ARGUMENT
BIANNUAL PHILOSOPHICAL JOURNAL

e-ISSN 2084–1043 p-ISSN 2083–6635
Published online: 26.08.2024

Vol. 14 (1/2024) pp. 57–71
https://argument.uken.krakow.pl/

Political melancholy, bad masters and the golden sadness of the Greeks*

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the idea of the absurd, not only as a metaphysical, individual experience — the main focus of existentialism — but also as a form of reaction to politics (something existentialist thinkers developed in their post-war writings). Two different ways of seeing this experience are taken into account, reaching back to Albert Camus' study of the absurd in relation to politics of 1940's as well as a more recent study of political melancholy by Lieven De Cauter. In the final part of the essay, reactions to the experience (political and cultural — not purely philosophical — feeling of loss of meaning) are reconsidered in the context of Camus' ideas of resistance and rebellion. Although Camus' remarks were predominantly related to the dangers of political ideology emerging from a feeling of loss, the author claims that contemporary experience might be also relate to contemporary situations connected to the environmental crisis.

KEYWORDS

philosophy and politics; philosophy of culture; political melancholy; the absurd in politics; cultural and political aspects of the absurd; studies in political culture

* The article presents the result of the Project no 021/GPS/2024/POT financed from the subsidy granted to the Krakow University of Economics.

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DOI: 10.24917/20841043.14.1.4

BLAME THE WRITERS: A HISTORY OF TREATING POLITICAL MELANCHOLY

In Ancient Greece, the orators Lycon, Anytus, and Meletus accused Socrates of corrupting the young through his teachings. Socrates was put to trial, and once found guilty, he decided to accept poison rather than leave Athens. What is surprising — if we restrict ourselves to Plato's account (Plato, 1977) — is that writers and poets were among the accusers rather than those accused of corrupting the young, of leading them to melancholy, anxiety, suicide, murder, sexual and moral corruption, atheism and nihilism. (Meletus joined the trial against Socrates, supposedly because he was "vexed on behalf of the poets".) In history, writers, artists and poets have far more frequently been on the same sides as Socrates — on the side of those on trial.

When German tanks appeared on the outskirts of Paris in June 1940, as reported by Simone de Beauvoir, people were completely shocked. Traumatic events continued up until the liberation, and, as the experience encompassed almost entire nation, they became a subject of discussion engaging intellectuals far outside the areas of psychology and psychiatry. On the one hand, this was an experience that demanded an explanation: Why did we fall and why did we fall so quickly? On the other hand, it was an experience that promptly produced a form of political propaganda, one that was useful for those far more interested in establishing guilt rather than finding a cure. In the eyes of some intellectuals, the nation that fell in the conflict was already corrupted by a mass experience of melancholy, a shared inability to engage politically, a feeling recently called a form of "political melancholy" (De Cauter, 2016). The roots of this feeling that weakened the soul of the nation harked back to the traumatic experiences of WWI. But even if the events of trench warfare had been traumatic, they did not provide a complete explanation for mass corruption. Politically, it would be useless to blame the veterans for having these feelings as it would undermine the myth of their heroic resistance to German forces in the years of the Great War. There was a much more convenient scapegoat to be found; politically convenient for the developing right-wing Vichy government. The French did not lose the war simply because of military mistakes, poor strategic decisions. The French army was made up of draftees who were struck with melancholy. This melancholy they had acquired not from memories of the last war, but from literature that presented the war as an absurd, useless and meaningless thing. When a mere phenomenon became reality, the soldiers were already doomed: their understanding of war was essentially "spoiled" by its representation in literature. As Giselle Sapiro sums up the events following the 1940 Fall of France: "In short, the writers who had been accused of being 'bad masters' for the past twenty years were now rendered responsible for the defeat" (Sapiro, 2014: 120).

The accusation was complex and there were significant differences between the various critiques. However, what is essential here is the common premise that novels had had a catastrophic moral impact on their readers:

> Here, the bad master has exercised the most fearsome influence of all. Intelligence has striven to kill conscience. [...] Look through the bookshelves of your library: pessimists, defeatists, immoralists and corydons (many with undeniable talent) will inform you of the depth of "intellectualist" evil. "It is not with good feelings that one makes good literature" — one of the most famous among them has said (Sapiro, 2014: 123).

