

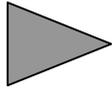
THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE ABSURD, AS ILLUSTRATED
IN EMIL CIORAN'S DESPAIR

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Abstract

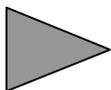
*The present article analyzes Emil Cioran's well-known essay collection, **On the Heights of Despair**, explaining and illustrating the philosopher's understanding of the absurd. The main ideas focus around the author's approach to the meaning of life (or better said, to the meaninglessness of life), and around the efforts one makes in order to try to lend some noble purpose to one's own existence. However, one's only escape from the self-induced world of illusions seems to be the "passion for the absurd".*

Keywords: the absurd, despair, meaningless, illusion, death



Introductory remarks

People's most ardent desire has probably always been to prove that their existence has a meaning, a noble purpose, above one's simple animal-like existence, whose sole aim seems to be the perpetuation of the species. However, it appears more and more obvious that philosophers have failed to prove this noble purpose. The philosophers who seem to have come closest to the truth are those who have understood that man's life is in fact dominated by the absurd. None of the noble purposes we are trying to attribute to it seem to stand. Neither art nor science, neither religion, nor morality have managed to prove that people's existence is anything more than a sad journey between two indifferent points, lost in the immensity of the universe. (...) You know not whence you came, nor why (...); you know not why you go, nor where", Omar Khayyam complained (<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-rubaiyat-of-omar-khayyam/>)



Cioran's approach to human existence – the passion for the absurd

Having reached *the heights of despair*, Emil Cioran also deplores the human condition, and understands that man is irremediably convicted to the absurd. "I feel I should die because of life and I wonder if searching for an explanation makes any sense." (Cioran, 1990: 6). Indeed, the futility of this attempt is by no means intended to reassure those who still dream of discovering the long-desired meaning of existence. "I do not understand at all why we have to do something in this world, why we have to have friends and aspirations, hopes and dreams." (Cioran, 1990: 10). Awareness of the fact that nothing really matters, that whatever we do on earth (for us, for our loved ones, for other people, or for humankind generally), means absolutely nothing, represents in fact the awareness of the absurdity of human existence, since all our aspirations, hopes and dreams are nothing more than a speck of dust on the universe's immovable face. "What can those who feel life, loneliness, despair or death beyond normal still expect from this world?" (Cioran, 1990: 14). This lack of horizons can only lead to the conclusion of the uselessness of any action; hence, the absurdity of all attempts to break the monotony of an existence doomed to an implacable, trivial ending. All the efforts of those trying to lend meaning to their own life seem hilarious and sad at the same time. They do not realize that the only thing which could save them from ridicule is the passion for the absurd, as Cioran recommends in the respective chapter.

There are no arguments to live. The person who has touched upon his limit, can he still invoke arguments, causes, effects, moral reasons, etc? No, obviously. He is only left with unreasonable reasons to live. (Cioran, 1990: 14).

We cling so much to these unreasonable reasons, though... if only we had the decency to acknowledge the absurdity of all reasons, causes, effects, pretexts we invoke in order to continue our struggle with life, we would definitely come to terms with our own condition, with our own fate... if only we had the decency to recognize the supremacy of the absurd!

On the heights of despair, the passion for the absurd is the only one shedding some demonic light on chaos. When none of our present ideals – moral, aesthetic, religious, social etc. – can orient our life towards an ultimate aim, how can life maintain itself and not become nothingness? Only by relating to the absurd, by love for the absolute futility, that is, for something that cannot take shape but which, by its very fiction, can create the illusion of life. (Cioran, 1990: 15).

This is what the literature of the absurd is like. Something that cannot take shape, that seems different from everything we consider literature; however, it can create the illusion of life. Life being absurd, the writings that best fit it are those overwhelmed with the absurd, since they best describe it.

The one who becomes aware of the absurd of existence, who lives with a passion for the absurd, is the only one who has made peace with life and with himself, since he has finally understood the value of all things or, better said, their lack of value. According to Cioran, the existence of every person is, by its very insignificance, a proof of the existence of the absurd.

The fact that I exist proves that the world has no meaning. How can I find meaning in the problems of one person, infinitely tragic and unhappy, for whom everything is eventually reduced to nothingness and for whom the law of this world is pain? (Cioran, 1990: 20)

When you understand that everything you do and everything you represent means in fact nothing, related to universal existence, you either hit on metaphysical despair or on the passion for the absurd; out of these two, the latter seems more viable.

After all, what makes the existence absurd is the very fact that man is mortal. The fact that, sooner or later, we shall turn to dust annihilates all our efforts and achievements. However hard we may try to feed upon the illusion that we shall leave something behind, this comfort is much too weak compared to our encounter with nothingness, where nothing still exists, nothing still matters. We can say that

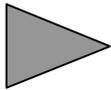
our existence is sublime, but completely missing. Its briefness makes it non-existent, hence its absurdity. The escape one finds in the idea of immortality only enhances the absurd of the situation. We cannot escape the idea – and the certainty – of death, this agony being our only truth.

