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Is Camus a philosopher?

Camus est-il un philosophe ? Cette question, qui n'est pas nouvelle dans le milieu des études camusiennes, a trouvé avec le temps les réponses les plus différentes et contrastées -- et pourtant, elle reste toujours une question ouverte. Dans notre texte, nous allons montrer les raisons pour lesquelles Camus mérite d'être pleinement considéré comme un philosophe, même s'il a occasionnellement refusé cette appellation avec conviction. En partant de la critique camusienne de la philosophie académique contemporaine et grâce à une lecture attentive des Carnets, nous comprendrons comment ce refus de Camus est tout à fait partiel et contingent. Puis, dans la dernière partie du texte, nous montrerons comment Camus lui-même avait conçu son œuvre dans les termes d'une véritable « philosophie mise en images » plutôt qu'une simple expression artistique avec des implications philosophiques.

Introduction

In the following pages we are going to debate the question whether Albert Camus can or cannot be considered a philosopher¹. It is not to satisfy a useless whim that we analyse this problem: our will is, instead, to suggest a new philological perspective on Camus' œuvre, showing how and why it is more correct to interpret it as a "*philosophy*

¹ The question is not at all new among Camus scholars, as well as the bibliography about this subject is really immense: from the first critic and factious pamphlet of Sartre's disciple Jean-Jacques Brochier (*Camus, philosophe pour classes terminales*, Paris, Balland, 1979) to the last enormous monograph of Michel Onfray (*L'ordre libertaire. La vie philosophique d'Albert Camus*, Paris, Flammarion, 2012), where Camus is defined as "l'un des grands philosophes nietzschéens du XX^e siècle – peut-être même le plus grand", the question has found the most differing answers. However, since our interest is not a bibliographic résumé of the question, we will quote just the most important works on the subject: Anne-Marie Amiot et Jean-François Mattéi, *Albert Camus et la philosophie*, Paris, PUF, 1997; Maurice Weyembergh, *Albert Camus, ou la mémoire des origines*, Paris-Bruxelles, De Boeck, 1998, (in particular chapter two, *Camus philosophe ?*, p. 15-28.); André Nicolas, *Une philosophie de l'existence : Albert Camus*, Paris, PUF, 1964; Abraham Sagi, *Albert Camus and the philosophy of the Absurd*, Amsterdam-New York, Rodopi, 2002, (in particular chapter two, *Camus as a personal thinker*, p. 25-34.).

expressed in images"² rather than an art work with some philosophical implications. Indeed, this is the way Camus has conceived his works, as it will emerge from the evaluation of his personal remarks.

Anyway, to answer our question we will not get lost in some complicated meta-philosophical reasonings on the correct definition of a philosopher, assuming that such a definition is probably impossible to find. Instead, using a philological approach, we will reconstruct Camus' point of view on the question and, not less importantly, the historical and intellectual contingencies in which Camus has developed his personal conception of a philosopher. We will start just from this last point, in particular from Camus' critique of contemporary philosophy, because through this we will obtain a first silhouette of the philosopher Camus strived to be.

Camus' critique of contemporary philosophy

Reading carefully Camus' direct and indirect remarks on contemporary philosophy there will emerge essentially four points of critique which can be listed in the following way: 1) historical fetishism and abuse of authority principle; 2) voluntary use of a cryptic and self-referential language; 3) pointlessness and excessive abstractness of the chosen philosophical subjects; 4) "*will to system*" and "*ontological impatience*". Let us describe and analyse all these arguments one by one.

As far as the first point is concerned, Camus is quite clear about it in a note of his *Carnets* dating March 1943:

Les anciens philosophes (et pour cause) réfléchissaient beaucoup plus qu'ils ne lisaient. C'est pourquoi ils tenaient si étroitement au concret. L'imprimerie a changé ça. On lit plus qu'on ne réfléchit. Nous n'avons pas de philosophies mais seulement des commentaires. C'est ce que dit Gilson en estimant qu'à l'âge des philosophes qui s'occupaient de philosophie a succédé l'âge des professeurs de philosophie qui s'occupent des philosophes. Il y a dans cette attitude à la fois de la modestie et de l'impuissance. Et un penseur qui commencerait son livre par ces mots, "Prenons les choses au commencement" s'exposerait aux sourires. C'est au point qu'un livre de philosophie qui paraîtrait aujourd'hui en ne s'appuyant sur aucune autorité, citation, commentaire, etc., ne serait pas pris au sérieux. Et pourtant...³

Contemporary philosophers have forgotten the true meaning of philosophy, which is to pose questions and – hopefully – to find answers to important existential problems.

