

## Albert Camus and his Philosophy of the Absurd

Writer Albert Camus and his philosophy of the absurd present an interesting twist on moral psychology. Whereas classical Western philosophers such as Plato and Socrates argued a moral obligation to "the good life" and the existence of an absolute common human (moral) nature, Camus suggests that life is absurd, and in fact almost meaningless. The only meaning or value he gives to human life is the pure joy of living in a world with which man is connected. He rejects religious belief and existentialism, which in his view serve only to support and even glorify the irrational. He puts forth a moral psychology which involves accepting and even embracing the absurdity of one's life, and simply living one's time as fully and intensely as possible. Camus' s argument maintains that any course of action is acceptable, as long as one faces whatever consequences may follow. This philosophy, and his related works of both fiction and non-fiction, is intriguing in that it is radically different from classical moral psychology and ethics. In order to understand fully the implications of Camus's philosophy for "the good life," should there be one at all, one must systematically examine all of his writings. No single work can be said to contain the "gist" of Camus's idea; Camus worked his whole life on developing a constant theme – that of the absurd universe.

To understand these writings, however, one first must understand the time in which they were written, for "to speak of Albert Camus and his time is to separate two entities that are essentially one."

Born November 7, 1913 in Algeria, Albert Camus grew up fatherless and poverty-stricken. His father had died in battle in World War I the year after he was born. Camus was brought up by his mute and illiterate mother, and was never encouraged to read or learn, but in spite of these conditions and his nation's poverty, he always looked upon his youth in Algeria fondly: "Poverty... was never a misfortune for me: it was radiant with light. I lived on almost nothing, but also in a kind of rapture. It was not poverty that got in my way: in Africa, the sun and the sea cost nothing." His earliest years were spent purely enjoying the sensual pleasures the physical world had to offer. Here he found "nothing on which to hang a mythology, a literature, an ethic, or a religion, but stones, flesh, stars, and those truths the hand can touch." This experience could be considered a precursor to his later philosophy of the absurd, which asserts that there is no god, and in fact *nothing* outside the realm of actual experience within this known world. There are no truths, he says, outside of the one truth of human experience.

Camus began his study of philosophy at the University of Algiers in 1930, but this was interrupted by his first serious attack of tuberculosis that year. In the following years he supported himself with odd jobs, had a brief marriage in 1934, and became active in literary and political circles. He joined the Algerian Communist Party but "quickly departed with disillusionment." Soon thereafter began his lengthy career in theater in which he played the roles of actor, director, and playwright. For Camus, theater was a

means of serious discussion about life. In this he can be compared to fellow playwrights Jean-Paul Sartre, Max Frisch, and Tennessee Williams.

Perhaps the most productive period of Camus's life – and the time when his fundamental ideas about the absurd were much further developed – was the time around World War II. In 1942 he left Algiers for Paris as part of the French Resistance movement, and became the editor of the clandestine newspaper *Combat*. His most widely-read novel, "*L'Etranger*" (The Stranger) and his first definitive philosophical collection of essays, "*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*" (The Myth of Sisyphus) were also published in 1942. It is important to recognize the circumstances in which these works were written in order to understand both Camus's motivations and popularity at the time. In all of his works, he endeavored to "illuminate the problems of the human conscience at the time," with the common themes of war, resistance, executions, and exiles.

Camus's first major published writing was the collection of essays titled "*Noces*" (Nuptials) which appeared in 1939. The experiences he illustrated within this work agreed for the most part with the conclusions of other major writers of his time. "His assumption that life was void of meaning, his apparent renunciation of hope, and his refusal of all mystical transcendence were merely an extension of the current philosophic views of the universe." In the tradition of those other philosophic writers, such as Sartre and Karl Jaspers, Camus deposited man in a world empty of understanding and hope – a godless world – and limited his experience by absolute and inescapable death. This initial version of his philosophy of the absurd naturally associated him with other existential philosophers. Camus repeatedly rejected his label as an existentialist, but aspects of his philosophy are undeniably existentialist. For example, Camus, like the existentialists, believed that the only truths are that we exist in and are related to the world, and that death is the final end of all life – leaving no hope of an afterlife. Where Camus parts with existentialist theory is in his belief that there is an essence, a value, in human existence, however vague that "essence" may be.