In any real agony there is a triumph of death, even if you continue living after those difficult moments... The most perverse feeling is the feeling of death. When you think that there are people who cannot sleep because of the perverse obsession of death! (Cioran, 1990: 24-25).

People do not realize that they are victims of a great hoax, that nature uses them with the unique goal of sustaining itself, without caring about those it permanently discards. Life of the world is eternal; however, life of the individual is not; humankind is immortal, man is not!

The absurdity of human existence is summarized by Cioran in Chapter 11 (*Nothing is important*):

Are we happier today if others have sacrificed themselves for our well-being, for our enlightenment? What well-being, what enlightenment? If anyone sacrificed himself for me to be happy right now, then I am more miserable than he was, since I will not build my existence upon a cemetery. (Cioran, 1990: 54)



A hopeless situation

Unfortunately for humankind, Cioran's vision is not encouraging, but extremely pertinent. It is also, a very fertile ground for the literature of the absurd. What other writings would better fit such an existence? When you read excerpts like the following: "Natasha stopped crying and started singing. She sang, and she sang, until she suddenly died. Natasha's father came and took her to the superintendent. 'Look', Natasha's father said, 'please certify her death'. The superintendent stamped Natasha's forehead. 'Thank you', Natasha's father said, and took her to the cemetery" (Harms, 2002: 194), where actions lack any cause-effect relation, where everything seems indifferent, with no importance, where gestures are mechanical, annihilating any human quality, you understand that the absurd is the one leading one's entire life, the only master of a world deprived of any logic. This approach also supports the author's view: "I am interested only in nonsense, only in that which makes no practical sense. I am interested in life only in its absurd manifestation" (Cornwell, 2006: 165). Thus, the questions torturing Cioran seem even more justified.

Was existence meant to be? Is there any reason to exist? Or is it that the only reason for existence, is an immanent one? Is a being only a being? Why should we not admit to a final triumph of non-being, why should we not admit that existence is heading for nothingness and that the being is heading for non-being? Is it not true that the only absolute reality is non-being? A paradox as huge, as the paradox of this world. (Cioran, 1990: 82)

In fact, everything comes to be paradoxical in this existence, even morality, since no one has been able to say what is right and what is wrong, where good ends and evil begins. When it is so difficult to distinguish anything, when life's clarity disappears, all we can do is grope in the darkness of paradox, in the mist of the absurd.

Nothing can save us from this hopeless situation, not even history, which gives us a past to build our future on, a future with some significance. Not even our birthplace, which should give us a feeling of belonging, of having roots. Neither time nor space can help us in any way, we are doomed.

I do not understand what the point is of living in history, of sharing an era's ideals, of being concerned about culture or social issues. History has to be overcome. And the only way to overcome history is when past, present and future have no importance to you, when things like when and where you live make no sense. (Cioran, 1990: 103)

The absurd of existence in general springs from the absurd of each person's existence. Sooner or later, each of us becomes aware of the fact that our life is meaningless. Can then universal existence have a meaning? The world begins and ends with each of us. Nothing that happens, at an infinite level of space and time, has any relevance. Eternity is a non-existent concept, as long as you do not belong to it. So, what are we left with? With bitter resignation. This resignation can exist under multiple shapes, from desperately living every moment to taking refuge in the literature of the absurd. The literature of the absurd is a form of resignation, one of the most interesting ones.

Our reaction to denying the meaning of life is spontaneous. If I feel I live in vain, and nothing I do can lead me to immortality, there is no truth able to convince me of the contrary. One not only dies alone, one also lives alone. And this loneliness is, after death, the most tragic element of our existence. This loneliness is one of the elements that deprive life of its desired meaning. However, at the same time, it shapes our personality. We are not social animals, we are lonely ones. Only in the mirror of loneliness can one see their true image. Our despair is everyone's despair; our death is everyone's death. People are alone, but their loneliness is universal. Embracing the absurd, accepting it, understanding it, learning to live with it means understanding and accepting your fate. You can only fight a losing battle against

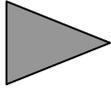
the absurd, and if you do not see this you become a new Don Quixote, lost among the windmills of your own illusions. "I feel a meaningless person, and I do not regret having no meaning." (Cioran, 1990: 133)

Everything seems to be against us; just like in Murphy's famous laws, everything prevents us from finding the meaning of existence, even infinity. When the road ends, it leads nowhere. Sooner or later we all see that. Then, we try to follow ourselves, to know and understand ourselves, revolving in the vicious circle of self-awareness. However, we get nothing.