The discussion avoided the topics of the social and economic crisis before the war and hardly any argument was provided about military analysis, numbers of soldiers, guns or tanks involved. Discussion focused almost exclusively on the *elan* of the nation: the literature-induced malady that resulted in defeat: "The French defeat is largely due to a weakness of intelligence" (Sapiro, 2014: 123).

Critics advocated a revolution in literature. Acknowledging that the aim of literature is not only to moralize, they accepted that evil may be depicted, showing troubled characters in despair. However, this should not be as a literary end, but only a means, unlike "those sickly contemporary novels where no general observation can be gleaned that denounces the evil of man or of society and discovers the causes if not the remedies for them" (Sapiro, 2014: 128).

Even the young Albert Camus who wrote an appreciative review of Jean--Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea* (interestingly, its initial name was *Melancholia*), found similar a fault in the existentialist novel, where the absurd is portrayed, but no implications are drawn from it (Camus, 1970: 202). The core of the dispute was this: Literature cannot solely aestheticize the experience of despair, melancholy, trauma. It should propose a cure otherwise it is responsible for "infecting" the reader with the experience portrayed.

To any historically and contextually disengaged observer, this core argument from the 1940's debate may sound completely absurd. Wars are not won or lost because of the books soldiers have read before being shot at. To many engaged intellectuals it also seemed rather clear that the implicit goal of the debate was political, the accusation being formed to discredit their political opponents in literary circles. On the other hand, we should be cautious about an easy rebuttal to this accusation as purely political: France was clearly involved in a difficult process of recovery from the trauma of WWI, an experience that had affected an entire generation of writers, intellectuals and artists. Far from accusing other writers, Camus is firmly convinced that what his generation has experienced is a form of mass melancholy, one that he tried to explain in his first philosophical essay, *Myth of Sisyphus:* "The pages that follow deal with an absurd sensitivity that can be found widespread in the age — and not

with an absurd philosophy which our time, properly speaking, has not known" (Camus, 1955: 2; my own emphasis). He, and many of his contemporary intellectuals were convinced there is a severe crisis being experienced by their compatriots. He postulated that this mass feeling of trauma — only strengthened by the defeat of 1940 — made the appearance of organized resistance a slow and painful process:

> For a long time we both thought that this world had no higher meaning and that consequently we had been cheated. I still think so, in a way. But I came to different conclusions from those you used to talk about, the ones which for so many years now, you have been trying to introduce into history (Camus, 1961: 27).

Camus concludes that the only proper reaction to the all-encompassing feeling of despair is resistance: individual, social and political. He also maintains (an idea to be developed in *The rebel*) that the Nazi German conquest is founded on nihilism, rising from the same feeling of despair and loss of value. The political confrontation between the resisting French and Nazi Germans is a confrontation of two polar-opposite ways of dealing with despair.[1]

After a series of historical misfortunes: The financial crisis of 2008, Brexit, election of Trump, COVID pandemic and Putin's recent invasion of Ukraine, we may well understand the reason for Lieven De Cauter's interest in a mass feeling of political melancholy. The philosopher states that this "Melancholy is a disorder of extremes: overestimation of oneself and despair, enthusiasm and existential or even metaphysical disillusionment" (De Cauter, 2016: 97). The author signals that melancholy is triggered by two, contradictory elements. It is not a singular, uniform feeling but a tension, the result of having hope for meaning and yet being denied it. If we were to follow 1940's critics and use this model of understanding political melancholy, it would mean that the readers were affected not by despair presented in the literary texts. They were perhaps affected by the hope of finding a remedy to despair in literature and disillusionment arising from the reading; they shared the predicament of literary heroes and they sought a way out. In the interwar context, the whole nation might have been affected by a similar experience following WWI. People were hoping to regain peace, but were then disillusioned by the peace that emerged, by the ever growing anxiety that it would not last, fuelled by the Great Crisis of 1929. They went through a similar experience with the fall of Nazi Germany as it led (at least In Europe) to a long period of economic and social instability. And quite possibly our contemporary situation, as De Cauter argues, is composed of the two extremes, resulting in a shared experience of political melancholy. On

