



# Camus on the Value of Art

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## Abstract

Many instances of art are valuable. Where is this value located? And how is it to be justified? In this paper I reconstruct and critically assess Albert Camus' answers to these questions. Camus' theory of the value of art is based on his "logic of the absurd", i.e., the idea that the human condition is absurd and that we therefore ought to adopt an attitude of revolt. This idea entails that art lacks any intrinsic value. Rather, Camus argues, art is valuable only insofar as it promotes creators' or recipients' awareness of the absurd and their attitude of revolt. The main problem with this theory is that it exaggerates the significance of the logic of the absurd for art. Even if the human condition is absurd and we ought to revolt, artistic value cannot plausibly be reduced to these facts.

**Keywords** Albert Camus · Value of art · The absurd · Aesthetics

Many instances of art are valuable. For example, other things being equal, a world which contains da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* or de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* is better than a world which lacks these works. It is not clear how to best account for the value of art, though. Debates have among others focused on the following two questions. First, where is this value located? Is it an intrinsic value, had by art in itself; or is it rather derived from some external source? And second, how is the value of art to be justified? Should we appreciate art because it arouses aesthetic experiences, because it communicates feelings, because it provides us with knowledge, because it leads to morally good actions, or for yet another reason, or some combination of the above?<sup>1</sup>

In contemporary discourse these questions are typically addressed in an analytic style. But the value of art has been an important topic in continental philosophy as well. In one way or another figures such as Georg W. F. Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Theodor W. Adorno all significantly contributed

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<sup>1</sup>Another important question, which will not be explicitly addressed in this paper, concerns the metaphysical status of the value of art. Is this value objective (i.e., independent from the mental states of observers) or subjective (i.e., dependent on such states)?

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to this topic (Cazeaux 2015; Deranty 2015). One continental philosopher who was particularly concerned with art, and ascribed a particularly important (practical) role to it, was the French existentialist Albert Camus (1913–1960).<sup>2</sup>

Camus is probably best known as a practitioner of art. He wrote classics such as *The Stranger* (1989b), *The Plague* (1991b) and *The Fall* (1991a); directed, translated and adapted texts for the theatre; and was even awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Throughout his life, however, Camus also extensively wrote *about* art — and indeed often did so from a philosophical perspective (despite his frequent insistence that he was not a philosopher, and not an existentialist in particular, 1965: 1427, 1995: 113, 2005: 30).<sup>3</sup> Many of Camus' writings specifically address the above two questions about the location and justification of the value of art. They thus involve at least part of what may be called a *theory* of the value of art.

Camus' views on the value of art are based on his “logic of the absurd”, which is his idea that the human condition is absurd and that we therefore ought to adopt an attitude of revolt (see in particular 2005, 1989a). From around 1942 onwards Camus' interpretation of this idea began to change significantly. Both his conceptions of the absurd and of the attitude of revolt took on a more positive, humane, and social complexion (Cruickshank 1959; Hochberg 1965; Pözlner 2011, 2014, 2016; Sagi 2002; van der Poel 2007).<sup>4</sup> It is therefore advisable to discuss Camus' early and late theory of the value of art separately.

Camus' early thinking addresses the above questions of the location and justification of art's value more clearly and in more detail. It has also received more attention by other scholars. In this paper I will hence focus on Camus' early theory of the value of art, as it was mainly expressed in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and mainly exemplified in literary works such as *The Stranger* and *Caligula*. My aim is to provide one of the very first detailed interpretations and critical assessments of this theory from the perspective of analytic philosophy.<sup>5</sup> In this way I hope to shed light on Camus' place in and relevance for contemporary (analytic) aesthetics.

My investigation involves three steps. First, I will introduce Camus' early logic of the absurd (Sec. 1).<sup>6</sup> Second, I will explain how Camus believes that this idea grounds answers to the questions about the location and the justification of the value of art as outlined above (Sec. 2 to 4). And third, I will consider the plausibility of this theory (Sec. 5). It will turn out that Camus considers something to be valuable as art if and only if it promotes creators' or recipients' awareness of the absurd and their attitude of revolt, and that this theory is implausible on grounds of it exaggerating the significance of the logic of the absurd for art.