² The expression "*une philosophie mise en images*" is used by Camus in his comment of Sartre's *La Nausée*.

Albert Camus, *Œuvres complètes I*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. « Bibliothèque de la Pléiade », 2006, p. 794.

³ *Id.*, *Œuvres complètes II*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. « Bibliothèque de la Pléiade », 2006, p. 990-991.

On the contrary, they prefer just to read, discuss and compare what past philosophers have said about the same old – often futile – problems: the contemporary philosopher has slowly become a mere historian of philosophy or, to use a sarcastic expression, a collector of ideas. That is why Camus also affirms, in a note dating from December 1937, that "*nous faisons de l'Histoire de la Philosophie l'unique thème sérieux de toute philosophie*"⁴. It seems that there is no more space in philosophy for new ideas, fresh problems or original concepts: the contemporary philosopher, forced by the academic system, cannot speak but about the past, forgetting to philosophize for the present. The famous metaphor of Bernard of Chartres is distorted: we are "*dwarves perched on the shoulders of giants*" but, instead of using this higher position to look beyond the horizon, the only thing we do is to listen and repeat giants' words.

Anyway, the contemporary philosopher is not only a master of erudite repetition but also of self-referential speaking: being persuaded that truth is something obscure and hard to say, he uses an equally obscure and hard language. He does not care to clarify his tortuous vision because he is not afraid to become self-referential or to remain not understood: indeed, he knows that his readers are ready for exegesis and interpretation, no matter how hard it will be. Camus sarcastically remarks: "*ceux qui écrivent obscurément ont bien de la chance : ils auront des commentateurs. Les autres n'auront que des lecteurs, ce qui, paraît-il, est méprisable*"⁵. The motto of this kind of obscure philosopher could be: "the more obscurely I write, the deeper my philosophy will be considered". That is why clear philosophy looks suspicious to him.

Camus ridicules to the extreme this common attitude in an important but unknown *pièce* named *L'impromptu des philosophes*⁶: probably dating back to 1947, it was written under the pseudonym Antoine Bailly and has never been published because Camus was seriously worried about the possible reaction of the philosophers he had made fun of⁷. Here is a short *résumé* of the plot: Monsieur Néant, who pretends to be a Parisian philosopher, comes to Monsieur Vigne's house in order to teach him all the great new philosophical concepts in vogue in Paris: He holds a voluminous book that he calls "the new Gospel" of which he considers himself "the new Apostle": He also affirms to have finally found his true profession, "the salesman of new doctrines". Then, he starts to preach fool ideas on love, democracy, freedom, etc., using a meaningless and inconclusive language, unexpectedly finding Monsieur Vigne's enthusiastic approval. No matter how hard his wife tries to let him recover his wits: by then Monsieur Vigne is completely lost in Néant's fool philosophy – for example, he strives to memorize and repeat Néant's nonsense maxim: "*Être en se faisant et faire que cela soit, c'est être à tout*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 846.

⁵ *Id.*, *Œuvres complètes IV*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. « Bibliothèque de la Pléiade », 2008, p. 1087.

⁶ *Id.*, *Œuvres complètes II*, p. 769-791.

⁷ Indeed the main character is Monsieur Néant, whose name is a clear reference to *L'Être et le Néant* of Sartre.

venant sans être quoi que ce soit". But, before the irreparable happens, the director of the local mental hospital comes on the scene to recapture Néant, who is clearly a mad man and not at all a philosopher. Camus' sarcastic message is pretty clear and really does not need further comments.

In the eyes of Camus, contemporary philosophers also make another great error: when they do not relegate themselves in the boundaries of the mere erudite repetition, they are unable to speak about real practical problems. Not only are they aristocratic regarding their language, but also for the philosophical subjects they choose to analyse. Camus reported in his *Notebooks* an amusing historical anecdote which conveys the idea: "*Kierkegaard brandissait devant Hegel une terrible menace : lui envoyer un jeune homme qui lui demanderait des conseils*"⁸. That is the point: in the name of a superior philosophical speculation on, for example, the Being of the Beings or on the transcendental conditions of the Perception, the contemporary philosopher forgets the real man and his absurd life.

In this way we arrive at Camus' last critique of contemporary philosophy. It is no exaggeration to say that for most contemporary philosophers their theoretical system – which should be a mere mirror of the world – matters more than the world itself: this attitude is what Nietzsche called "*will to system*", defining it as "*a lack of honesty*"⁹. For all the systematic philosophers the first priority is not truth in itself, rather their system's *completeness, coherence* and *unity*: *completeness*, because every single aspect of reality must be resolved and incorporated into the system; *coherence*, because in the end no contradiction can remain; *unity*, because one theoretical principle must clarify everything. Quoting Maurice Weyembergh, the systematic philosopher suffers from what he calls "*impatience ontologique*"¹⁰.