[1] It should be added, that after the war Camus founded his thesis concerning Nazism and nihilism on Herman Raushning's book (first published in 1938) *The revolution of nihilism: warning to the West*, presenting a very similar worldview of the origins of nazi German politics.

the one hand, hope continually develops, manifested for example by promises of posthumanism and the progress of technology. On the other hand, there is a growing feeling of impending catastrophe, with pessimistic predictions regarding the effects of global warming and rising populism and "post-truth" in politics.

In my view, both the aforementioned elements — which may have made up the shared experience expressed in the phrase "bad masters quarrel", perhaps also our experience today — may, in existentialist terms, be reduced to the notion of the absurd. Long before De Cauter voiced his concerns about political melancholy of our modern age, Camus described the absurd in *Myth of Sisyphus* as a tension that appears between the hope of man or woman and the unreasonable silence of the world. There is clearly, in what Camus described, an element of overestimation represented by the human desire for meaning, his or her stubborn conviction that life has some recognizable purpose or end. There is also an element of disillusionment in the felt lack of certainty that any such purpose or meaning exist (a state of affairs caused (in Camus) by external factors.) What I think is important to note here is that both Camus and De Cauter seem to be saying that melancholy is a state of mind which experiences this tension, but also does not resign from it. We keep hope alive (Sisyphus coming back to the rock) and yet we keep on being disillusioned by our failure to obtain a satisfactory response to our "excessive" claims. We resist the negation of the tension (Camus firmly rejects suicide as a resolution of this state) in despair, but — at least in Camus — we should also limit our resistance to despair to solutions that do not rely only on faith beyond human reason (Camus says that the belief that meaning only exists in the form of transcendent God is a form of "metaphysical suicide"). In the last part of the article, I will argue why and under what circumstances I think it is worth considering retaining this tension. Before that, however, I would like to present a recent counterview that advocates the removal of these tensions.

HISTORY AND PRESENT: MODERN POLITICAL POPULISM AND BAD MASTERS OF THE 21TH CENTURY

I have depicted a case from the past, related to the idea "bad masters quarrel", which by itself could be easily be applied to today's realities. There have been many cases where people have sought the source of corruption in literature in history, so it is quite likely similar cases will occur today and will occur whenever politicians need to find a source for moral decline in the worldviews of their political opponents. Enumerating these cases, as interesting in itself as this would be, would probably not be conclusive. Pointing out that something exists does not establish an analogy. I have therefore decided to search and find

arguments that could be used as a case study of the modern reaction to political melancholy. I have found them in Wojciech Roszkowski's essays *Roztrzaskane lustro: Upadek cywilizacji zachodniej* [Broken mirror: The fall of Western civilization] (Roszkowski, 2019). The choice of author demands special explanation. First, his worldview perfectly corresponds to the pattern of searching for scapegoats for moral corruption both in literature and philosophy (but not limited to these areas, as the author sees moral corruption in everything outside his worldview, as his lists of perceived threats demonstrate). Second, his remarks were published in 2019, and they offer a very broad analysis of how and why there is an ongoing moral decline in western culture and how it can be cured — from a manifestly Catholic, conservative perspective. Third, the author openly claims in his essays that culture is responsible for despair, moral decline, murder, suicide and many other disturbing phenomena which would be strictly limited if people shared his Christian-Catholic worldview and morality. Curiously — to make a bridge to the aforementioned debate of 1940's — Roszkowski actually joins the 1940's "bad masters quarrel" claiming, in his 2019 book, that Sartre's *Nausea* heralded the incoming, contemporary crisis. Conflating Sartre with the literary character of Antoine Roquentin (though nowhere in the 1938 is it claimed that the book is autobiographical), Roszkowski observers that "The author (sic) observes the surrounding world and constantly makes a fuss" (Roszkowski, 2019; my translation). Roszkowski continues the charge against literature and its role in moral decline by pointing out that Samuel Beckett was the master of "presenting the absurdity of human existence", Louis-Ferdinand Céline offers an image of "doubt in human nature and society", Ernest Hemingway, the author claims, propagated "pure existentialism" and allegedly made himself a victim of his philosophy, as his suicide was "an expression of specific nihilist heroism" (Roszkowski 2019; all translations my own). Roszkowski accuses writers, artists and singers who *portray* anything he finds evil of a decadent effect on others, contributing to moral decline. He even quotes François Mauriac (ironically, one of the accused during "bad masters quarrel"), calling him one of the greatest French writers mainly because of the writer's avowed Christianity. Culture, according to the author, uses persuasion and provocation and so leads to the mistrust and confusion of those in contact with its artifacts and representations. Roszkowski's — evidently political — claim implicitly confirms the premise that "bad" culture has an enormous impact on people and is far more successful than "good" culture, the latter being almost entirely removed from view. As in 1940's bad masters quarrel, a remedy must be found for literature to avoid guilt. Playing with fire did not, inexplicably, prove fatal for some writers like Satre who died peacefully at 75, but Roszkowski reassures us that in those cases they certainly harmed others: "Sartre's views poisoned France's intellectual elite for generations. He was also, obviously, a supporter of abortion, an apologist of the nothingness that

