consider is of course that Camus meant just what he said, namely that the feeling of the absurd is a feeling (a “sentiment”, as he put it in the French original). This interpretation can be ruled out rather quickly. Psychologists and philosophers typically use the term “feeling” to refer to conscious experiences of our own bodily or mental states, for example, to pleasure or pain, or to what it is like to love or to hate someone.³ But neither the feeling of the absurd in the narrow sense nor its appearances can be coherently understood as feelings in this sense.

Take, first, the feeling of the absurd in the narrow sense. Camus describes this feeling as “indeterminate”, “vague” and “elusive”. Feelings *qua* conscious

³ William James (1884) and Carl Lange (1885) argued that particular kinds of feelings are not only aspects of emotions, but are identical to them. Contemporary emotion researchers mostly reject this view.

experiences of bodily or mental states, however, tend to be rather determinate, clear and definable (at least more determinate, clear and definable than other kinds of affective mental states). We can easily tell how pleasure differs from pain, how experiences of love differ from experiences of hate, and so on. Moreover, the examples that Camus provides of appearances of the feeling of the absurd also suggest that these appearances must not be understood as feelings *qua* conscious experiences of bodily or mental states. Both weariness, strangeness, nausea, and horror are much more readily classified as belonging to other kinds of affective mental states (as will be explained below).

If Camus did not use the term “feeling” to denote conscious experiences of our own bodily or mental states, to which kind of affective mental states did he intend to refer to instead? As mentioned above, philosophers and psychologists typically distinguish at least two further relevant kinds: emotions and moods. The precise nature of these states is highly contested. However, there is at least agreement about some of emotions’ and moods’ most basic conceptual features (see, e.g., de Sousa 2013; Johnson 2009; Solomon 2008: 10–14).

Emotions are commonly defined as rather specific responses to internal or external stimuli. Moreover, they are supposed to be intentional, i.e., directed at specific objects. For example, a person’s fear of a big dog barking at her is most likely a response to stimuli involving the dog (such as the person’s perception or memory of it), and the fear is also *about* the dog. The duration of emotions tends to be rather short, typically in the range of some minutes or even only seconds. During this short time, emotions fill up our conscious awareness to a significant extent. This high intensity likely relates to the fact that emotions come along with specific dispositions to behavioral, cognitive and affective changes. When a person is afraid, for example, she may tremble, her heart rate may increase, she may start sweating; and these physiological activations may lead her to run away or shout for help.

Moods are commonly defined as contrasting with emotions with regard to all of the above mentioned features (see, e.g., Deonna et al. 2015: 195; de Sousa 2013; Johnson 2009; but see, e.g., DeLancey 2006). To begin with, moods are rather general and somewhat indeterminate. We typically characterize them in more unspecific terms than emotions; as “good”, “bad” or “tense”, for example. Moods are not responses to specific stimuli or intentional in nature either. For instance, although a person’s bad mood may have partly originated in her being angry with somebody, this mood itself is not a response to some perceived offense or directed at such an offense. This non-intentionality of moods is also reflected in English language. While it makes sense to say “I am angry that you broke my vase”, “I am in a bad mood that you broke my vase” sounds rather strange (see DeLancey 2006: 528). Finally, moods also differ from emotions in that they can last up to days or weeks, tend to be much less intense, and come along with dispositions to behavioral, cognitive and affective changes which are more general and often less strong.

Table 1 Widely accepted features of emotions versus moods (see, e.g., de Sousa 2013; Johnson 2009; Solomon 2008: 10–14)

	Emotions	Moods
Specificity and Determinacy	High	Low
Response to Specific Stimulus	Yes	No
Intentionality	Yes	No
Duration	Short	Long
Intensity	High	Low
Dispositional Effects	Specific, Strong	General, Weak

The following table summarizes the above-mentioned widely accepted features of moods and emotions (see Table 1).⁴

Above I have argued that Camus did not mean feelings (in the sense in which this term is commonly used by philosophers and psychologists) when he discussed the feeling of the absurd. May he have meant emotions or moods?

Let us first consider the feeling of the absurd in its narrow sense. To repeat, Camus characterizes this feeling as “indeterminate”, “vague” and “elusive”. He also suggests that it is more indeterminate and vague than mental states that we would ordinarily qualify as emotions, such as jealousy and generosity (2005: 9). Finally, in discussing the feeling of the absurd in its narrow sense Camus repeatedly draws on the metaphor of an “absurd climate” (2005: 9, 10, 27). Compared to the weather, the climate only admits of gradual and small changes, and by definition ranges over a long period of time. All of these characterizations strongly suggest that what Camus meant when he spoke of the feeling of the absurd in the narrow sense was a certain kind of mood (see Reiff 1999: 26).