At this point, after having described Camus' critical point of view on contemporary philosophy, we can finally understand what he affirmed in an interview to the journal *Servir* in 1945. To the journalist, who remarked that his name was often associated with Sartre and the existentialism, he replied:

Je ne suis pas un philosophe. Je ne crois pas assez à la raison pour croire à un système. Ce qui m'intéresse, c'est de savoir comment il faut se conduire. Et plus précisément comment on peut se conduire quand on ne croit ni en Dieu ni

⁸ Camus, *Œuvres complètes IV*, p. 1268.

⁹ Nietzsche's passage from the *Twilight of the idols* is also reported from Camus in his *Carnets*. *Id.*, *Œuvres complètes II*, p. 889.

¹⁰ Maurice Weyembergh, « L'unité, la totalité et l'énigme ontologique », *op. cit.*, p. 29. : « *La recherche de l'unité n'aboutit le plus souvent qu'à la totalité, laquelle implique la "mutilation", la "dégradation" du réel. La totalité est en quelque sorte le produit de l'impatience ontologique : elle ne laisse pas être la polarité constitutive du réel, mais sacrifie un pôle à l'autre ou prétend abolir leur opposition dans une synthèse soi-disant réconciliatrice* ».

en la raison.¹¹

Here, Camus' first affirmation has not an absolute meaning: he is not saying "I am not a philosopher at all"; instead, he is suggesting that he is not a philosopher if with this word one means existentialist philosophers like Sartre, Heidegger, Jaspers and so on¹². In the end, the task he recognizes as his own – "to know how one must behave when one does not believe either in God or in reason" – is genuinely philosophical. So, what kind of a philosopher did Camus strive to be?

Camus the philosopher

Camus' way of philosophizing is unconventional for the standards of Western history of philosophy: even the only two *livres d'idées* he wrote – *Le mythe de Sisyphe* and *L'homme révolté* – are far away from the official academic way of philosophizing. Comparing them to the three major books of existentialism – Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant* and Jaspers' *Philosophie* – it is easy to notice the abyssal difference. Anyway, this difference does not arise from a sort of philosophical inability of Camus, as Sartre suggested naming him a "*philosophe pour classes terminales*". On the contrary, it is about a clear methodological choice.

To begin with, Camus chooses to go beyond the rigorousness and the heaviness of the philosophical treatise because he is aware that the cold, dead substance which the concept is made of is nothing without the catalysing power of images and feelings¹³. Indeed, Camus remarks that: "*on ne pense que par image. Si tu veux être philosophe, écris des romans*". That is not just a sort of paradoxical provocation, of which few academic philosophers would approve: it is, instead, a true programmatic affirmation, written by Camus in 1936 in his *Notebooks*¹⁴.

Anyway, this particular need of expressing every concept through images and feelings lies in Camus' another specific persuasion, which is: far from being a mere discipline to study, philosophy is instead a practice to follow – or, better, a passion to live. This belief is fully derived from Nietzsche, who firmly underlined the unbreakable

¹¹ Camus, *Œuvres complètes II*, p. 659.

¹² Catherine Camus agrees with this interpretation: "He always said that he was not a philosopher, if for philosophy one means a system; he did not have an "esprit de système". In this way, he is not a philosopher. If philosophy is, instead, to think about the human condition, then he is a philosopher, who, however, never built up systems". I translate from the Italian interview published in Paolo Flores D'Arcais, *Camus filosofo dell'avvenire*, MicroMega, Roma, 2013, p. 16.

¹³ *Ibid.*, « *Les sentiments, les images multiplient la philosophie par dix* ». This sentence is a comment to Melville's *Moby Dick*.