leads to suicide" (Roszkowski 2019; my translation), although the author fails to mention how many people exactly committed suicide inspired by *Being and nothingness* and how Sartre himself managed to avoid the temptation. We might simply dismiss these essays as so many examples of political bias, negligence and distortion, resulting in a polarized view of western culture — one accusing feminism, existentialism, Marxism and many other worldviews of causing the current perceived crisis and avoiding any serious discussion of the real merits or impact of these positions.[2] Understanding Roszkowski's text as a paradigm of the contemporary conservative critique of the "literature of despair" leading to a "civilization of death", we may conclude that whatever the conclusions of the 1940's debate were, there is clearly an ongoing tendency to view, interpret and blame literature and philosophy for social, cultural and political phenomena, for causing despair and "moral corruption". Yet writers rather tried to portray and understand than support. These accusations seem to completely ignore the fact that if "bad" literature had such a horrible effect on people, simply reading "good" morally uplifting literature would reverse the trend.

In the next part of this article, I would like to focus mainly on Camus who was, in the 1940's clearly viewed as a prominent representative of a group of writers engaged in a literature of despair and frequently criticized for the corrupting influence of their works.[3] In my view, for purely political reasons (Camus is commonly viewed in Poland as a fervent critic of communism, especially after the publication of *The rebel* in 1951) he is completely absent from the sweeping accusations of Roszkowski. Were he to be included however, he would make the whole argument most problematic. If there is, in existentialist

[2] I will limit myself here to a specific element in Roszkowski's evaluation of Sartre, his response to Sartre's apology for suicide. Although suicide is remarked upon by Sartre in *Being and nothigness*, it is used rather as an example of ultimate human freedom — the freedom to negate one's own existence. There is hardly any affirmation of a decision leading to suicide in the book. On the contrary, Sartre's reflection, although clearly and understandably avoiding moral analysis (as it was not intended to be a book on existentialist ethics) clearly situates suicide as a paradoxical and highly problematic act — definitely not the account of an apologist: "Suicide cannot be considered an end of life for which I should be the unique foundation. It is an act of my life, indeed, it itself requires a meaning which only the future can give to it; but as it is the last act of my life, it is denied this future. Thus it remains totally undetermined. If I escape death or if I 'misfire', shall I not judge later that my (attempted) suicide was cowardice? Will the outcome not show me that other solutions were possible? But since these solutions can only be my own projects, they can appear only if I live. Suicide is an absurdity which causes my life to be submerged in the absurd" (Sartre, 2021: 701). Roszkowski claims there is an apology of suicide in Sartre without providing any references, so it is hard to guess why he considers the French philosopher "an apologist of nothingness leading to suicide" — other than his commitment to the claim that Sartre is one of formative thinkers of the civilization of death.

