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Matthew Sharpe's *Camus, Philosophe?*

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Arguably, few academics within philosophy are unfamiliar with at least some of Albert Camus' work, fewer still are unaware of his relationship with Sartre, and yet within philosophy there is precious little serious work on Camus focussed on approaching him not as an author or playwright, but as a philosopher. Sharpe outlines the situation Camus' work is in in the opening to his book *Camus, Philosophe?*, offering his understanding as to why the scepticism around Camus as a worthwhile contributor to philosophy has surfaced. Sharpe's book initially takes us on a brief journey through the development of Camus' reception in academia so that we might observe just how and why the writer's work has been taken away from philosophy over the decades, especially in Anglo-American institutions. Sharpe's task in his book is to make the first step towards revealing the relevancy of Camus' work to that of contemporary philosophy. For the most part, Camus' work has often been scrutinised in a number of disciplines including, but not limited to, literary criticism, modern languages and, to a lesser degree, theology. Sharpe looks to accurately describe Camus' 'philosophical discourse'¹ by drawing a through-line of philosophical thought within the range of Camus' works. The task seems a difficult one, but it is one that hopefully, once achieved, as I believe it is in Sharpe's text, will make Camus' philosophical importance clearer and his work's use in philosophy not only encouraged but made more tenable.

Camus, Philosophe? draws a number of ideas out of Camus' corpus to create a portfolio of motivations, concepts and ideas which Sharpe works into a coherent philosophy presentable to academia. The methods Sharpe uses for this are threefold, including a large investment in thorough and effective exegesis to expose philosophical elements of Camus'

¹ Matthew Sharpe, *Camus, Philosophe* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p.22.

work; revealing Camusian paradigms reflected in the work of a number of philosophers (for example Foucault and Levinas); and illustrating, with the philosophy brought out in exegesis and comparison, the major philosophical themes with which Camus is wrestling in his writing, and how his philosophy could impact upon those topics in a way beneficial to contemporary academic philosophical work. Camus' philosophy is often applied to political concerns pertinent to him and arguably to contemporary society, theological concerns, especially questions of the problem of evil, and ways to address and even rebel against totalitarianism of both metaphysical and political sorts.

Once Sharpe has introduced the problem which has inspired his work and the ways he aims to resolve this, or at least substantially impact upon it, Sharpe enters into Part 1. The first part to the book, titled *Cave & Critique*, is centred heavily around the effect on Camus' work from his experience of totalitarianism during and after the Second World War. Sharpe is very successful, in this first part, at drawing the critique of totalitarianism out of Camus' works, especially *The Plague* and *The State of Siege*. The use of texts and plays not normally characterised as 'philosophical essays' to reveal Camus' philosophical assertions is one of many profound moves taken in Sharpe's work to demonstrate the importance of Camus' writing as a holistic effort at articulating philosophy not confined to a single literary mode of expression. Referring to the work later developed by Foucault and the close links between works such as *The History of Sexuality* and *Discipline and Punish*, Sharpe draws Camus into more modern discussions by threading his work into something of a genealogy of power and revolt. The following sections draw the discussion toward Camus' motivations towards his 'metaphysical rebellion'. Sharpe talks through Camus' interaction with Christianity and Christian theodicies, lighting the route to the exploration of what this metaphysical rebellion would consist of and its relations to Camus' work in *The Rebel* when trying to disclose a philosophical solution to societal and political fascism; a metaphysical revolt and a historical revolt, as Sharpe describes them. To outline this, Sharpe offers a breakdown of Camus' *The Rebel* to show in clearer detail how Camus has laid out his argument's progression leading to the assertion for two major forms of revolutionary nihilism, both of which Camus is opposed to: absolute negation and absolute affirmation.² Immediately following the claim made by Sharpe that this pattern in Camus' text *The Rebel*, also given previous discussions in the

2 Matthew Sharpe, *Camus, Philosophe* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p.133.

chapter, is philosophy Camus is committed to, there is a breakdown of *The Rebel*, to further illustrate Sharpe's point.

