



The *Yogavāsiṣṭha* and the Philosophy of the Absurd: A Hindu Response to the Heart's Cry

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Abstract

In this article, I call attention to the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*'s depiction of Rāma's existential crisis and Vasiṣṭha's various methods for resolving it. However, I illuminate this crisis and Rāma's lengthy monologue by turning to an altogether different frame of reference: Albert Camus's philosophy of the absurd as developed in his absurd-oriented works, from *The Myth of Sisyphus* to *The Rebel*. Arguing that Rāma's existential crisis is strongly reminiscent of Camus's awakening to life's absurdity, and that his monologue may be considered among the most successful meditations on this predicament, I examine not only Rāma's quandary but also what the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* deems the ultimate response to it. In this way, I throw into sharp relief two contrasting responses to the absurd condition in human life that effectively challenge one another. Considering some of the Indian classical works, such as the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, in this light suggests that they too acknowledge the absurd as their starting point and, at least to a certain extent, develop doctrines that aid their practitioners in facing it. Nevertheless, the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* also enables us to develop our thinking about absurdity and expand the discussion of constructive responses to the reality of the absurd.

Keywords *Yogavāsiṣṭha* · Camus's philosophy of the absurd · Vedānta · Witness consciousness · Existential crisis · Thomas Nagel

The *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, a medieval Indian work traditionally attributed to the celebrated poet-sage Vālmīki, consists of an elaborate discourse that unfolds on the borderline between a radical form of non-dualistic metaphysical idealism and soteriology. It is, however, not a "treatise on liberation" (Buxton 2006, 392) but a "transformative dialogue" (Madaio 2019, 107): a dynamic exchange that is designed to lead both discussant and reader from a state of existential perplexity to a gradual awakening and, ultimately, an unwavering soul liberation (*jīvanmukti*). As a dramatic dialogue (*saṃvāda*), it declaredly strives to engage its discussants, and consequently its readers, in an

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intense self-inquiry (*ātma-vicāra*) by reflecting their misconceptions about life's most fundamental questions as well as their own unadulterated nature. For this reason, it is extremely repetitive rather than presenting a progressive flow of argumentation.

The central problem that occupies the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*'s sages and seekers is which of the two paths is more conducive to liberation: fulfilling scriptural injunctions or abandoning all action (*Yogavāsiṣṭha*, I.1). The *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, however, lays out a paradoxical path, in which, despite one's disillusionment with the objective world (*drśya*), one may live in the midst of the world without being compelled to externally renounce it.¹ This resolution further establishes the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* as a transformative dialogical process whose interest lies not only in a metaphysical vision but also in offering a philosophy as a way of life. While the text continuously insists that the world ontologically relies on the absolute reality, just as a golden bracelet is nothing but gold (e.g., III.1), its primary concern is how one should respond to this realization and live "an enlightened life of a liberated sage" (I.3).

This philosophical and transformational problem is made more acute for readers by drawing them into a kind of existential crisis that is humanly recognizable: the text is primarily an extensive and tortuous answer given by the sage Vasiṣṭha to the sixteen-year-old prince Rāma, who is steeped in what appears to be a state of depression. Facing a diverse audience, from sages, ministers, members of the royal family, and servants to pet animals and celestial beings, Rāma opens the dialogue by laying bare the reasons for his dejection (*durmanas*) in a lengthy monologue. Understandably, scholarly attention has mostly been drawn to scrutinizing Vasiṣṭha's multilayered response to Rāma's monologue, since it constructs a fascinating worldview drawing on a range of influences beyond Vedānta's realm and employing numerous logical claims, storyworlds, allegories, and metaphors.² Assuming that Rāma's monologue serves as a mere catalyst for the presentation of Vasiṣṭha's doctrine, writers tend to be content with addressing the concerns of the young prince, including his suicidal considerations and his burning question of whether life is worth living at all, as an existential crisis within the context of the search for *vidyā* (ontological knowledge) and religious detachment (e.g., Madaio 2019, 109, 122). Nevertheless, in this article, I would like to call attention to Rāma's monologue and to illuminate it by turning to an altogether different frame of reference: Albert Camus's philosophy of the absurd as developed in his absurd-oriented works, from *The Myth of Sisyphus* to *The Rebel*.

Arguing that Rāma's existential crisis is strongly reminiscent of Camus's awakening to life's absurdity, and that his monologue may be considered among the most

¹ Doniger O'Flaherty (1984, 141–142) captures this paradoxical statement when he reads the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* as an attempt to resolve the tension between the Buddhist ideal of renunciation and the Hindu ideal of duty.

² Offering a summary of modern literature on the origins of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, Buxton (2006, 394–398) builds on Mainkar's (1980) and Slaje's (1997) studies to convincingly refute the traditional assumption that the work is a "unitary text written by a single author" and that it is exclusively Vedāntic. Nevertheless, notwithstanding evidence of references to terms and concepts used in other traditions such as Yogācāra Buddhism and Kashmiri Śaivism, it should be concluded that the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*'s metaphysical axis is, after all, a homogeneously Vedāntic universe of *ātman*–Brahman unity.

successful meditations on this predicament, I shall examine not only Rāma's quandary but also what the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* deems the ultimate response to it. Since Camus (2005, 16) repeatedly points out that the absurd itself is a truism and thus one should concern oneself with the consequences that can be deduced from it, demonstrating that there exists a Vedāntic awareness of life's absurdity would not suffice. In this way, I will be able to throw into sharp relief two contrasting responses to the absurd condition in human life that effectively challenge one another.