[3] For an excellent examination of the allegedly detrimental influence of Camus' prose, see Kaplan, 2019.

prose, anything seriously related to a shared feeling of melancholy and despair, with the possible outcome of suicide, it is actually a firm and stubborn refusal to countenance suicide, developing progressively into a call for solidarity and resistance. It is also possible that Roszkowski is silent about Camus, commonly referred to as an existential thinker, because he does not fit another thesis: although an non-believer, he is a firm defender of the value and meaning of life contrary to its alleged absurdity and despair. This leads to his firm critique of suicide, political murder and the death penalty. In the context of a culturally induced feeling of melancholy leading to dangerous consequences, Camus offers a complex solution still attracting academic interest in philosophy and psychology.[4]

TWO DIRECTIONS OF RESISTANCE: RETURN AND CREATION

Criticism, which began as early as 1943,[5] has often overlooked the inconclusive remarks contained in existentialist works focused on the feeling of absurdity, despair and nostalgia for unity, especially those of the early war-period. Bracketing out Camus' explicit statement from the *Myth of Sisyphus*, that his elaborations on absurd are the beginning and not the end, critics conflated the diagnostician with the malady he recognized. Sartre, as explicitly stated in Being and Nothingness, desired to develop an existentialist ethics that would be a reaction to the problem of universal contingency (Sartre, 1945) and difficulties met by attempts at embracing others as free, individual subjects (Sartre, 2021: 471–556). However, he was continuously attacked for a lack of any ethically laudable conclusions in his early, existentialist philosophy, being frequently (but also superficially) accused of pessimism and nihilism. Camus openly confessed that his essay on the absurd does not propose ethical solutions — solutions which he would take pains to develop in his later analysis of revolt.

Not surprisingly, both the authors mentioned focused on the individual experience of loss of meaning. But Camus as well as Sartre were well aware that the experience they were interested in might be shared, and was clearly caused not only by living in the world in general, but because of living in a world where culture, politics and social issues are responsible for this experience. This makes their understanding of the absurd comparable to De Cauter's notion of political melancholy — something that becomes quite evident when Camus links the feeling of absurdity with political action. In reaction to the individual feeling of loss of meaning, nihilist ideologies, like that of Nazi

[4] Quite recently an excellent analysis proved consistency of Camus' position on suicide (DeLancey, 2021).

[5] See Camus' summary of Gabriel Marcel's reaction to his essay on absurd (Camus & Grenier, 2003: 48).

Germany, develop (Camus, 1961: 5–11). De Cauter remarked that political melancholy started being a collective experience much earlier:

> in the Baroque period: history ceases to be a history of salvation, without God the world is empty and what happens is purposeless. History becomes natural history and the condition of the world a state of nature: the eternal recurrence of exploitation, injustice, suffering. The world and politics are dominated by the everlasting law of the jungle, the incessant civil war, the war of each against all (De Cauter, 2016: 100).

What both clearly had in mind though, by using different terms, is that the "absurd" and "melancholy" are far from nostalgia for the past. Rather, they focus on the feeling that what politics changes in the world, culture and social sphere leads to a feeling of loss of meaning. People recognize that their disappointment with their situation is not a purely individual and metaphysical matter, it is a shared experience related to politics. The melancholy (not nostalgia) of the Germans, following defeat in WWI becomes a collective, political experience. Paraphrasing De Cauter, we might see the rise of fascism and Nazism as despair leading to overestimation, disillusionment that is rapidly replaced by enthusiasm. It was quite clear that both of the existential philosophers believed in some form of reconstruction of meaning, to be developed by the subject himself. In this process, however, the feeling of absurdity (at least in the understanding of Camus) seems to have a foundational, and not solely negative value. It must not be replaced by enthusiasm; any possible constructive project must be developed in relation to this experience, to its memory. It is only after the subject has understood the nature of the loss of meaning (and possibly the shared nature of this experience), that he may actually develop a project of reconstruction, initiated by revolt. The transition of this reconstruction into the interpersonal sphere is of greater relevance to us here, in terms of understanding political melancholy as a shared feeling of loss of hope in meaning and the possibility of changing the social and political sphere by human engagement and action. As such, it would probably demand a shared, communal response and an analysis of Camus' reply and Sartre's concept of existential psychotherapy seem be a good starting ground to reflection on a more important, contemporary question. The question remains, however: Can existentialism actually offer a solution to the shared experience of the cultural, social and political rather than purely individual corrosion of optimism regarding political and social ends?