<sup>2</sup> For discussion of Camus' relation to existentialism see, e.g., Heffernan *forthcoming*; Schlette 1975: 176; 1980: 16–17.

<sup>3</sup> That Camus often did think like a philosopher has recently been stressed by Sharpe (2011: 578–580).

<sup>4</sup> For scholars who deny or downplay this change of mind see, e.g., Foley 2008: 4; Pieper 1984: 9.

<sup>5</sup> So far Camus' theory of the value of art has mainly been addressed rather cursorily, in larger contexts, and from a continental perspective (e.g., Bennett-Hunter 2009; Davis 2014; Ribac 2011; Sefler 1974; Wittmann 2009). I do not know of any detailed analytic investigation.

<sup>6</sup> This Section draws on Pözlner 2011, 2014, 2016, 2018.

## 1 The Logic of the Absurd

Camus' explanations of his early logic of the absurd suffer from several methodological shortcomings, such as a lack of clear definitions, a confusing structure and an overabundance of rhetorical figures. It is no wonder, thus, that these explanations have been interpreted quite differently (compare, e.g., Bowker 2013 to Tesak-Gutmansbauer 1993). In this Section I will outline how I will henceforth understand Camus' early logic of the absurd. First, I will consider Camus' postulation of the absurd. And second, I will address the normative conclusions that he attempts to draw from this idea.

### 1.1 The Absurd

In Camus' understanding the absurd denotes a relation. More precisely, it denotes a relation of tension, or disproportion; a clash between an aspiration and a reality which does not meet this aspiration (2005: 28–29). Camus' most famous illustration of this conception traces back to the Greek myth of Sisyphus (2005: 115–119). Having upset the Gods, Sisyphus is sentenced to eternally roll a rock to the top of a mountain. Every time he reaches the top, however, the rock will, due to its own weight, roll back down again. In serving this sentence Sisyphus aims at anchoring his rock at the top. However, he is put in a world which continuously frustrates this aim. Whatever Sisyphus does, whatever pains he takes, his rock necessarily rolls back down.

Camus argues that our condition as humans is characterized by an analogous relation. Humans naturally search for meaning. If there were a God this search could indeed succeed. But God does not exist (or at least it is impossible to know whether s/he exists). Thus, we struggle to realize meaning, but like Sisyphus we are put in a world in which our efforts will never be rewarded. Whatever we do, whatever pains we take, we cannot possibly achieve meaning:

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. (2005: 26; see also Aronson 2011; Foley 2008: 6-7)<sup>7</sup>

One important question about this conception of the absurd is what Camus understands by “meaning”. I will come back to this question below. For now, let me make another clarification. In a discussion of *The Stranger* Sartre (1962) appeals to a distinction between what he calls “primary absurdity” (absurdity in the sense just defined, i.e., as a feature of the human condition) and humans' secondary awareness of this primary

<sup>7</sup> Some scholars (e.g., Bowker 2013: 85–86; Sagi 2002: 47) have argued that Camus does not locate the absurd relation between humans and the world, but rather within humans. It is a relation between their experiencing themselves as striving for meaning and their experiencing themselves as being unable to achieve this meaning. Elsewhere (Pözlner 2018) I show that this phenomenological interpretation of Camus' conception of the absurd is inferior to the metaphysical interpretation assumed in this paper. Just consider the above quote, where Camus explicitly characterizes the absurd as a confrontation between something that is internal to human consciousness (“the human need”) and something that is external to it (“the unreasonable silence of the world”) (2005: 26).

absurdity. Moving on to art, it will emerge that Camus does not so much associate artistic value with primary absurdity but rather with promoting a secondary awareness of it (see Bennett-Hunter 2009).

## 1.2 Supposed Normative Implications

Suppose Camus is right that the human condition is absurd. How ought we to respond to this recognition?

Two natural responses are physical and what Camus calls “philosophical” suicide. Being aware that I will remain forever unable to achieve what I desire most it may seem that there is no reason for me to continue living at all. The absurd rather seems to require physical suicide. But suppose I decide to hold on to life after all. Then I confront the question of why I should go on actively searching for meaning, given that I cannot realize it anyway. Wouldn’t it be wiser to stop doing so, and instead to set my hope in God, life after death, reason, or some other idea that transcends existence (i.e., to commit “philosophical” suicide)?<sup>8</sup>

Camus rejects both of these conclusions. To commit physical or philosophical suicide would mean to destroy one’s search for meaning, and thus the absurd relation as a whole. Instead of *solving* the problem of the absurd, he argues, suicide merely *resolves* it. It is an “escape” (2005: 30, 34, 50, 52), an “evasion” (2005: 7), an “elusion” (2005: 34, 52); it implies that one is too weak to cope with the absurd (Camus 2005: 29–30, 51–53).