To the extent that commentators have addressed Camus' conception of the feeling of the absurd they have typically assumed that the feeling in its narrow sense and its appearances are instantiations of one and the same kind of affective mental states (see, e.g., Reiff 1999: 29). On this assumption we should find that Camus understands the appearances of the feeling of the absurd as moods as well. At least one of his examples of these appearances may indeed be classified as a mood, namely anxiety. In his brief discussion of this state (2005: 12) Camus refers to Martin Heidegger, who understood anxiety as being unspecific and at least somewhat indeterminate, and who argued that it is not a response to or directed at a specific event in the world, but rather relates to being-in-the-world as such (1962: 174–176, 230–231).

That said, there is strong evidence that Camus generally understands the feeling of the absurd's appearances as emotions rather than as moods. Consider, for instance, his examples of weariness and horror in the face of one's own mortality. Both of these mental states are relatively specific and determinate. They are also responses to specific stimuli and have specific intentional objects. Weariness is typically a response to and about one's performing or having to perform certain routine acts, such as having to go to work every day (Camus 2005: 11; see Sec. 3

⁴ While these features are widely accepted, their acceptance is not universal. Scholars in the psychoanalytic tradition, for example, deny that emotions are intentional. Some proponents of so called “cognitivist” theories of emotions have also denied that emotions are closely linked to actions.

below). Horror tends to be a response to witnessing the death of other living beings, and is about the fact that some day one is going to die as well (see also Sec. 3 below). Both weariness and horror also tend to be quite intense (though in very different ways), and come along with dispositions to quite specific and strong behavioral, affective and cognitive changes. While weariness may correlate with a lack of motivation, tiredness and weak forms of nausea, horror of one's mortality often manifests itself in panic and physiological changes such as increased heart rate and blood pressure.

These considerations suggest that in speaking of the "feeling of the absurd", Camus did not only refer to a mood (feeling of the absurd in the narrow sense), but also to emotions (appearances of the feeling of the absurd). He himself did not explain how this mood and these emotions relate to each other. There is a natural way of understanding their relation, though. Moods do not only influence people's behavior and cognitions, but also other affective mental states, including our emotions. If a person is in a bad mood, for example, she is prone to getting angry, but unlikely to become amused. The relation between the absurd mood and absurd emotions may thus be understood as one of causation. The absurd mood causally promotes the emergence of absurd emotions; it constitutes the soil, so to speak, on which absurd emotions (such as weariness, nausea or horror) tend to grow.

There is at least some evidence that Camus understood the relation between the feeling of the absurd in the narrow sense (i.e., the absurd mood) and the appearances of this feeling (i.e., the absurd emotions) in this way. In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, for example, he wrote that the emotions he is interested in "take with them their own universe" and "light up with their passion an exclusive world in which they recognize their climate" (2005: 9). This entails that there is a specific universe and climate (a specific mood) that typically accompanies these emotions.

2 The Absurd

The second step in gaining a better understanding of Camus' conception of the feeling of the absurd consists in analyzing his usage of the term "absurd".

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* the absurd is characterized in a variety of different ways, some of which are confusing and incoherent (e.g., 2005: 4, 12, 13, 26, 48). A useful starting point for examining Camus' conception is his engagement with cases that people ordinarily classify as absurd: a case in which an innocent person is accused of a horrible crime, a case in which a virtuous man is accused of desiring his own sister, and a case in which a man attacks a group of heavily armed fighters with a bare sword (2005: 28). What all these cases have in common, Camus argues, is that they involve a certain kind of relation, namely a relation of tension, or disproportion. On the one hand we have a person's aspirations. On the other hand there is a world that does not meet these aspirations.

From cases such as these Camus concludes that the essence of the concept of the absurd is a tension between human aspirations and a disappointing world:

The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation. (Camus 2005: 28–29)
 ‘It’s absurd’ means ‘It’s impossible’ but also: ‘It’s contradictory.’ (Camus 2005: 28)

Camus believes that the term “absurd” does not only apply to specific situations within humans’ lives (such as the cases mentioned above), but also to their existences as a whole. Humans by nature search for meaning. They long for becoming one with the world that surrounds them (unity), for understanding (intellectual clarity), and for performing actions that are valuable in and on themselves (intrinsic value). However, in a world devoid of God (e.g. 1939: 74, 85; 1946: 120–122; see also Paepke 1958: 49) this search for meaning is only met with indifference (2005: 26) or even “hostility” (2005: 13).⁵