Camus' solution to the problem of absurdity is his revolt, clearly understood at first as an individual reaction to human suffering and the loss of any sign of the objective meaning of life. But, as early as in 1945, he was more than certain that this kind of revolt cannot be solitary and demands a common foundation, — something shared by people in their attempt at a construction

of meaning. In my view, two possible ways of interpreting this moment in his existential development seem to be in tension. On the one hand, having the existential — if not existentialist — background, he is stating that, "Man is the only creature who refuses to be what he is" (Camus, 1991b: 11). In this form, refusal and resistance in revolt seem to be a move away from something embedded in the very core of human being. Meaning, both individual as well as social, seems to be in need of construction, close to what Sartre understood as the core element of existential freedom. Lacking any "essence", we are able to construct whatever defines us. Ina sense, the rebellion does not actually discover anything — it creates, something actually consistent with what Camus wrote about the important role of art in the process of describing the crisis as well as constructing the vision of a recovery from the absurd. A difficulty arises, however, when we ask: On what basis can common ground be achieved here? If a solitary revolt aims at the creation of something that can be possibly communicated but is not necessarily a belief shared by others. Camus makes this clear by openly stating : "I rebel, therefore we are" (Camus, 1991b: 23), giving precedence to the subjective discovery of the necessity of saying "no". And in the final version of his essay on rebellion, he rests this "no" on a value that is already shared by all men and women:

> An analysis of rebellion leads us to the suspicion that, contrary to the postulates of contemporary thought, human nature does exist, as the Greeks believed. Why rebel if there is nothing worth preserving in oneself? (Camus, 1991b: 22)

In this context, resistance towards previously experienced absurdity is linked to the Latin etymology of the French word "revolte", going back to the Latin: *revolvare*, which means "to revolve" — as when the slave turns back to the master to say "no". But at the same time, and more importantly, it also means "to return" — thus, it is not simply the creation of resistance, but a return to something we already have. And the tension in Camus' thought on the remedy rests on the tension between these two meanings. It leads to considerable interpretative difficulty; the value which will from that point mark the action of the human being with a sense of purpose is described throughout the essay both as created and discovered. From an analytical point of view, the ambiguity is a serious foundational problem. It is difficult to offer a remedy for shared political melancholy and despair, when they should be both created and assumed as rooted in the human nature. The problem becomes less serious, however, if we consider the tension between discovery and creation an intentional one. And, as I will try to show below, this is not a sophistical attempt to rescue a historical thought from contradiction. We may, curiously enough, find a theory reconciling both aspects interesting for our analysis of political melancholy and our search for its remedy. The basic problem of Sartre's existentialism, as

Camus feared,[6] was the lack of common ground where "we" could have been created. And whatever he thought about the importance of freedom and however fond he was of the existential theory of project and self-creation, he was also aware (as was de Beauvoir), that it does not offer much in terms of social analysis (which Sartre was at pains to develop later in his unpublished ethics and subsequent dialectics). At this point I would like to focus on Camus because this tension between creation and retrieval, rather than (as in Sartre) on freedom and creation, seems to be firmly connected with his own peculiar and interesting way of understanding political melancholy. As I see it, Camus offers an intriguing opportunity to understand our own contemporary feeling of melancholia, at least in connection with our understanding of potential consequences of the climate change.