Its [the absurd’s] first distinguishing feature [...] is that it cannot be divided. To destroy one of its terms is to destroy the whole. There can be no absurd outside the human mind. Thus, like everything else, the absurd ends with death. (2005: 29)

There can be no question of masking the evidence, of suppressing the absurd by denying one of the terms of its equation. (2005: 48)

Instead of physical or philosophical suicide, Camus urges us to adopt an attitude of revolt. In his interpretation Sisyphus responds to his sentence by accepting it as a fact, but rejecting it as a norm. Such an attitude of simultaneous yes and no, Camus believes, is demanded by the absurd as well (see Pieper 1984: 102). As a fact humans should accept the absurd, i.e., that they search for meaning and that this search will never be successful (2005: 29). At the same time, however, we should also confront the absurd with “scorn” (2005: 117); we should regard its existence as a scandal, an injustice (2005: 30, 53).

Living is keeping the absurd alive [...] One of the only coherent philosophical positions is thus revolt. It is a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity. It is an insistence upon an impossible transparency. It challenges the

<sup>8</sup> Camus labels this attitude „philosophical suicide” because in his opinion, it is particularly widespread among philosophers, especially existentialists and phenomenologists.

world anew every second. [...] That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it. (2005: 52)  
 There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn. (2005: 117)

The longer we are able to maintain this attitude of revolt, the more significance and freedom our life has (2005: 54–58).<sup>9</sup>

## 2 The Intrinsic Value of Art

Now that we have some understanding of Camus' early logic of the absurd, let us come back to our main object of interest, namely his views on the value of art. Most contemporary art theorists (e.g., Budd 1995: 1–16; Scruton 1997: 374–376) believe that the value of art does not derive from external sources. While works of art often cause us pleasure or provide knowledge, for example, bringing about these ends is not what makes them valuable as works of art. Rather, valuable instances of art are thought to be valuable in their own right — “l’art pour l’art” (art for art’s sake), as a famous nineteenth century slogan goes.<sup>10</sup>

Camus rejects this popular view about the location of the value of art: “the work of art”, he writes, “cannot be the end, the meaning, and the consolation of a life. Creating or not creating changes nothing” (2005: 94, see also 2005: 92, 110, 112). He also repeatedly stresses that the work of art “lacks importance” (2005: 110, 112), which is most naturally taken to mean “importance in itself”.<sup>11</sup> This rejection of the intrinsic value of art clearly matches the spirit of Camus' logic of the absurd. In fact, the relation to this idea may be even closer. The logic of the absurd (or more precisely, Camus' postulation of the absurd) *logically entails* that art lacks any intrinsic value.

For the early Camus to achieve meaning is to perfectly and continuously realize three closely related states. One of these states, besides unity with the non-conscious world and intellectual clarity, is the realization of intrinsic value. Humans are claimed to naturally strive for aims which are not means to realizing other aims, but are valuable in and on themselves. They want to reach whatever ultimately answers the question “why”: Why getting up? Why catching the tram? Why going to work? Etc. (2005: 11; see also Pieper 1984: 65; Tesak-Gutmansbauer 1993: 10). Given this conception of meaning, the existence of the absurd (i.e., of humans striving for meaning which they cannot achieve) entails that nothing has intrinsic value. But if *nothing* has intrinsic value then art cannot have such value either.

<sup>9</sup> Camus believes that revolting can give our lives some sort of “value” and maybe even “majesty” in a loose sense of these terms. In discussing the fate of Sisyphus, he also suggests that it enables leading a happy life. It is important to stress, however, that even by adopting an attitude of revolt we cannot realize meaning in the strong metaphysical sense that we ultimately crave: we do not thereby unite our consciousness with the objective world, we do not achieve full intellectual clarity, and revolting does not constitute an intrinsic objective value.