¹⁴ On the same line, he also affirms, commenting Sartre's *La Nausée* (*Id.*, *Œuvres complètes I*, p. 794.): « *Un roman n'est jamais qu'une philosophie mise en images. Et dans un bon roman, toute la philosophie est passée dans les images* » ; as well as (*Ibid.*, p. 288.): « *Les grands romanciers sont romanciers philosophes* ».

relationship between the philosopher, his philosophy and his life: Nietzsche said that "*the product of the philosopher is his life*"¹⁵; Camus remarked in the same style that "*les philosophies valent ce que valent les philosophes. Plus l'homme est grand, plus la philosophie est vraie*"¹⁶. Following this principle, he also imagined a sort of a test for all contemporary thinkers:

Question à poser : Aimez-vous les idées - avec passion, avec le sang ? Faites-vous une insomnie de cette idée ? Sentez-vous que vous jouez votre vie sur elle ? Que de penseurs reculeraient !¹⁷

In the end, it is true that for most of contemporary philosophers there is no coincidence of life and philosophy – especially when the philosopher is also a professor of philosophy: he can teach a certain doctrine in class while he does the opposite outside it; or, worse, he can pass from believing in a certain theory to the opposite one without feeling the need to justify himself, acting as if nothing had happened. For Camus, instead, philosophy is not an intellectual *divertissement* – in which the philosopher can play with ideas as in a frivolous game – neither a historical discipline – in which the ideas are analysed and discussed with the typical detachment of a historian. On the contrary, in Camus' perspective we could affirm that *ideas justify life* as long as *life testifies for ideas*: even the greatest thinker and writer is not a true philosopher if he does not provide examples for his ideas.

Carrying this methodological principle to the extreme, we finally understand why Camus considers suicide the only "*problème philosophique vraiment sérieux*"¹⁸: if I really think that everything is absurd, that life is total nonsense and that our existence is bound to be a failure, no matter from which perspective I see it, then I should commit suicide, in order to give my thoughts the legitimization they need. Otherwise, my greatest nihilistic thoughts are nothing but words or, worse, intellectual poses. Maybe it is just for this reason that in the past a lot of philosophers preferred to argue about abstract concepts like Being, Nothing and Becoming rather than real practical problems: for the first ones, indeed, there is no need to "*preach by example*", given their abstractness, while for the second ones a certain moral-practical coherence is required. For example, how much credit could we give to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's pedagogical lessons knowing that Rousseau himself placed his five little children in an orphanage? Not so much, I guess.

In conclusion, weighing all the considerations we made, we can easily understand in

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Posthumous Fragments Summer-Autumn 1873*, 29[205]. I translate from the following original German text: "Das Product des Philosophen ist sein Leben (zuerst, vor seinen Werken). Das ist sein Kunstwerk".

¹⁶ *Id.*, *Œuvres complètes II*, p. 816.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 971.

¹⁸ *Id.*, *Œuvres complètes I*, p. 221.

which sense Camus can be considered a philosopher: first, using an impressive expression, we could define him as "a philosopher outside philosophy", where by philosophy we mean evidently academic philosophy. Indeed, the point is that Camus only refused the erudite way of philosophizing, not philosophy itself; but, since the first one was so predominant and arrogant in his *milieu intellectuel*, he preferred to refuse the appellative of "philosopher" rather than to force contemporary philosophy to change. Maybe he also thought, like Pascal, that "*se moquer de la philosophie, c'est vraiment philosopher*".

In line with this, we could define Camus as "a philosopher who writes to be understood", obviously in a provocative sense.¹⁹ As we have seen before, the imposture of Monsieur Néant – embodiment of the contemporary philosopher – is to speak about nothing but in a charming way, in order to impress without explaining anything. Instead, Camus' way of writing is a perfect, rare example of symbiosis between conceptual clarity and stylistic nobility. Knowing that "*nothing is easier than to write so that no one can understand*" and that, on the other hand, "*nothing is more difficult than to express learned ideas so that everyone must understand them*"²⁰, Camus decided to use his superior artistic capabilities to express his great philosophical insights: this definitely makes him, I think, a philosopher who speaks through the artist rather than an artist with some kind of philosophical implications. To be precise, we can say that in Camus the philosopher always *comes before* – and always *speaks through* – the artist.

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¹⁹ « *Il faut parler le langage de tous pour le bien de tous* ». Letter of Albert Camus to Charles Poncet, October 1955, quoted in *Albert Camus. Citoyen du Monde*, Gallimard, Paris, 2013, p. 101, a collective work of Sophie Doudet, Marcelle Mahasela, Pierre-Louis Rey, Agnès Siquel-Courdille and Maurice Weyembergh

²⁰ I translate from the original German text: Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga und Paralipomena: kleine philosophische Schriften*, Diogenes Verlag, Zürich, 1977, second tome, p. 565-566 (chapter XXIII: *Ueber Schriftstellerei und Stil*): "*Und doch ist nichts leichter, als so zu schreiben, daß kein Mensch es versteht; wie hingegen nichts schwerer, als bedeutende Gedanken so auszudrücken, daß Jeder sie verstehn muß*".