Camus' closure of the problem of absurdity — developed years after his initial, philosophical deliberations of the notion of the absurd — relates to the idea of exile. The initial situation, standing behind the intellectual crisis — which, seen from "above" makes room for cultural crisis, a form of mass melancholy and anxiety — was depicted as a conflict between the man/women and the world.[7] But, Camus adds in 1950's, this is just the factual, not the historical, part of the equation. And when looking at the tension from a historical perspective, reaching back to the origins of philosophy, Camus comes to the conclusion that part of the problem is actually inherited because of the development of the rationalist tradition leading to the marriage of existentialism and historical materialism. For the crisis to develop, man/woman and the world must be perceived by the subject as radically opposing (a conviction which when reading early Camus and Sartre seems evident). In *Helen's exile*, a lyrical essay with strong, philosophical connotations, Camus sees this from a perspective of a cultural loss, a memory of disappearance, like the diagnosis of Friedrich Nietzsche, to an important aspect of thought as developed by the ancient Greeks. Modern attempts at reparations, such as Marxism or existentialism, offer, instead of the replacement of exiled unity, in the form of "totalizing" rather than unifying vision, in which the absurd, the conflict and the tension would disappear in the historical progression of culture and technology.

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[6] For a brief summary of Camus' critique of Sartre's existentialism, see Raskin, 2001.

[7] In a seminal essay, *Enigma*, Camus clearly moves away from the idea that the experience of the absurd results from the permanent inability of human beings to understand their surroundings due to the inherent absurdity and meaninglessness of the universe: "At the centre of his universe, we find not fleshless nonsense but an enigma, that is to say a meaning which is difficult to decipher because it dazzles us. […] In the centre of our work, dark though it may be, shines an inexhaustible sun, the same sun that shouts today across the hills and plains" (Camus, 1970: 160). Comparing living in Paris to being in Plato's cave, looking at shadows and refusing to turn back to see the sun, Camus makes clear here that this sun — the meaning of existence, the understanding of the human condition in the world — is real.

If we look back at the events of last decade, it may well be that a post-existentialist diagnosis following Camus' idea of exile might resonate well with our contemporary worldviews. Camus' philosophy of measure, founded on a "somewhat fanciful and idealized Greek inheritance" (Boisvert, 2013) calls for an appreciation of limits and reaches back to at least one of multifarious understandings of the Greek virtue of *sophrosyne*.

In our context, it is also interesting to observe that Camus differentiated between ancient and modern forms of despair. The despair presented and experienced by 20th century writers (and more generally: participants of western culture) is not only related to the unfortunate separation or conflict of humans and their world. It is lyrically described by Camus in *Helen's exile* as the distinction between solar despair, "golden sadness", experienced in the very acute presence of an external, encompassing world and the modern despair of "mists" (a motive, later developed in Camus' *The fall*, 1956). Modern melancholy is related to the metaphor of mist: a situation in which the shapes of the surrounding are blurred, imprecise and to some extent surreal. The metaphor presents the world of the ancients not as a world of happiness, but rather as a world where despair and, more broadly, suffering, had meaning and were understood. The sun clarifies the distinction between areas, allowing the subject to determine where the limit between the known and the unknown lies. Furthermore, on moral grounds, the transgression of limits was seen with reference to the sophrosyne. Greek culture — as interpreted by Camus — developed in the tension of an appreciation of these limits and fascination with the situations (Greek tragedy) when these limits were transgressed. Thus, an understanding of despair was possible: it was a reaction of the Gods (Greek Goddess Nemesis) or the world of an attempt to move beyond established limits. In this worldview, from an existentialist standpoint, there is almost no possibility of conceiving of suffering (or more generally, the human condition) as absurd — it is impossible not to feel a union with the world when it is understood through the strongly platonic and neoplatonic prism of metaphysics.[8] Camus makes it very clear that modern philosophy has lost its connection to moderation (sophrosyne), moved away from a philosophy of the figure of the sun to the realm of mist, in which missing shapes are to be enforced by humans:

> But the Europe we know, eager for the conquest of totality, is the daughter of excess. We deny beauty as we deny everything that we do not extol. And, even though we do it in diverse ways, we extol one thing and one alone: a future world in which reason will reign supreme (Camus, 1970: 149).

[8] Walter Hilsbecher understood the difference between tragedy and the absurd exactly as a cultural shift from human suffering as a natural or metaphysical reaction to overambitious human activity to the understanding of suffering as devoid of any meaning (Hilsbecher, 1972).

