

Revolt, Dharma, and Human Dignity: Re-reading Albert Camus through Renaissance Humanism and the Bhagavad Gita

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Abstract

Renaissance Humanism relocated human dignity in reason, freedom, and creative agency, displacing medieval dependence on divine authority – an ideal articulated as forcefully in Pico della Mirandola's Oration on the Dignity of Man as in Michelangelo's visual celebration of the human form. This paper argues that Albert Camus, writing four centuries later from within a secular, post-metaphysical world, should be read not as humanism's negation but as its final, unacknowledged transformation. Camus retains the Renaissance conviction that dignity belongs to human action and reason, but strips away its transcendent guarantees, relocating dignity in revolt against an indifferent universe.

Rather than treating this Camusian inheritance in isolation, the paper extends the genealogy to the Bhagavad Gita, which answers a structurally parallel crisis – how to act with dignity amid suffering and uncertainty – through dharma and nishkama karma, or detached action. The argument is not that Camus and the Gita resemble one another, but that both stand as independent humanisms, each a distinct historical response to the same underlying question of how dignity survives the collapse of certainty. Reading Meursault and Arjuna as parallel figures of moral crisis, and Sisyphus alongside Arjuna's battlefield duty, the paper traces three convergent yet historically unconnected paradigms: Renaissance reason, Camusian revolt, and Gita-derived duty.

Extending into the visual register central to this conference, the paper juxtaposes Michelangelo's Creation of Adam with the iconography of Nataraja as two artistic visions of human and cosmic agency against which Sisyphus can be situated. By tracing humanism's afterlife from Renaissance Europe through twentieth-century existentialism to classical Indian thought, this paper reframes humanism not as a closed European inheritance but as a plural, cross-civilisational tradition grounded in responsible action despite suffering and uncertainty.