Significantly, Camus (2005, 62) himself, in a statement to which I shall return near the end of this article, construes the choice made by "certain Vedāntic schools" to develop a "philosophy of indifference" as a potential response to the reality of the absurd. Moreover, although Camus certainly does not endorse negation of the world, he considers this type of response equally worthy as the life-affirming responses he himself offers, so long as it is rigorously pursued (*ibid.*). This justifies my attempt to juxtapose these two seemingly disparate worlds, since, to borrow Camus's words in relation to the existentialists, "despite such dissimilar zones of knowledge, the cry that terminates their itinerary rings out in the same way" (*ibid.*, 27). Indeed, considering some of the Indian classical works, such as the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, in this light suggests that they too acknowledge the absurd as their starting point and, at least to a certain extent, develop doctrines that aid their practitioners in facing it. Thinking with Camus on works of Indian philosophies may therefore lead us to conclude that one of the most common themes occupying Indian philosophers—the problem and ending of existential suffering (*duḥkha*)—bears similarities to what existentialist and absurdist philosophers have identified as coming up against life's absurdity. This insight can broaden the scope of the as yet relatively limited comparative research on not only the metaphysical but also the existential dimensions of Indian thought (see, for instance, Chaudhuri 1962; King 1983; Kumar 2023).³

I shall begin my exploration with a brief discussion of the essentials of Camus's absurdist philosophy. This will enable me to scrutinize Rāma's monologue and the existential crisis that it depicts against the backdrop of what Camus considers to be awakened feeling and consciousness of absurd tensions. This section will demonstrate not only the commonality between these philosophical viewpoints, but, more importantly, the fact that both maintain that as excruciating as it may be, this awakening is potentially constructive and ultimately transformative if one follows it all the way. Nevertheless, what "all the way" implies exactly is where the two philosophies finally diverge. In the ensuing section, I will thus delve into the similitude and dissimilitude of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*'s and Camus's responses to the absurd predicament. Assessing this Vedāntic response to "this cry from the heart" (Camus 2005, 25), also by invoking Thomas Nagel's criticism of Camus's philosophy, I will ponder whether the absurd is partly or entirely an escapable component of human existence.

³ It should be clarified that too often, absurdism and existentialism are used interchangeably, whereas Camus's conception of the absurd was developed as a form of criticism of existentialist thought (Camus 2005, 8, 27). Thus, an absurdist reading may add yet unexplored dimensions to the literature in this field.

Depression, Wisdom, or Both?

Since our first objective is to engage in a Camusean reading of Rāma's existential crisis, I shall limit my discussion of Camus's philosophy of the absurd to his phenomenological observations of absurdity as a fundamental feeling and friction in human life (rather than the claims he makes about potential responses to this condition, which will be pertinent to the following section). Camus clearly distinguishes the feeling of the absurd from the notion of the absurd, conceiving of the former condition as primarily a living, pre-philosophical recognition, "facts the heart can feel" rather than a matter of words and minds (Camus 2005, 2, 27).⁴ As a profound feeling and a climate, it lights up the absurd universe (8, 10). Beginning as an underlying anxiety—Sartre's famed nausea—that lurks on every street corner, this feeling, in its "distressing nudity," may burst forth without warning, pulling us out of the "sleep necessary to life" and thrusting us into a painful confrontation with an existential "why" (9, 11). This weariness ignites the impulse of consciousness, which may culminate in either a definitive awakening to life's absurdity or a slow regression to the chain of daily habits (11). Significantly, Camus concludes that while this weariness is sickening and its striking lucidity might even lead to "flight from light" in the form of suicide, its ability to inaugurate consciousness makes it essentially constructive (3, 11). Camus's oeuvre, mainly the works he named the "three absconds" (*Caligula*, *The Stranger*, and *The Myth of Sisyphus*) and his later long essay, *The Rebel*, includes a painstaking attempt to discern unwholesome reactions to this awakening and to take advantage of this lucidity, however painful, for the sake of the fulfillment of the human potential to attain self-integration, authenticity, freedom, and even happiness.

While *The Myth of Sisyphus* initially highlights the nonverbal and nonconceptual dimension of the absurd, it does gradually achieve, through a blend of poetic lamentation and philosophical musings, a metaphysical portrayal of this reality. The absurd, Camus maintains, originates neither in the human mind nor in the universe but from the meeting point between the two (Camus 2005, 29). It is an abyss between the observing mind and the life in which it participates: whereas cats and trees belong to this world, human consciousness stands apart from the rest of creation, thus experiencing an estrangement from a universe that is supposed to be its home (4–5, 49–50). This, as both Camus and one of his well-known critics, Thomas Nagel, have pointed out, is an inherent feature of the mind, endowing us with the ability to step back from life's stream, transcend ourselves in thought, survey ourselves with "detached amazement," and wonder whether what we are doing is of any value (Nagel 1971, 719–720, 725). Driven by existential nostalgia, however, human thought seeks to recover the sense of familiarity and unity, through both mystical thought and scientific elucidation of the world. Nevertheless, Parmenides's reality

⁴ By accentuating the pre-philosophical dimension of absurdism, Camus inevitably runs the risk of having his philosophy treated as a fragmented artistic work rather than an argument-based system, and indeed, this has been a source of widespread criticism among philosophers (see Sagi 2002, 1; Golomb 2005, 119, 141; Aronson 2017, 2).

of the One inevitably acknowledges the diversity it claims to resolve, and science's attempt to capture the universe ends up reducing it to elusive images of atoms and subatomic particles (Camus 2005, 16, 18). Confronted with the irrational and irreducible nature of the world, thought reaches its confines, which are metaphorically described by Camus as “absurd walls” (9).⁵