Camus' melancholy, not shared by his contemporaries in philosophy, looked back at a foundational element he though necessary for a shared resolution of despair: human nature as a source of values, the existence of natural limits for human action. He thought that this aspect of understanding should be present, even if it is in constant tension with our firm belief in the freedom of our decisions and our significant possibility to change the social, cultural and existential aspects of human life. It should remain present, even if complete knowledge regarding our situation is beyond our reach, as at the very core of his conception human nature relates primarily to a limitation of violence to others and harm to the surrounding world. The tension can obviously be resolved if one believes that the existence of "human nature" would be in opposition to the human possibility of freedom (denying the existence of any moral imperatives) or if one submits unconditionally to a strictly essentialist worldview. But it seems clear that Camus was not suggesting either of these. He thought of human nature as a source for knowledge on the limits of action. He perceived a possibility, that this nature can be voiced down, "exiled", and even destroyed by the totalizing movement, replacing the search for unity.

I am not saying simply that he was right and a stance of moderation that appreciates tension is all that is actually needed today. Looking back appreciatively at a different worldview hardly helps with any, individual or collective experience of concern, despair or anxiety in our contemporary world. I want rather to say that our contemporary melancholy might be much more similar to the earlier manifestations presented above, especially in regard to the experience of political melancholy. But if there is anything to share at the foundation of our collective concerns and anxieties it is that Camus was right when calling for moderation and limitation of excess, given the fact that it is exactly excess that has caused our feelings of anxiety today — at least in the context of our growing concern about the natural environment. While Camus directed his own criticisms mainly against the totalitarian philosophies of 1940s and 1950s, perhaps we may well address the warnings of *Helen's exile* to our contemporary environmental crisis. This is because scientists have clearly proven that the natural world actually has limits, which we cannot transgress. My individual sense of melancholy, which I believe to be shared by many others, is that we have probably removed some of the mists and walls Camus accused European philosophy of constructing between humans and their surroundings. While we have gained more knowledge about our condition, we seem to have done very little to moderate and temper the excessive, blind and mindless destruction of the natural world. A contemporary political melancholy might be understood here as the despair and sadness of someone who has obtained knowledge but as a result can only expect the situation to get worse. It is not, as it once was, a situation where traumatic events belong almost exclusively to the past.

> In our madness, we push back the eternal limits, and at once dark Furies swoop down upon us to destroy. Nemesis, goddess of moderation, not of vengeance, is watching. She chastises, ruthlessly, all those who go beyond the limit (Camus, 1970: 149).

These words from Camus' lyrical essay had hardly any effect when directed against the totalitarian consequences of political ideologies. We know from history that no such chastisement restores the political order and that the decisionmakers of totalitarian regimes rarely take any responsibility for the terrible consequences of their ideas. But the very same sentence, when understood in the context of human excessive exploitation of the environment, is disturbingly consistent with scientific predictions of the consequences of our actions. The more excessive and possessive our culture will be, the less likely it is that humanity will have a future. And in this context our political melancholy seems to have moved away from the misty, absurdist standpoint of not understanding where we are and where we are going. It is getting closer to the "golden sadness" attributed to the Greeks. It is very likely that when I write these words, all supporters of popular political ideologies already know whom to blame and are sharpening their pencils — like the conservatives of the aforementioned "bad masters quarrel" — to accuse their opponents of causing another mass feeling of melancholy that stopped the entire generation from doing anything to counteract the climatic changes we already experience. And, like their predecessors, whoever they will blame they will most likely be wrong — if they do not confess their own participation. It is only, Camus advised when we stop being inquisitors that we can still imagine a meaningful future. Nowhere, in the diagnosis of deep melancholy, revoked by the feeling of absurdity, was Camus close to despair, to the conviction that nothing can be done, that the damage done by humans cannot be repaired. He only thought that whatever plans humanity has for future, they should be moderate. In his experience and analysis of past revolutions, excessive faith in progress is accompanied by murder and the violation of human dignity. De Cauter, in his study of contemporary melancholy, remarks that "Melancholy in contemplation doesn't necessarily rule out enthusiasm for activist practices" (De Cauter, 2016: 110). As long as these activities are founded on human solidarity and mutual respect, it seems that they could be a good starting point for reconstruction, a form of therapy for our shared melancholia and our contemporary crisis.

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