<sup>10</sup> There has been much debate about how to best distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic value. Given the coarse-grained level of the following considerations, my stance on this issue should not be of too much consequence. But for the record: I here assume a conception of the distinction that has recently been proposed by Zimmerman (2014).

<sup>11</sup> Like Camus, most other existentialists have denied the intrinsic value of art too (Deranty 2015).

Certain passages in the *Myth of Sisyphus* (e.g., 2005: 58–59, 64–66) as well as in early literary works such as *Caligula* (1984) and *The Stranger* (1989b) suggest that Camus might not only deny intrinsic value, but any value whatsoever. However, this interpretation does not withstand scrutiny. Camus explicitly acknowledges that various things are good in an extrinsic, or more precisely instrumental sense. Art is one of these things. On Camus' view art has extrinsic value to the extent that it fulfills both a certain cognitive and a certain moral function. In particular, it must promote our awareness of the absurd (i.e., make us see that humans strive for meaning but cannot achieve it) and our attitude of revolt (i.e., make us accept the absurd as a fact and reject it as a norm). In other words, art must lead us closer to the ideal of “absurd existence” (2005: 110).<sup>12</sup>

Any theory according to which the value of art derives from the fact that it fulfills a certain function must provide an account of this function (Graham 2005: 59). So how can art promote our awareness of the absurd and our attitude of revolt? In what follows I will explain Camus' answer to this question. Adopting a distinction implicit in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, I will first consider how art might promote an awareness of the absurd and an attitude of revolt in its creator (Sec. 3), and then how it might fulfill this function with regard to its recipients (Sec. 4).

### 3 The Extrinsic Value of the Process of Creation

From the perspective of the logic of the absurd it does not matter which actions one performs<sup>13</sup>; it only matters that these actions are accompanied by an attitude of revolt. Camus accordingly repeatedly stresses that leading an absurd existence does not require any particular way of life (2005: 66–67, 88–89). At the same time, however, he also suggests that some ways of life make it at least *more likely* that one develops or maintains an awareness of the absurd and an attitude of revolt. Artistic creation is claimed to be valuable in virtue of being one of these ways of life. As Camus puts it, engaging in such creation provides any person with “the opportunity [...] of overcoming his phantoms and approaching a little closer to his naked reality” (2005: 112).<sup>14</sup>

One reason why Camus recommends artistic creation is that he believes seriously engaging in it cultivates traits and attitudes that are indispensable to developing and maintaining an awareness of the absurd and an attitude of revolt. Most importantly, creating is supposed to make one more disciplined, more lucid and more patient (2005: 112–114; see also Seffler 1974: 415–416). For all their motivational helpfulness, however, increases in these traits and attitudes in no way guarantee that the creator approaches the ideal of absurd existence. So which further conditions must a process of creation fulfill in

<sup>12</sup> Most often, Camus states this ideal in terms of being an “absurd man” (2005: 64–67). Note also that Camus himself advises against thinking of the absurd man as an ideal. In the ordinary sense of the term, however, what he develops clearly is an ideal.

<sup>13</sup> This is, of course, as long as one's actions do not exemplify physical or philosophical suicide (which are both forbidden).

<sup>14</sup> At one point Camus even goes so far as to say that artistic creation is the most effective way of promoting absurd existence whatsoever, making the creator the “most absurd character” (2005: 89).

order to reliably lead towards this ideal, and thus to become valuable according to Camus' theory? On closer consideration Camus seems to endorse three conditions.

First, valuable artistic creation requires that the artist “detaches” (2005: 99) or “frees” himself/herself from his/her work in the sense of regarding this work as meaningless (2005: 99–100). Such an attitude is difficult to maintain. Chances are, Camus concedes, that the artist becomes so consumed by his/her work that s/he cannot but regard this work as intrinsically valuable (just like many people who start out seeing money as a means to happiness at some point come to regard it as their final end) (2005: 99–100, 114). The rationale behind Camus' imperative to avoid such ascriptions of meaning is obvious. By doing so the artist would commit himself/herself to the achievability of meaning. The absurd, however, entails that nothing in the world actually has meaning:

To work and create ‘for nothing’, to sculpture in clay, to know that one’s creation has no future, to see one’s work destroyed in a day while being aware that, fundamentally, this has no more importance than building for centuries – this is the difficult wisdom that absurd thought sanctions. (2005: 110–111)