Among these limits, we find not only the insurmountable wall of separateness—involving also an acute sense of distance from oneself and the inability to attain self-knowledge—but also epistemological barriers preventing the mind's efficacious but limited reason from getting hold of the ultimate unintelligibility of the universe and, even worse, from obtaining that part of cosmic knowledge that could shed light on the sense of our life (Tubali 2020, 40–46). To these we should add Camus's “most obvious absurdity”: the limit of time and death, which compels humans to march, meticulously and cautiously, toward tomorrow, only to realize that, traveled to its end, tomorrow turns out to be nothing but the nemesis of all mortal life (Camus 2005, 12, 57). At the same time, human thought comes up against the absurd wall of repetitiveness, as we as life's astonished spectator recognize that our being is tied to mechanical gestures without any ability to rise above its own programming (Nagel 1971, 726). However, it should be emphasized once again that absurdity does not result from these limits in themselves but rather from the friction between longing and limit: “What man wants, what the world offers, and what links them” (Camus 2005, 29). In this gap between intention and reality, question and cosmic silence, a self-transcending consciousness is hammered into a recognition of its barriers and finitude.

Nevertheless, as far as Camus is concerned, this metaphysical delineation of the absurd is not a conclusion but a starting point, at which the absurd hero must steadfastly remain to develop a consequential ethical relationship with life (Camus 2005, 1). This determination to stay in the absurd's waterless deserts and under its stifling sky—in other words, between the enclosing absurd walls—is vital but deadly, and thus, Camus observes, it is only understandable that the existentialists came upon the reality of the absurd, but soon after sought to escape its universe through hope's myriad manifestations (8, 27). Considering these subtle forms of escape “philosophical suicide,” the intellectual twin of the erroneous choice to take one's own life in response to absurdity, Camus develops a methodology of absurd reasoning, that is, remaining logical to the bitter end, arguing that only an unwavering approach can yield an absurdist enlightenment (8, 110). His methodology's first step involves a piecemeal negation of the ways in which so-called existentialists, from Kierkegaard and Chestov to Dostoevsky, Kafka, Jaspers, and Heidegger, have violated the absurd's commandments. If one is “careful not to quiet the pain,” as Kierkegaard initially was, one ought to preserve the absurd's delicate tensions between longing and limit: hopelessness that does not culminate in despair or renunciation and, at the same time, unceasing revolt without seeking to destroy or transcend the boundaries of absurdist reality (24, 30).

This brief introduction to Camus's conception of the absurd leads us to an unexpected proponent of this type of consciousness: young Rāma, whose speech surveys

⁵ These abstract walls transform in Camus's *The Stranger* into the concrete prison walls in which Meursault is compelled to develop his absurdist consciousness (Tubali, 2020, 21).

the human experience, incrementally lighting up a kind of universe that is comparable to the one Camus beholds in his *Myth of Sisyphus*. The fact that the unknown author (or authors) of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* chose to devote so many verses to this speech (Yogavāsiṣṭha, I.11–I.31) indicates that the reader or hearer of the text is invited to be spiritually transformed not only by Vasiṣṭha’s guidance but also through the monologue’s liberating effects. This choice becomes even more meaningful when we consider the traditional structure of Indian transformative dialogues, from the Hindu Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavadgītā* to the Buddhist Pāli Canon and the Jain Śvetāmbara canon, in which a brief question would be posed by the truth-seeker only to trigger the master’s lengthy discourse (*praśnottara*).⁶ We should therefore wonder in what sense Rāma’s absurdist-like reflections on human life may indeed be soteriologically valuable, both on their own and as a preparation for Vasiṣṭha’s ensuing words of soul illumination.

Rāma’s speech, aptly described by Madaio (2019, 110–111) as “elegiac lamentation,” presents a partly disturbing and partly grotesque vision of the world as he views it at this time of existential crisis. What makes this vision profoundly absurdist is not only the exaggerated ways in which Rāma illustrates life’s futility—describing, for instance, how the deity presiding over death sees the old man’s white-roofed head as a salted melon and rushes to grab it (Yogavāsiṣṭha, I.21–22)⁷—but, more importantly, his depiction of an unending clash between human expectations and what the world truly has to offer, as well as humanity’s pointless efforts to find meaning. The text itself, despite its soteriological context, makes every attempt to lead its reader or hearer to the same state of sheer hopelessness in which the young prince is steeped. For purposes that greatly differ from those of Camus’s methodology of persistence (Camus 2005, 51), this form of extreme negation that robs one of “all hope in this world” (Yogavāsiṣṭha, I.11–12) is designed to set in motion an acute awakening to life’s absurdity.

It should be understood that the ideal reader or hearer (*adhikārin*) whom the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* itself deems worthy of studying this scripture (*śāstra*) is one who is in between bondage and liberation, ignorance and enlightenment (Yogavāsiṣṭha, I.2). This condition of the ideal learner parallels Rāma’s half-awakened state (*ardha-prabodha*), indicating in both cases preparedness for the ultimate initiation into supreme enlightenment that can only be carried out by a fully realized sage such as Vasiṣṭha. The implication is that in the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*’s universe, absurdist consciousness—in Camus’s vocabulary, an unswerving awareness of the barriers of human existence, and, in Vedāntic terms, a poignant awareness of the reality of bondage—is equated with profound discernment (*viveka*) and wisdom, leading to

⁶ It may be argued that the *Bhagavadgītā*’s Arjuna, another discussant in a soteriological dialogue that commences with an existential crisis, also lays out his moral dilemma in a relatively lengthy manner (*Bhagavadgītā*, 1.29–46), although it is still far from Rāma’s complex presentation. At the same time, the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* is mostly in keeping with the Indian written dialogical tradition: after Rāma’s speech is over, he disappears into the background, giving way to Vasiṣṭha’s lengthy answers.