At this point of his effort man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. (Camus 2005: 26)

[...] the absurd [...] is that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints, my nostalgia for unity, this fragmented universe and the contradiction that binds them together. (Camus 2005: 48)

Our above considerations suggest that Camus conceived of the absurd as a tension or discrepancy between humans’ search for meaning and a disappointing world. This interpretation is accepted by most commentators (see, e.g., Aronson 2011; Hall 1960: 26–27; Hengelbrock 1982: 69; Mélançon 1983: 21; Müller-Lauter 1975: 119; Tesak-Gutmansbauer 1993: 12). Unclarity and disagreement have mainly arisen with regard to the *status* of the absurd, i.e., the question of what kind of thing Camus purported to refer to when he spoke of the absurd in the above sense.

Most naturally, Camus is taken to regard the absurd as partly internal and partly external to human consciousness. It is internal in that it entails a particular psychological fact (the fact that humans search for meaning). And it is external in that it entails a particular fact about the non-conscious world (the fact that the world does not provide such meaning) (e.g., Aronson 2011; Cruickshank 1959: xiii; Mélançon 1983: 21; Pieper 1994: 7; Simpson 2005). Let us call this interpretation of the status of the absurd the “metaphysical” interpretation of the absurd (as it involves a claim about the fundamental reality of the world).

Recently, some commentators have suggested replacing the metaphysical interpretation with a phenomenological or psychological one. According to these alternative interpretations, Camus regarded the absurd as wholly located within consciousness. Avi Sagi, for example, argues that the absurd consists in humans *experiencing* themselves as searching for meaning and *experiencing* the world as not providing meaning (2002: 47). And according to Matthew Bowker, the absurd is

⁵ Note that the sense in which Camus considers unity and intellectual clarity to be unachievable is a perfect and continuous sense. In particular in his earliest works he concedes that unity and intellectual clarity may be achieved imperfectly and temporarily, for example, by “becoming one” with nature or a loved person (see, e.g., 1939, 1958, 2005: 34).

best understood as a tension between humans longing for meaning in the sense of unity and *their own* rejection of this unity by insisting on their identity and autonomy (2013: 1, see also Bowker 2013: 51–55, 2014: 23–27).

Phenomenological and psychological interpretations of the status of the absurd may yield interesting and true theses about central features of human consciousness. They are also supported by Camus' prefatory notes in the *Myth of Sisyphus* (2005: 1). There he states that he is going to be concerned with an “absurd sensitivity” rather than an “absurd philosophy”; that he attempts to describe an “intellectual malady”; and that “[n]o metaphysic, no belief” is involved in his project (2005: 1). Yet, given the conservative approach that I assume in this paper, the metaphysical interpretation is overall more appropriate. This is because it is better supported by almost all other statements that Camus made about the absurd.

A first reason for favoring the metaphysical interpretation is provided by Camus' explicit definitions of the absurd. Recall the passages quoted above. Camus there contrasts “the unreasonable silence of the world” with humans longing for happiness and for reason “within” them (2005: 26); and “the world that disappoints” with “the mind that desires” (2005: 48). Why explicitly characterize one of the two parts of the absurd relation as internal to consciousness (“within” humans, “the mind”), when one actually believes that this holds true for both? Two other definitions of the absurd even more clearly suggest the metaphysical interpretation. The absurd, according to these definitions, “is not in man (if such a metaphor could have meaning) nor in the world, but in their presence together” (2005: 29), and it is constituted by a “break between the world and my mind” (2005: 50).

The metaphysical interpretation of the status of the absurd also turns out to be more faithful to Camus in light of the evidence that he put forward in favor of the absurd's existence. If Camus had understood the claim that the world does not answer humans' search for meaning in a phenomenological or psychological sense then he should have argued that humans *experience* the world as not providing meaning or that they *themselves* reject meaning in the sense of unity. In fact, however, the existence of the absurd is mainly justified by appeal to facts about the external world. With regard to unity, for example, Camus argues that this state cannot be achieved because of the gap between our own consciousness and the non-conscious world around us (“This ridiculous reason is what sets me in opposition to all creation,” 2005: 50, see also 2005: 16, 48–49). And in arguing that humans cannot achieve intellectual clarity, Camus points to science's supposed failure to explain the world's diverse phenomena by one single unifying principle (2005: 18).