If the world had had a meaning, it would have revealed itself by now and we would have learned about it. (...) The world is meaningless not only because it is irrational to its core, but also because it is infinite. Meaning can only be conceived in a finite world, where you can reach something. Infinity reaches nothing, since everything in it is temporary and insecure. (...) No one can experience infinity without (...) a deep, unforgettable anxiety. (Cioran, 1990: 151)

This initial anxiety, caused by the shock of an unwanted discovery, will pass without a trace, making room for a beneficial, existential tranquillity, brought about by our having understood our aim on earth or, better said, the absence of one. It is a condition we have to embrace without hatred, without malevolence or regrets. People's astounding tragedy, as they are temporarily exiled on earth, can only make them feel that fate has thrown them on the deserted island of a life without prospects, without meaning. Their only fulfilment thus appears to be death; their only hope, the slumber of reason. And again, the obsessive question with no answer: where are we coming from? Where are we going? The terrible tragedy of man also consists in the fact that he is unfortunate enough to be human; therefore, he cannot live just for the sake of living, since this condition appears as demeaning, unworthy of his status of master of the universe. He has to have a purpose, a noble one preferably, as a being closer to the gods than to the animals; being compared to the latter (as some say we originated from them, in some distant past) seems to him the worst insult.

The tragedy of man (...) consists in that he can no longer find satisfaction in life's facts and values. Any being can live as part of the existence, since for them, the existence they belong to has an absolute nature. For man, life is not an absolute. Therefore no man, being more than an animal, can find satisfaction in the very fact of life, in the act of living. For an animal, life is everything; for people, it is a question mark. And this question mark is the ultimate one, since one has not obtained an answer to their questions so far, nor will they obtain one, as life not only has no meaning, but it is impossible for it to have one. (Cioran, 1990: 169)



Struggling to find an escape. Facets of the irrational

What is left for us to do, in the absence of the meaning of existence? As we have said, we can find one in its absurd and maybe resign ourselves to it, to the multitude of shapes and colours that this world generously offers us. The beauty of nature on this earth is often a cause for unrivalled delight; for this reason, the moment of life under the sun given to us almost seems worth living. "There were moments when a flower's beauty has explained, to my understanding, the existence of some universal finality (...)." (Cioran, 1990: 174)

Having reached the awareness of the absurd, of universal futility, people remain baffled when confronted with their lack of options, of priorities, of activities. Apparently, nothing can meet their desire to stand out, to prove that they are important, that they are needed, that they have a meaning, after all. Faced with the horror of this shocking revelation, is it surprising that they take refuge in the absurd, their only support, their only friend? The conclusion is clear, abandon all hope, you who enter this life; you will gain nothing out of it! This is the tragic reality; the sooner we accept it, the better.

Is there something to lose, something to win in this world? Anything won is in fact lost, anything lost is in fact won... Why do people still expect a decisive attitude, precise ideas and correct words? (Cioran, 1990: 180)

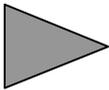
According to Cioran, there are two forms of the irrational, which we call the abstract irrational and the concrete irrational. The fact that nothing matters, that there is no hierarchy in priorities, that everything eventually leads to nothing, represents the abstract irrational, specific to every existence. The fact that, in spite of the above, people continue to live, to do the useless, minor little things of everyday life, reveals the concrete irrational, the naivety of which saves us, says Cioran. We wake up in the morning, we make the bed, although we shall use it again in the evening, we wash, although we shall be dirty again, we have breakfast, although in a few hours we shall eat again, and so on, we live in a whirlwind of the irrational that only the much-feared death will eventually stop. Everything is irrational in this world, even love, which leads nowhere (the abstract irrational) and where moments of happiness are followed by moments of pain (the concrete irrational).

The irrational appears (...) in a two-fold shape: the irrational, as blind dynamism, denying any value hierarchy, and the irrational as a reality, in which one lives naively, happy and content. This two-fold understanding of the irrational enables us to say why life has no meaning, being irrational in its essence, as well as why

we support the naïve experience of the irrational as the only salvation. The unconscious proximity to the irrational essence of life keeps one in a state of organic equilibrium, as one's forms of activity and expression are the forms of life. (Cioran, 1990: 195)

There is only one unavoidable, irreversible conclusion. We have to resign ourselves and to give the absurd what belongs to it, that is, the lion's share, or even more. We have to give it everything. If we do not find happiness in acknowledging its supremacy, if we feel frustrated and disillusioned, then at least we shall know what to expect, while death, the final apotheosis of the absurd, will no longer take us by surprise.

Man is built in such a way, that he always requires a hierarchy of values (...) and a sum of criteria. Confronted with the irrationality of life, with its aimless evolution, which makes life a chaotic multitude of overflowing rough shapes, the demand for a hierarchy of values remains just a demand. Then, revolt is born, the revolt of conscience against life, the revolt of a man detached from life against the irrational; to this revolt, life responds: adjust yourself to me, give up your conscience (...) and you will stop trying to find meaning where there is none. (Cioran, 1990: 197).



Conclusion

This was Cioran's despair, which is the despair of us all, whether we are aware of it or not. We have seen what price and what meaning our existence has. From now on, we may start contemplating the absurd from a different perspective, since it is the one defining us. We live in vain, and yet we live. This should set us thinking. Accepting the absurd lends meaning to existence. The meaning of existence consists in its lack of meaning.

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