Second, Camus stresses that valuable artistic creation also requires that the artist “illustrates” (2005: 99) both the absurd and the attitude of revolt. This does not mean that his/her work must straightforwardly depict these phenomena. However, both the absurd and the attitude of revolt must at least be affirmed in some allegoric, metaphoric, negative or other indirect sense. In the case of novels, for example, such illustrations can take the form of cautionary tales. An author’s attitude of revolt may be promoted by him/her showing how alternative responses to the absurd (such as physical or philosophical suicide) fail. Camus’ own oeuvre predominantly involves such negative models. Caligula, for instance, mistakenly infers a rampant nihilism from the absurd, and deliberately lets himself be killed (1984). And Meursault in *The Stranger* only breaks through to revolt after he was sentenced to death (1989b).

Third and finally, in order for a process of creation to be valuable Camus also requires that the artist resists the temptation to *explain* the experiences that his/her work addresses. The absurd entails the futility of any attempt to reach perfect intellectual unity. However hard we try (scientifically, philosophically, etc.), we cannot get to the ultimate bottom of reality; we cannot reduce its divergent and complex phenomena to one single explanatory principle (2005: 16–19). All that we are left with is thus to “enumerate” and “describe” the experiences that we make (2005: 42). Works of art, Camus believes, must not move beyond enumeration and description either. Only if they involve “images rather than [...] reasoned arguments” (2005: 98), only if they are a “repetition of the themes already orchestrated by the world” (2005: 92) can the process of creating them promote the artist’s absurd existence (2005: 91–92, 94–95, 97–99, 112).

#### 4 The Extrinsic Value of the Product of Creation

At first glance Camus' early philosophy seems exclusively preoccupied with art's effects on its creators. However, Camus also acknowledges the possible value of the outcome of this process of creation, i.e., of the *work of art* (Davis 2014: 28–29; Sefler 1974: 416; Wittmann 2009: 106). His account of this value resembles that of many

other existentialist philosophers (Deranty 2015), stressing again art's cognitive and moral function. In particular, a work of art is claimed to be valuable if and only if it leads its recipients to develop or maintain both an awareness of the absurdity of their condition and an attitude of revolt towards this absurdity (2005: 98).

In Camus' opinion only few works of art succeed in meeting the above requirement, even among the greatest of these works. So which conditions must a work of art fulfill in order to lead its recipients closer to the ideal of absurd existence, and thus to count as valuable according to his theory? Camus believes that the work of art cannot be separated from its creator (2005: 97). Accordingly, he holds that such a work tends to be valuable to the extent that it springs from a valuable process of creation (2005: 97). First, the work of art must reflect a certain kind of freedom of thought and action which can only come from the artist regarding it as meaningless. Second, the work of art must "illustrate" the absurd and the revolt in the (liberal) sense explained above, i.e., at least by involving relevant allegories, metaphors, negative examples, etc. And third, in order for a work of art to promote absurd existence it must also only describe, and not explain, the experiences that it addresses.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus is sparse with examples of works of art that qualify as valuable in the above sense. At one point (2005: 94) he favorably mentions Rimbaud, who completely stopped writing at the age of 19 (becoming an adventurer and merchant), and towards the end of his life also destroyed all written materials from his period as an artist. These actions supposedly suggest that Rimbaud did not ascribe any or much meaning to his poetry.<sup>15</sup> Further positive examples of valuable works of art include Melville's *Moby Dick* (2005: 110), and Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* (2005: 121–122, 125–126). In general, however, Camus regards it as more illustrative to consider how works of art depart from the ideal of absurdity (2005: 110). One of his prime examples in this regard, besides various novels by Dostoyevsky, is Kafka's *The Castle*.

Camus argues that in contrast to Kafka's earlier works, *The Castle* fails with regard to all three of the above conditions for the valuableness of works of art (2005: 120–134). Kafka did not manage to sufficiently detach himself from this novel. Moreover, while K.'s futile attempts to gain access to the mysterious castle that summoned him provide a metaphor for the absurd, the novel neither affirms revolting nor remains free from explanation. In the end, Camus suggests, K. gives up his struggle and indulges in irrational hopes. He commits philosophical suicide<sup>16</sup>: "*The Trial* diagnoses, and *The Castle* imagines a treatment. But the remedy proposed here does not cure. It merely brings the malady back into normal life. It helps to accept it" (2005: 126).