Finally, the metaphysical interpretation of the status of the absurd is also supported by Camus' famous considerations about the classical myth of Sisyphus (2005: 115–119). Sisyphus had been sentenced to eternally roll a rock to the top of a mountain from where it rolled back down again and again. According to Camus, this sentence illustrates the absurd (2005: 16). Just like Sisyphus futilely aims at fixating his rock on the top of the mountain, humans futilely strive for meaning. Note, however, that Sisyphus' aspiration is not frustrated in the sense that he *experiences* the rock to roll down again and again, or in the sense that he himself

(unconsciously) *does not want* to achieve his aim. Rather, Sisyphus was put in a world where his task cannot be fulfilled as a matter of objective fact.

To reemphasize, these considerations are not meant to dismiss any of the insights provided by phenomenological and psychological interpretations of the absurd. They do show, however, that the metaphysical interpretation does more justice to what Camus most likely intended to express. In what follows (given this paper's conservative approach) I will hence assume that the absurd is partly internal and partly external to human consciousness. It denotes a relation between humans search for meaning and the non-conscious world that fails to provide this meaning.

3 The Feeling of the Absurd

Sec. 1 and 2 explained Camus' understanding of the terms "feeling" and "the absurd". It turned out that in the context of his discussion of the feeling of the absurd Camus uses the term "feeling" to refer to both a mood and to emotions that this mood tends to give rise to; and that by the "absurd" he means a metaphysical discrepancy between humans' search for meaning and the world which does not answer this search. In order to fully grasp Camus' conception of the feeling of the absurd we must finally bring these two findings together. In virtue of what relation to the absurd does Camus consider moods and emotions as qualifying as *absurd* moods (i.e., as feelings of the absurd in the narrow sense) and *absurd* emotions (i.e., as the appearances of this feeling)?

Camus is rather cryptic and brief when he discusses the feeling of the absurd's relation to the absurd. Most importantly, he explains that (1) the feeling of the absurd is distinct from the absurd, (2) this feeling "lays the foundation" for the absurd, and (3) the feeling of the absurd precedes the absurd (as well as the attitude of revolt):

The feeling of the absurd is not, for all that, the notion of the absurd. (Camus 2005: 27)

It [the feeling of the absurd] lays the foundations for it [the notion of the absurd], and that is all. (Camus 2005: 27)

The climate of absurdity is in the beginning. The end is the absurd universe and that attitude of mind which lights the world with its true colours to bring out the privileged and implacable visage which that attitude has discerned in it. (Camus 2005: 10–11)

Some scholars have recently suggested that the feeling of the absurd lays the foundation for and precedes the absurd in the sense that this feeling *constitutes* the absurd. Avi Sagi, for example, argues that Camus conceived of the concept of the absurd as a mere "explication" of the feeling of the absurd (2002: 47–48). And in Matthew Bowker's opinion, "it is the *feeling* of the absurd that grounds the notion" (2013: 54), and the notion is therefore to be understood in "emotional terms" (2013: 55).

This constitutional interpretation clearly contradicts Camus' above statement that the feeling of the absurd is distinct from the concept of the absurd. Moreover, while

compatible with phenomenological and psychological interpretations⁶, it is also incompatible with the metaphysical interpretation of the status of the absurd. On this interpretation the feeling of the absurd cannot plausibly constitute the absurd. Moods or emotions may (partly) constitute the human search for meaning. But how could they also make it the case that the non-conscious world does not answer this search (i.e., that the world is such that humans cannot achieve unity, intellectual clarity, and intrinsic value)?

The above problems suggest that, given the conservative approach assumed in this paper, the relation between the feeling of the absurd and the absurd is best understood in a non-constitutional way. There is in particular reason to believe that Camus regarded the feeling of the absurd as laying the foundation for and preceding the absurd in an epistemological sense. Moods and the emotions that these moods tend to give rise to count as absurd if and only if they promote the discovery of the absurd, i.e., if and only if they make humans realize that they strive for meaning, but can never achieve it (see fig. 1).

An important merit of this epistemological interpretation of the feeling of the absurd is that it is consistent with all of Camus' above statements about the relation between the feeling of the absurd and the absurd. The interpretation construes the feeling of the absurd and the absurd as distinct; it entails that the feeling of the absurd "lays the foundation" for the absurd (in an epistemological sense); and it entails that the feeling of the absurd precedes the absurd (in the sense of preceding its discovery).

The epistemological interpretation is also supported by Camus' characterizations of the feeling of the absurd's appearances. Consider, for example, his discussion of the emotion of weariness. According to Camus, weariness tends to involve or prompt the question "Why?": Why getting up so early in the morning? Why taking the same old bus to the same old office? Why doing the same boring work every day? In thinking about these questions humans may come to realize that there is actually no satisfactory ultimate answer. We do things for other things' sake. But none of our actions is a means to an end that is good in itself. By pointing our attention to this fact weariness promotes our becoming aware of the absurd, and may lead us to eventually develop an attitude of revolt towards it.

Rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep and 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. [...] Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening. (Camus 2005: 11)

⁶ Both moods and emotions have phenomenal character, i.e., there is something that it is like to be in these states. If certain moods and emotions were accompanied by the experience of futilely searching for meaning they could thereby constitute the absurd *qua* the experience of futilely searching for meaning. Certain kinds of emotions could also constitute the absurd *qua* a tension between humans' search for unity and their own rejection of this unity.

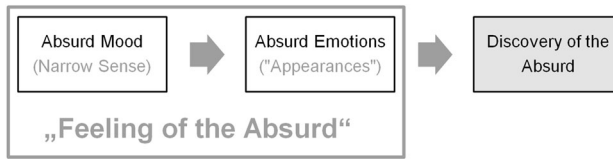


Fig. 1 Epistemological interpretation of Camus' conception of the feeling of the absurd (arrows represent causal relations)

A final advantage of the epistemological interpretation of the feeling of the absurd is that it is also in line with Camus' literary works, in particular with *The Stranger* and *Caligula*. In both of these works the protagonists are confronted with the death of a close relative. Meursault is informed about the death of his mother; Caligula learns that his sister and mistress Drusilla had died. Following these events they come to relate very differently to the absurd. While Meursault fails to gain any significant awareness of it, and simply continues to follow his daily routine, Caligula sees the absurd almost right away. "Men are dying and they are not happy," (2008: 60), he declares, and "nothing lasts" (2008: 133).⁷ What explains this difference in Meursault's and Caligula's awareness of the absurd?

In my view, any comprehensive explanation of this fact must appeal to the absurd emotion of horror of death. Meursault fails to see the absurd because he actively evades this emotion. For example, he refuses to look at his mother's corpse (1946: 6), and distracts himself with a relationship with his former coworker Marie (1946: 14–15). Only when he accidentally kills a person and the prison chaplain forcefully challenges him to think about life after death, feelings of horror (and also anger) emerge. These feelings finally lead Meursault to see the absurd. Caligula, on the other hand, does not close his eyes to death from the beginning. He studies Drusilla's corpse and even touches her (2008: 56). "Men are dying" and "nothing lasts" — it is his horror of death that enables Caligula to unmask his desire for meaning as a desire for the impossible, and to recognize the absurd.

4 Conclusion

What does Camus mean when he speaks of the feeling of the absurd? Answering this question is of course not an exact science. In this paper I assumed a conservative approach. I attempted to reconstruct Camus' conception of the feeling of the absurd in a way that is as faithful to his own statements as possible. It turned out that on this approach the feeling of the absurd is not, strictly speaking, a feeling. It is rather a conjunction of a mood and of emotions that this mood tends to give rise to. Moreover, both moods and emotions qualify as absurd in virtue of their promoting the discovery of the absurd, i.e., the discovery that humans search for meaning, but the world does not answer this search.

⁷ That Caligula discovered the absurd is of course not to say that he drew the right conclusions from this discovery. Camus clearly rejects Caligula's destructive nihilism.

On this epistemological interpretation, Camus ascribes less theoretical significance to the feeling of the absurd than on some alternative interpretations (in particular, interpretations according to which this feeling constitutes the absurd). But the feeling of the absurd turns out to be highly significant in a practical sense.

Camus argues that the only way to lead our meaningless lives with dignity and possibly even happiness is to adopt and maintain an attitude of revolt. We must acknowledge the absurd as a fact, but at the same time regard it as a scandal or injustice that must be defied (e.g., 2005: 29–30, 55, 119). In order to be able to develop such an attitude one first needs to become aware that the absurd exists. There are various circumstances that might promote this awareness. The most common and effective one, it seems, is precisely what Camus described under the heading of the feeling of the absurd. People mainly come to recognize that they futilely strive for meaning when they are in an absurd mood and have absurd emotions (such as weariness or horror of death).

As mentioned in the introduction, proponents of nihilistic views in analytic philosophy have so far largely neglected the affective dimension of our lives' purported meaninglessness. Camus' arguments for the epistemological — and hence practical — significance of this dimension are *prima facie* plausible. His conception is also particularly compatible with analytic approaches. For example, just like many analytic philosophers (see, e.g., Nussbaum 2004; Solomon 1993), it assumes a cognitivist theory of emotions, according to which emotions (among others) function to represent facts. I therefore believe that contemporary nihilists could significantly benefit from considering and elaborating on Camus' insights about the feeling of the absurd.

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