⁷ As Michael Bennett (2015, 5, 10) suggests, we should distinguish the philosophy of the absurd from “absurd” in the literary sense of “ridiculous,” although absurdism may include exaggeration of existential tensions.

dispassion (*vairāgya-prakaraṇa*) and indifference to worldly affairs (*vyavahāra*). Thus, in both philosophies, this agonizing realization is potentially liberating and, in this sense, positive: it constitutes the essential step toward enlightenment, either absurdist or mystical.

For this reason, Rāma's existential crisis, whose severity may be construed by modern psychologists as depression, is confusingly praised by the text as "full of wisdom and dispassion" and pointing to enlightenment (Yogavāsiṣṭha, I.11). On the one hand, we read that Rāma appears to be dejected, emaciated, silent, and unresponsive; he shuns company, avoids bathing, and merely goes through the motions of mundane activities as if he were an automaton; and, even worse, he seems to harbor suicidal thoughts (I.10). On the other hand, he is portrayed as shining with the "peace of maturity" (I.11).⁸ This paradoxical delineation resembles Camus's conception of absurdist awakening: the first sign of absurdity appears when one is asked what one is thinking about and sincerely replies "nothing," indicating an "odd state of soul" in which the void takes hold, a breaking of the mechanical "chain of daily gestures," and a vain search of the heart for the link that will reconnect it; out of this weariness, an existential "why" arises; and finally, one is confronted with the consequence of this awakening: either suicide or recovery (Camus 2005, 11). Nevertheless, like the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*'s author, Camus insists that this awakening is good since anything of value must begin with it (*ibid.*).

Another commonality between *The Myth of Sisyphus* and the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* is that they do not aspire to establish arguments for the reality of absurdity but are content with its phenomenological dimension, faithful to the pre-philosophical nature of the feeling and the climate of the absurd. The worldview outlined by Rāma is justified by him through metaphors and analogies (*Drṣṭānta*), a common method of persuasion utilized in classical Indian philosophy.⁹ Whether his descriptions are a sincere attempt to capture the actuality of human life or deliberately farcical is an altogether different question. In either case, they are designed to provoke intense consciousness of the unrelievable tensions between longing and limit and to compel readers and hearers to remain in those "waterless deserts," to borrow Camus's terms, without escape.¹⁰

Nevertheless, this phenomenological leaning does not imply that the monologue is devoid of a metaphysical frame of reference, in this case the absurdist dimension of the common Indian conception of ceaseless transmigration. This view of the unbroken cycle of birth and death (*saṃsāra*) as absurd is conveyed by Rāma at the outset: "All beings in this world take birth but to die, and they die to be born!" (Yogavāsiṣṭha, I.12), and close to the end of his speech, he provides us with an evocative metaphor for this cycle, imagining it as a "skilful dancer whose skirt is made up of living souls,"

⁸ Considering Rāma's exceptionally young age, we may be reminded of the *Kāthopaniṣad*'s Nāciketa: the boy who, despite his age (or perhaps because of it), demonstrates dispassion and preparedness for initiation that are misunderstood by his elders (Kāthopaniṣad, 1.1–6, 1.26–28).

⁹ For a discussion of this method of persuasion as practiced in the Indian tradition of Nyāya vāda, see Lloyd (2013, 292, 294).

¹⁰ It may be argued that Rāma's hopelessness is incomplete since his hope for transcendence taints his absurdist position (see, for instance, Yogavāsiṣṭha, I.14, I.30–31).

and who dooms the souls to their future manifestations with each dancing gesture (I.28). This tireless merry-go-round of reincarnations leading nowhere is reminiscent of one of the phases of Gautama Buddha's story of awakening in the Pāli Canon: with his now-open transhuman eye, the Buddha gains a complete vision of "beings passing away and reappearing" (*Majjhima Nikāya*, 36). While the vision of this cycle is construed, both traditionally and scholarly, within the context of the problem and potential cessation of suffering (*duḥkha*), a Camusean reading illuminates it as an absurdist notion.¹¹ Significantly, this interpretation was deployed by Nietzsche when he envisioned a so-called European response to the Indian concept in the form of his eternal recurrence: an aimless condition of eternal *saṃsāra*, repeating the same old habits in different contexts, life after life, without hope for "quenching" (*nibbuta* in Pāli) in *nirvāṇa* (Morrison 1999, 153, 155, 197). Since Camus's philosophy of the absurd was deeply influenced by Nietzsche's thought (Srigley 2007, 5), it is only natural to assume that Nietzsche's suggestion to stretch absurdity ad infinitum as a test of one's readiness to consciously choose one's fate inspired Camus's (2005, 116–117) image of Sisyphus tirelessly pushing his rock upward only to watch it rush down.

In his speech, Rāma offers a vast array of absurdist experiences in human life, some of which are in line with Camus's depiction of the collision between longing and the untraversable limits of separation, knowledge, meaning, death, and repetition. Nevertheless, Rāma's insight into the human experience seems to broaden our view of absurdist manifestations in that it accentuates the ways in which the mind restlessly produces its own mirages of happiness, chases after them, invariably fails to achieve satisfaction, and consequently only grows in restlessness (e.g., *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, I.16). This mind-made absurdity is the primary reason that a life invested in the pursuit of one's happiness ends in unhappiness: although the mind flits in every possible direction in the hopes of achieving satisfaction, it is unable to rejoice even in the pleasures that are within its reach (I.15–16). Its absurd craving—vividly personified as an aged actress whose constant failure to perform well does not deter her from dancing on the stage—has no direction and does not even aim for happiness (I.16–17). This emphasis derives from the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*'s metaphysical idealism: as opposed to Camus's insistence on absurdity as originating neither in human consciousness nor in the universe but from the meeting point between the two, the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, whose axiom is that it is the "mind alone which is the cause of all objects in the world" and thus that "when the mind vanishes the worlds vanish too" (*ibid.*), leads us to conclude that the mind is the source of all absurdity. It is therefore closer to Nagel's (1971, 719–721) understanding of the absurd as clashes within human consciousness itself.¹²

¹² Specifically, Nagel's viewpoint, to which I shall return in the following section, captures an unredeemable but foundationally meaningful struggle between contrasting viewpoints within oneself: the view from nowhere, which is the external or self-transcending perspective that human consciousness is endowed with, and the view of the participant in the particular form of one's life.