## 5 Critical Assessment

In the preceding Sections I provided a reconstruction of Camus' early theory of the value of art. On this reconstruction Camus denies that art has any intrinsic value. Rather, he considers something to be valuable as art if and only if it promotes creators'

<sup>15</sup> Note, however, that Rimbaud's decision to destroy his remnants may also (partly) have been due to the influence of his religiously scrupulous sister.

<sup>16</sup> Camus believes that this is shown, among others, by K. turning from his previous lover Frieda to the Barnabas sisters, who have a very troubled relation to the castle (2005: 128–129).



or recipients' awareness of the absurd and their attitude of revolt. Let me close my investigation of Camus' theory by expressing a few thoughts about its plausibility.

Elsewhere (Pözlner 2014, 2016) I argued that interpreted in a philosophical sense, Camus' early logic of the absurd is incoherent. On the one hand the absurd is supposed to exclude the existence of intrinsic values (e.g., 2005: 58–59, 64–66). On the other hand, however, Camus' normative conclusions from the absurd only follow if such values exist. And indeed, on closer consideration he implicitly acknowledges that certain things — in particular, traits and attitudes such as lucidity and authenticity — are intrinsically good (e.g., 2005: 4, 7, 30, 34, 48, 50, 52–53).

However, let us grant here that the logic of the absurd is sound. Even then Camus' theory of the value of art is in need of major revision; for his specifically art-related considerations are problematic as well. In particular, promoting our awareness of the absurd and our attitude of revolt is neither sufficient nor necessary for artistic value.

First, promoting absurd existence cannot plausibly be said to be *sufficient* for a process or product of artistic creation to be valuable. There are innumerable works of art which fulfill this condition but nevertheless lack any value. Suppose, for instance, I hastily scrawl some key passages of *The Myth of Sisyphus* on a blank canvas. The resulting work may qualify as a work of art, and may bring a considerable proportion of its recipients at least somewhat closer to the ideal of absurd existence. But could this work really have any significant artistic value? Even in a universe characterized by the absurd, it seems, such value requires other than absurdity-promoting qualities as well: qualities such as skill, style, originality, or beauty, for example (see Baccarini and Urban 2013: 481, 488; Graham 2005: 71–72; Lamarque and Olsen 1994: 6, 22).<sup>17</sup>

Second, promoting either the artist's or the recipient's awareness of the absurd and attitude of revolt does not even seem *necessary* for a process or product of creation to be valuable. My first argument for this conclusion pertains to the role of art critics (see Lamarque and Olsen 1994: 332, 334).<sup>18</sup> Professional critics likely start from roughly correct assumptions about what is relevant to assessing works of art. If Camus were right that artistic value requires the promotion of absurd existence then critics should accordingly regularly address whether works of art promote absurd existence. There may be some truth about this prediction when it comes to literary criticism in Camus' times. Today, however, assessments in terms of absurdity are very rare (much rarer, for example, than considerations about skill, style, originality, or beauty). Moreover, they have always been rare outside literature.

Camus' necessity claim is especially problematic with regard to art forms that have little representational content, such as instrumental music, abstract painting, or architecture. These art forms can only communicate very simple, concrete or familiar ideas.<sup>19</sup> They therefore cannot lead us significantly closer to an awareness of the absurd and an

<sup>17</sup> The above mentioned authors target cognitivist/moral theories of the value of art or literature more generally. For example, Baccarini and Urban (2013: 481) agree with many others that while Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* increases our knowledge about slavery and has an important and valid moral message, its artistic value is nevertheless fairly low.

<sup>18</sup> Again, Lamarque and Olsen criticize cognitivist theories of the value of literature more generally. They point out that critics rarely debate the truth of *any* proposition that is implied in literary works.

<sup>19</sup> An orchestral piece's *tremolo* may, for example, represent a thunderstorm (which is both a simple, concrete and familiar idea). A painting's composition of colors and forms may represent love (which is a simple and familiar idea).

attitude of revolt at all. But this means that Camus' claim that promoting absurd existence is necessary for artistic value implies that no work in instrumental music, abstract painting, architecture, etc. can possibly have any significant artistic value — which is of course highly implausible (think of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*, Kandinsky's *Yellow-Red-Blue*, or Lahauri's *Taj Mahal*).