Sharpe points out in the introduction that Camus is resistant to categorisation, both in person and in his work, due to his resistance to any 'all or nothing' commitments. Such an attitude toward absolutes is a reflection of his being an artist interested in rebellion and creation. The difficulty is to then approach Camus with the intention of establishing a 'master argument'³ out of Camus' corpus without sacrificing too much of the artistry that the writer employs. Why is this important? Whilst Sharpe does excellent work at achieving a clear and defined breakdown of Camus' argument, it is questionable how much of Camus is indeed left once the analysis and exegesis has taken place. Sharpe does great work at articulating how Camus' thoughts are very much situated in his historical and political context. Camus' chosen form of expressing these ideas is through texts not usually associated with philosophical discourse – and yet, arguably, one of the reasons Camus wrote in ways considerably more ambiguous was to better convey the message that Sharpe draws out in his work. Therefore, given that Sharpe does appear to achieve the deliberation of Camus' master argument, I wonder if it is not at the expense of something of Camus himself. What Sharpe accomplishes is no mean feat, yet it would seem that the main concern that Camus does not escape scepticism from within philosophy is not resolved entirely by presenting Camus' philosophy in a way suggesting he was a philosopher. Rather, what would seem to better establish Camus as contributing to philosophy would surely be to have him contribute without exegetics stripping the creativity from him. Can Camus remain an artist with a coherent philosophy, and not a philosopher who fell prey to art? The wealth of intricacy developed into Camus' arguments throughout his work seem to be stripped away in an effort to show that Camus has a contribution to make to contemporary philosophy. I do not doubt that Sharpe's intention is for Camus to remain an artist and be accepted as such, only the extent of the work done does, I believe, risk that.

To some degree the integration of both geography and philosophical heritage in Camus and his philosophical master argument, counters this issue, as they are raised and discussed in Part 3: *Going Back Down*, as only Sharpe can, in a way that appeals not for the need to simply include or impose these influences on Camus post exegesis, but recognise

3 Matthew Sharpe, *Camus, Philosophe* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p.24.

their ever present permeation in all areas of Camus' work, teased apart or not. On reading Part 3, concerns over the necessity of Camus leaving his art in order to become a philosopher seem impossible, and yet there is a definite demystification of Camus that threatens to pull his work too far apart. Perhaps it can be considered a necessary evil that, in order to dispel any ambiguity in Camus' work, Sharpe has had to cut away much of what makes Camus distinct as an artist in order to better accomplish what he has set out to do in the introduction and show him as being a distinct philosopher, too. Perhaps, in the future work of others, Sharpe's efforts can be built upon to introduce more elements of Camus' work and continue to build confidence in Camus as a philosopher from the philosophical bones exposed by Sharpe's rigorous and thorough work. An artist with a philosophy is perhaps something academic philosophy is not quite prepared to handle yet, better, I imagine, to begin with or introduce an artistic philosopher.

Sharpe's text has a depth to it which tells of the wealth of time, energy and research that has been poured into it. The work is one of very few attempting to lead Camus into academic discourses in philosophy as an artist with a distinct and important philosophy to offer. Much of Camus' work is laced with themes discussed frequently in contemporary academia, themes Sharpe is glad to expose here, and were Camus' work discussed in a less sceptical way than arguably such discussions would be all the better for it. Such is the assertion of Sharpe's book and it is executed masterfully and, with minor misfortunes with regards to Camus' creativity that are no doubt unavoidable in this project, successfully accomplishes what Sharpe works to achieve. As a text it is an extensive and highly detailed odyssey into the life, ideas, philosophy, theology and world of Camus, mapping out his effect on philosophy and putting forward a strong case for his considered inclusion in the serious discourses of academic philosophy today. Sharpe's work will hopefully be sought after for its superb insights and the contextual, strikingly geographical and genealogical account of Camus' work enable it to be seen in a new light, as it is taken up by and expressed through other philosophers in their own work, and help Camus' work gain the potential, revealed by Sharpe, to remain applicable and relevant to contemporary Anglo-American and Australasian academic philosophy.