¹¹ Apart from *saṃsāra*, we may also consider the Vedāntic conception of *māyā*, which traditionally translates as "illusion," an equivalent of Camus's reality of the absurd. As a part of his existentialist and absurdist reading of Swami Vivekananda's thought, Kumar (2023, 50–51) suggests that Vivekananda viewed *māyā* not as a hindrance but as an inescapable set of absurdist frictions inherent in the human condition and the basis for knowledge and for a new life.

Notwithstanding this predominant idealist framing, most of Rāma's observations may still be read as an expansion of the existential frictions illustrated in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, demonstrating in their own way the distance and disproportion between one's intention or action and the reality of the world that eclipses it (Camus 2005, 28). We read, for instance, that wealth only engenders worry and insatiable craving (Yogavāsiṣṭha, I.13) and that the effort to extend one's life span ultimately prolongs one's suffering, as we know all the while that death is watching over, eager to catch its prey, as a cat would watch a rat (I.14).¹³ Furthermore, the body in which we dwell is a source of absurdity, since it is not designed to collaborate with our hope for happiness and self-fulfillment. Akin to a hollow tree in *saṃsāra*'s forest, it is the abode of the monkey of the mind, the crickets of worries, the insects of suffering, the venomous serpent of craving, and the wild crow of anger (I.18). As such, it is prone to extreme reactivity, illness, and fluctuating emotions and mental states, and its useless existence seems to achieve fulfillment only when it is finally burned, devoured by the death of which it was oblivious (*ibid.*).

Rāma goes on to strip life's three major phases—childhood, youth, and old age—of their false promises. Childhood, which is expected to be enjoyable, is filled with sorrow, since the child is helplessly subjected to delusions and disproportionate behaviors, including tearful heartbreak when it does not get exactly what it wants and bursts of anguish that appear to be worse than those of a dying person (Yogavāsiṣṭha, I.19). This unhappiness develops into greater misery throughout one's youth, a period that appears to be physically desirable but is mentally destructive, producing countless lustful mirages and short-lived pleasures whose pursuit ends in anxiety and long-lasting suffering (I.20). Even worse, the delusion of youth, which is the yearning for that which changes to be changeless, lingers on, and the passions it ignites continue to inflame the adult body (*ibid.*). Lastly, Rāma robs us of our hope for at least a few redeeming words depicting old age wisdom when he describes life's last phase in poignant but ironic terms: the flesh, once the source of attractiveness, transforms into "shrivelled ugliness"; senility causes the old man or woman to be the "laughing stock of other people"; and the person is still eaten up by desires and cravings, even though the body is unable to satisfy these desires and it is far too late to alter the course of one's life (I.21–22). This futile progression, in which the dissatisfied child dreams of youth and the frustrated youth is overpowered by old age, may remind us of Camus's (2005, 12) youngster who, by eagerly situating themselves in relation to time, falls prey to tomorrow's empty promise.

Having scrutinized the absurdist dimensions of all periods of the life span, Rāma concludes his persistent negation by considering the absurdity of time as a whole and the human longing for stability that comes up against it—since "when Time thus dances in this universe, creating and destroying everything, what hope can we

¹³ While it is clear why for Camus's absurd hero, who has nothing besides the visible world of phenomena, death would signify the ultimate limit, we should wonder whether a metaphysics of transmigration does not nullify the absurdity of death. Rāma seems to include both the dread of death and the ceaseless cycle of birth and death as absurd. Perhaps Nagel's (1971: 717) refutation of Camus's limit of death would be helpful in this case: according to Nagel's argument, an average lifetime of seventy years would be simply "infinitely absurd" if it lasted forever.

entertain?” (Yogavāsiṣṭha, I.25). With great pathos, Rāma delineates time as an ever-ravenous cosmic being, whose whimsical behavior is interchangeably likened to that of a deceptive magician, a playful boy, and a dancer (I.23). Time renders all human aspirations absurd, leaving mortals to crave enjoyments that are no different than the taste of fruits reflected in a mirror and to hold on to permanency where there can be none (I.26). Since one’s senses and mind are one’s gravest enemies (I.26), we are fooled into believing in the world’s stability, just as a potter’s wheel appears to stand still while revolving speedily, and we fail to bear in mind the inevitable destruction of whatever sense objects form in front of our eyes (I.27). In the end, Rāma avers, whether an eon or a moment, all experiences amount to a dream (I.27–28).¹⁴

Having demonstrated the human condition to be an unsettleable contradiction, both within the human mind itself and between a struggling mind and an unyielding universe, and determined that “there is no way out of this suffering” (Yogavāsiṣṭha, I.26), Rāma’s monologue ends in a tragic tone. Or at least this is how the reader, who has faithfully followed Rāma’s own overt statements, may think it ends, since the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*’s author provides us once again with a paradoxical description of the young prince’s condition. Just as Rāma was portrayed prior to his speech as despondent and suicidal on the one hand, and as radiating peace and maturity on the other, so too the monologue culminates in a meaningful discrepancy between Rāma’s feelings and the narrator’s conclusions.