Camus at one point implicitly denies that his theory has this counterintuitive consequence. In particular, he briefly remarks that both the visual arts and music are absurd art forms *par excellence* (2005: 96). But his justification for this view relies on a problematic ad hoc modification. According to Camus, art forms with little representational content can have, and typically do have, significant artistic value because they do not lead us away from absurd existence (“description alone prevails”, 2005: 95–96). However, on most other occasions he affirms the much stronger requirement assumed above. Rather than not leading us *away* from absurd existence, Camus suggests, art must actively lead us *towards* such an existence in order for it to qualify as valuable (e.g., 2005: 99; see also Sec. 3 and 4 above).

Given this problem, it is no wonder that Camus largely ignores instrumental music, abstract painting, architecture, and other art forms with little representational content. His focus (like that of most other existentialists) is mainly on literature. But not even literary value requires the promotion of absurd existence. Think back of Kafka's *The Castle*. Camus may be right that this novel fails to promote an attitude of revolt. But not only does *The Castle* provide one of the most accurate metaphors of the absurd that has ever been conceived; it is also written in an original and highly appealing style, creates an inimitably dark atmosphere, involves subtle sprinkles of irony, and so on. Non-absurd qualities such as these clearly suffice for ascribing the novel a high degree of artistic value; just like they suffice for ascribing such value to Dostoyevsky's *The Brother Karamazov*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Orwell's *1984*, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and innumerable other literary works which fail to promote an attitude of revolt, and often even an awareness of the absurd.

## 6 Conclusion

In this paper I reconstructed and critically assessed Camus' early theory of the value of art. It turned out that based on his logic of the absurd, Camus denies that art has any intrinsic value. Rather, he argues, something is valuable as art only insofar as it promotes creators' or recipients' awareness of the absurd and their attitude of revolt. One problem with this theory is that Camus' early logic of the absurd may not be sound. Here I have abstracted from this problem. Instead I have argued that Camus' theory also considerably exaggerates the significance of the logic of the absurd for art. Even if Camus is right that the human condition is absurd and we ought to revolt, artistic value cannot be reduced to these facts, but depends on various other issues as well.

A natural response to this negative assessment of Camus' theory of the value of art is that it results from an inappropriate approach. As a philosopher Camus is to be seen in the continental tradition, alongside figures such as Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. So how can the fact that his theory fails by the standards of *analytic* philosophy be held against him? One's answer to this question depends on one's metaphilosophical views. In my view, analytic and continental philosophy differ in style and in the extent to which they emphasize ideas' historical context. However,

most standards for evaluating philosophical theses and arguments (such as clarity and logical consistency) hold across this distinction. If a theory fails by these standards it thus fails *simpliciter* — not just relative to either the analytic or the continental paradigm (see Leiter 2011).

A more serious worry pertains to my interpretation of Camus' early thinking about art as an independent theory. This thinking has been embedded in a general defense of the logic of the absurd, i.e., of the existence of the absurd and of revolting as the most appropriate response to this absurd. Maybe Camus only used the example of art to illustrate or substantiate these considerations and did not mean to come up with anything like a credible theory of the value of art at all? I agree that in this case my objections (though valid) would be somewhat unfair. At the same time, however, they would still be scholarly relevant and instructive; for a variety of other authors have interpreted Camus as having provided an independent aesthetic theory as well (see, e.g., Sefler 1974; Wittmann 2009).

Over the years Camus seems to have become at least somewhat aware of the incompleteness or implausibility of his thinking about art. In *The Rebel* (1989a) and other later works he accordingly also inferred rudimentary stylistic criteria for evaluating art from his logic of the absurd (requiring that the artist imposes a particular degree of form on the content that he takes from reality), and put stronger emphasis on the value of beauty. These later thoughts are less elaborated and detailed than the early theory of the value of art. However, they are more appealing. Promoting an awareness of the absurd and an attitude of revolt are not necessary and sufficient for artistic value. The question that should be further explored is rather under what conditions they are able to contribute to such value.

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