As far as Rāma is concerned, he is sorrowful, dumbfounded, and fearful, caught in a limbo between full awareness of life’s absurdity and the possible transcendence of this condition that would lead him to wisdom and freedom (Yogavāsiṣṭha, I.30). The last verses of his monologue indicate that he is absorbed in intense questioning, wondering how one can be fully involved in worldly activities while remaining inwardly untainted; in other words, how, upon growing aware of the absurd and living in its light, the wise can remain unbefuddled by it and even transform it into a source of joy (I.30–31). The rest of those gathered, however, ignore Rāma’s self-evaluation: instead of being dispirited by the monologue’s discordant descriptions, the participants are unanimously elevated and cheerful, feeling that the words have dispelled their minds’ delusions and doubts and even positively liberated them from hope (I.32–33). Moreover, the sage Viśvāmitra declares that the speech reflects Rāma’s attainment of the highest wisdom and that besides having his knowledge confirmed, there is really nothing further for him to know (II.1).

We, the event’s observers, are left to wonder why everyone is happy and, if Rāma’s knowledge is complete, why we should engage at all with Vasiṣṭha’s book-length answer. But then again, is this what the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* deems the supreme enlightenment? While it is clear that Vasiṣṭha’s intricate reply to Rāma’s questioning

¹⁴ Although Rāma and Camus seem to be leading us toward the same conclusion about time—suggesting that it is nothing but fractured and disjointed moments—Rāma’s impermanency is a relative reality that takes place within the broader framework of an immutable reality, whereas Camus (2005, 84) chooses to deprive himself of the eternal, accepting, as Smith (2011, 3) puts it, that what cannot be unified becomes multiplied into countless shimmering moments.

is far from mere confirmation—Rāma is, after all, only half-awake—the text’s appraisal of the monologue constitutes an important statement about the value of a complete and hopeless perception of life’s absurdity. We learn that this consciousness is, in itself, a vital ingredient of the “truth” that can ultimately lead the adherent to the Vedāntic *nirvikalpa samādhi* (Yogavāsiṣṭha, II.1–2).¹⁵ It is not just a first necessary step facilitating one’s transcendent leap, since it involves a substantial transcendence of its own: awareness of the absurd can liberate in that it gives rise to dispassion. The young prince himself is cognizant of the absurd’s liberating effects when he points out that by being able to perceive the world’s limitations, he has uprooted the undesirable tendencies in his mind (I.29), and Viśvāmītra reinforces this view when he asserts that the most undeniable indication of wisdom is a person’s indifference to worldly pleasures (II.2). If we consider the position of dispassion through the lens of Camus’s absurdist break between the observing mind and the life in which it participates, which Nagel later developed into the view from nowhere, we can deduce that dispassion leads to a disengagement of one’s self-transcending consciousness from life—what, in Vedāntic terms, is regarded as the witness consciousness (*sākṣin*). This preliminary enlightenment of detached awareness prepares the ground for the final initiation by the master.

Where Vedānta Diverges from the Absurd

Dispassion, however, is not an inevitable derivative of absurdist awakening but a Vedāntic response to this awakening. This confirms Camus’s (2005, 62) consideration of Vedānta’s philosophy of indifference and world negation as one of the legitimate responses to the reality of the absurd. By validating the Vedāntic approach, Camus necessarily points out that his own preferred response to absurdity—acceptance of the world intermixed with the full ignition of the “passionate flames of human revolt”—has its limits (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, in the absurdist universe constructed by Camus, Rāma’s detached consciousness is a step that cannot be taken for at least two fundamental reasons, the first of which is metaphysical and the other ethical.

Metaphysically, although they are tragically and irreparably divorced, the mind and the limited world that it observes cannot be truly separated since, in Camus’s phenomenological universe, the two appear together. Indeed, *because* the subjective consciousness and the objective world are constitutively interwoven, consciousness’s sense of estrangement in a world that should be intimately familiar to it is its absurd condition. Thus, detachment may be a form of existential coping with this reality, but it is not a metaphysical option, as it is for the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*’s sages. This kind of hope for transcendence, betrayed by Rāma’s monologue (e.g., *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, I.27), would be classified by Camus (2005, 27) as “philosophical suicide.”

The other, ethical reason is the criterion by which Camus evaluates the worthiness of possible responses to absurdity. As previously clarified, what occupies Camus’s

¹⁵ A state that ends any subject/object distinction and leads to the absorption of self (*ātman*) in Brahman’s infinite light.

mind is not the discovery of the absurd, which he deems self-evident, but its ethical consequences—a lifelong project that was consummated in his essay *The Rebel*. A wrong response is the “mind’s retreat before what the mind itself has brought to light” (Camus 2013, 48). This retreat seeks to eliminate the absurd’s mind–universe dynamic tension, violating the absurd’s commandment that we remain hopeless and dissatisfied but without sinking into despair and renunciation (30). Among such negative responses, Camus considers suicide, murder, nihilism, philosophical suicide, and, in this context, Vedānta’s renunciation (Tubali 2020, 59–64).¹⁶ Conversely, positive responses blossom within the confines of the universe’s absurd walls, on the basis of one’s insistence on carrying absurd logic to its conclusion and consenting to human fate as the “single necessary good” (Camus 2013, x). By retaining this tension, Camus avers, we enable the flourishing of an authentic absurdist ethics. These positive responses include a blend of acceptance and revolt, as well as a free and passionate spirit born of the falling away of the future, but also art as an expression of rebellion and human solidarity that involves a “strange form of love” (Tubali 2020, 64–71).¹⁷

Thus, the two philosophies seem to share the starting point of the absurdist journey while branching off to opposing conclusions and implications. On the one hand, despite their disparate terminologies, both philosophies not only acknowledge the absurd dimension of human life but also consider its experience and the harrowing awakening to it as potentially developmental and enlightening. Consequently, Camus’s absurdist works and the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* encourage their readers to resolutely confront this source of great suffering and to maintain a positively hopeless condition of “definitive awakening,” while resisting the temptation to gradually fall back into the unconscious “chain of daily gestures” (Camus 2005, 11). In both cases, suicide as a viable response to this realization is sincerely considered but eventually rejected, although the truth-seeker’s question of whether life is worth living remains a matter of life and death: Camus regards it as the “most urgent of questions” (ibid., 2), and young Rāma dramatically declares that “if you consider that I am neither fit nor capable of understanding this, I shall fast unto death” (*Yogavāsiṣṭha*, I.31). Nonetheless, Camus’s philosophy of the absurd and the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* develop their investigations based on the trust that this type of unflinching confrontation with the absurd yields therapeutic and liberating outcomes.

On the other hand, the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*’s liberating outcome offers hope outside the universe of the absurd. While it confirms that human life is, in itself, utterly futile, carrying this absurd logic to its conclusion leads both Rāma and the reader to a gradual release of consciousness from their particular form of life and ultimately creation as a whole. Dispassion is the first step that absolves one of the commitment to the mind–human equation, thus transforming Nagel’s (1971, 719–720) “detached amazement” into a state of pure witness consciousness (*Yogavāsiṣṭha*, IV.42). The next step, however, is

¹⁶ It is, however, meaningful to note that Camus distinguishes the Vedāntic philosophy of indifference from the nihilist approach, which he dismisses altogether.

¹⁷ The question of social implications of humanity’s shared absurd predicament, which had been absent from the solipsistic universe of *The Myth of Sisyphus* but later propelled Camus to develop *The Rebel*, is only briefly addressed by the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*’s author. When Rāma becomes absorbed in the state of undivided consciousness, Vasiṣṭha forcefully pulls him out of this self-immersion, stating that it is not proper for a yogi to be steeped in the ultimate reality while others are still in bondage (*Yogavāsiṣṭha*, VI.1.128).

the self-recognition of this consciousness as the infinite, undivided, and ubiquitous consciousness (*cid akāśa*) (III.97). This release is permitted only because Vedānta ascribes an independent ontological status to consciousness, whereas for Camus, like Husserl, Sartre, and others, consciousness is always consciousness of something (e.g., Sartre 2003, 650). Consequently, the *Yogavāsīṣṭha*'s conception of freedom is that of a metaphysical substance pervading all reality, whereas for Camus, freedom can only be a "psychological response to the challenges that the limitations of the body, mind, and spirit impose on us" (Kumar 2023, 54; see also Camus's notion of freedom, in Camus 2005, 54–57).

The *Yogavāsīṣṭha*'s metaphysical freedom does not imply that the Vedāntin ceases to go through the experience of the absurd as a dimension integral to human life. As Nagel (1971, 725–726) correctly points out, although absurdity might significantly diminish, it would not be eliminated altogether even then, since so long as one is in human form, one must always "drag the superior awareness" through the arduous mundane life. However, Nagel—who, like Camus, is not dismissive of Vedānta's response of abandoning one's earthly life for the sake of an identification with a detached universal viewpoint—agrees that this shift of identification could, indeed, demolish the absurd's component of the limits of human existence (*ibid.*). Moreover, since Camus's absurd is a tension between limit and longing, such a universal viewpoint would also obviously jettison the other component of longing. Thus, the absurd can be transcended at the level of consciousness by rising above the friction between mind and creation.

This is indeed the prescription offered by Vasiṣṭha in the opening words of his elaborate answer to the absurd-stricken prince: "neither the world of matter nor the modes of creation are truly real," and the only reasons that the universe keeps appearing are desires arising in one's heart and ignorance of the truth of creation's inherent nonexistence (*Yogavāsīṣṭha*, I.3). However, Vasiṣṭha's soteriological cosmology does not end in the melting away of the universe in favor of an intensification of the observing mind. After all, Rāma's monologue conceives of the mind as the primary source of the experience of absurdity in human life. For this reason, Vasiṣṭha, who strives to provide Rāma with a response that could entirely relieve him of his absurdist depression, must elevate Rāma's consciousness to an altogether non-dual perception, in which neither the world nor the mind or ego-sense exists (VI.1.97). As a result, the two components that arise together and form the apparent division of outer and inner also vanish together, ultimately collapsing into Brahman, a preconceptual beginningless and endless "pure experiencing consciousness" (*ibid.*). Nonetheless, since the *Yogavāsīṣṭha* proposes a form of metaphysical idealism, its infinite consciousness lies in a seedlike state in the observing mind. This implies that the very transcendent element that sticks out of creation and seems to watch creation's limited patterns from the outside, hence giving rise to absurdist strangeness (Camus 2005, 49–50; Nagel 1971, 726), is the element whose expansion ad infinitum liberates the Vedāntin from all absurdity.¹⁸

In this sense, both Camus's and the *Yogavāsīṣṭha*'s universes remain silent, and it is not in finally hearing the universe speak that the question of the absurd finds its answers. In the

¹⁸ The interrelation between the concept of Brahman and the potential expansion of human consciousness can be etymologically identified when we consider that Brahman derives from the root *brh* ("expand") and therefore means "that which expands" (Easwaran 2007, 339).

mystical enlightenment that awaits Rāma on the other side of absurdity, the universe does not divulge any kind of concealed meaning but instead ceases to exist as an object of consciousness and is swallowed, together with the troubled questioner, into Brahman's homogeneous vision. Likewise, what the absurdist enlightenment conveyed by Camus in the essay of the absurd, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and the novel of the absurd, *The Stranger*, involves is a type of ironic unity consciousness that does not answer anything but dissolves the suffering-producing struggle with the cosmic stillness. *The Myth of Sisyphus* poetically illustrates Sisyphus's merging into his fate by describing how the universe's now welcome silence allows the countless little voices of the earth to emerge and each atom and mineral flake of Sisyphus's rock and mountain to form a world unto itself (Camus 2005, 119). In a similar tone, the soon-to-be-executed Meursault in *The Stranger* feels that for the first time, he is able to open himself to the "gentle indifference of the world," realizing that he and the world are essentially made of the same stuff and tapping into a brotherlike kinship with it (Camus 1988, 122–123). Whereas the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* responds to the mind–world collision by following the mind's transcending element all the way until it loses sight of the apparent universe, Camus chooses to respond to it by guiding this estranged element in the opposite direction: moving into the heart of a world that previously seemed nothing but a prison cell and uniting with it.

The question is, of course, whether one of these two types of enlightenment is more viable than the other. I have already stated that the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*'s release into the absolute reality can significantly loosen the grip of the absurd on human consciousness. The absurd condition as an actual, daily experience may be inescapable, even for great sages like Vasiṣṭha, but since absurdity thrives on the tension between one's awareness and the life of which one is aware, shifting consciousness to a universal viewpoint should result in leaving the absurd universe behind. On the other hand, despite Camus's soaring poetry at the end of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, it is questionable whether by merging his transcendent consciousness with his effortful but futile fate, Sisyphus can indeed attain the happiness Camus offers him. However, such evaluations must take into account the fact that the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* deploys the event of absurd awakening as a springboard for a sublime state that is utterly devoid of the very need for struggle. Camus, on the other hand, seeks to preserve the spirit of revolt as a dynamic existential factor in human life, whose ongoing transformation propels the individual to imbue the phenomenal world with internal value.

Conclusion

By bringing Camus's philosophy of the absurd into dialogue with the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, we affirm that the feeling and experience of the absurd is a transcultural phenomenon.¹⁹ Owing to the breadth of Rāma's monologue, which is quite uncommon in the tradition of the Indian transformative dialogue, it becomes possible to explore the

¹⁹ Absurd consciousness is commonly associated with the modern Western mind, and even Camus (2005, 1) opens his *Myth of Sisyphus* with the reservation that he seeks to confront a type of absurd sensitivity that has become prevalent in his age rather than absurd philosophy more broadly construed. Furthermore, Sagi (2002, 8, 12) asserts that Camus's experience of the absurd is a "symptom of modern life" rather than an inherent attribute of human existence. However, the tension between longing and limit has metaphysical origins.

problem and the ending of existential suffering (*duḥkha*), which have greatly occupied the minds of Indian philosopher-mystics, as a way of tackling the reality of the absurd. Suffering, in this context, results from the collision between human longing and limit, and it becomes an urgent problem as soon as a truth-seeker undergoes absurdist awakening. While Rāma's tragicomic delineations of the reality of human life clearly illustrate the essential tensions pinpointed by Camus's works, they also enable us to develop our thinking about absurdity by calling attention to the role of the mind in producing its own absurdist entrapments. The *Yogavāsiṣṭha*'s predilection toward the mind as the pivotal cause of absurd tensions is guided by the form of metaphysical idealism that it advocates and, more generally, the widespread acknowledgment of the mind as the root cause of human suffering among Indian philosophers.

Furthermore, Rāma's existential crisis and Vasiṣṭha's various methods for resolving it help us expand the discussion of constructive responses to the reality of the absurd, especially upon realizing that the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, like Camus, insists on seizing the moment of absurd awakening.²⁰ In the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*'s case, this awakening is deemed both a sobering seeing of things as they are and a valuable step on the path of spiritual awakening. Thus, full consciousness of the absurd human condition, despite its initial agonizing effect, is not a hindrance to Vedāntic self-realization but rather a potentially liberating and perhaps even necessary position. It may be postulated that at least as far as the existential dimension of teachings such as the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*'s goes, the conception of liberation while in human form (*jīvanmukti*) has been developed as a fundamental way of responding to cognizance of the absurd.²¹

By juxtaposing Camus's constructive responses to absurdity with the soteriology of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, it becomes clear that Camus's life-affirming ethics is simply a choice (as mentioned, Camus himself, faithful to the limitations imposed on him by the absurd, admits that it is indeed a possible course of action rather than an inevitability). Thusly, while Camus infers from his absurdist awakening that one should cultivate a passion for the only life we have, the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* invites us to explore the very opposite, which is dispassion, or what Camus defines as a philosophy of indifference. But setting these two philosophies side by side yields an even deeper insight into the nature of Vedāntic dispassion: dispassion is not merely a psychological technique for relieving the mind–universe tension, but a reevaluation of the self-transcending capacity that human consciousness is endowed with. This view from nowhere, recognized by Camus as a source of insoluble estrangement and by Nagel

²⁰ This type of mutually informed juxtaposition is invaluable, and for this reason, we should be careful not to limit ourselves to comparative studies of existentialist and absurdist views and Indian philosophy that merely wish to unify while blurring illuminating dissimilarities. See, for instance, Chaudhuri (1962, 10), who argues that both Vedānta and existentialism seek to relieve the individual's existential alienation by attaining an "immediate contact with Being."

²¹ Arguing against what he deems a limited interpretation of Indian philosophy as world-negating, Kumar (2023, 47, 51, 54) suggests a reading of Vedānta, including its conception of the ontologically independent Self (*ātman*), as an existential response to life's limitations and struggle.

(1971, 726–727) as “one of our most advanced and interesting characteristics,” is a potent seed of unlimited consciousness within the human mind, and its blossoming constitutes a radical resolution to the human condition of the absurd.

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