Camus's feeling is that "even though life ends in death and there is no transcendence, there remains the possibility of attaining a special kind of human happiness." This happiness comes from the understanding that since death is the absolute end, man is completely free in life from obligation, responsibility, or guilt. One must, according to Camus, understand and accept the contradiction between the fact of death and his desire for immortality. It is through this understanding that the feeling of the absurd is borne.

The clearest example of this "feeling of the absurd" is found in Camus's somewhat parallel texts, "*L'Etranger*" and "*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*," which were published in 1942 and 1943, respectively. In "*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*" Camus sought to "explore the manifold problems that people encounter in their daily lives." The "intellectual malady" that was a result of the contradiction between what man wants (immortality) and the fundamental truth of existence (the fact of death) concerned Camus greatly, and inspired him to investigate a reason for living. The essay begins with the basic and serious philosophic question of whether or not life is worth living. This, says Camus, is the

"fundamental question of philosophy." He writes, "There is but one truly philosophical problem and that is suicide." He reasons that all one can know for certain is that he exists and the world exists, and that he is inescapably connected to the world. This, however, is no reason to live. It is merely the fact of life. Thus, Camus concludes that life has no absolute meaning, despite the natural human longing for such a meaning. Between this yearning for meaning and the actual condition of the universe there is a gap that cannot be filled with any reasonable explanation. This gap is the confrontation between the irrational and the truth – and therein lies the feeling of the absurd.

Camus's next problem was to determine if thought is possible in an absurd existence. To do so, he looked to the writings of Jaspers, Lev Shestov, Søren Kierkegaard, and Edmund Husserl – all of whom had reached a similar recognition of an absurd universe. He realized, however, that "once faced with the absurd none of these philosophers remains true to it. All of them eventually destroy it by deifying the contradiction between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world," usually through religious methodology, which Camus completely rejected because "the absurd cannot be transcended." Camus accepts the absolute truth of an absurd existence and all of its consequences.

Within "*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*," Camus defines three results, or consequences, of the acceptance of the absurd: revolt, freedom, and a passion for daily life. The first, revolt, involves a constant struggle between the individual and his obscurity in the universe. In other words, one must fight the urge to give up on his life, just because it has no absolute meaning. The revolt challenges the fact of an absurd existence and forces one to live fully within one's experience - despite the fact that life is limited. Freedom, the second consequence, comes from an understanding that there is no need to be concerned with the future, since death is the only reality. Therefore man is free to do all he wills within his time, with the understanding that this life is his only opportunity to experience pleasure. Lastly, through an acceptance of his absurd existence, man is given a renewed passion for life and all that is offered in the world of experience. He realizes that since death is imminent, each moment is precious, and decides to live as fully and intensely as possible.

The essay after which "*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*" is named uses the example of the mythical figure Sisyphus to illustrate what it means to truly accept one's fate as absurd. Sisyphus, who (like all absurd men) hated death and was passionately attached to life, enraged the gods by escaping from Hades back to the world of sun and pleasure. In retaliation the gods sent Mercury to return Sisyphus to the underworld and sentenced him to an eternity of rolling a huge rock up a mountain and then having to watch it roll all the way back down. This – the ultimate exercise in futility – should be torturous for Sisyphus. He accepts his fate, however, and understands that it is the consequence for having lived his life so fully and freely. It is in this sense that Camus imagines Sisyphus to be happy, and Sisyphus thus becomes the "absurd hero."

Although the novel "*L'Étranger*" was written before "*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*," its meaning is more easily understood when put into the context of "*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*."

Its protagonist, Meursault, can be seen as a modern-day Sisyphus, in that he bases his life on the truth of being and feeling, not on society's codes and rituals. He is a man "who does not play the game. He is a poor man and naked who is in love with the sun." What matters to Meursault is physical experience; he is indifferent to all human relations and lives only in a succession of purely sensory moments. The death of his mother does not affect him. Only after he murders an Arab and is sentenced to death does he become aware of the value of his own life. Meursault is an absurd hero in that the fact that he will die makes his life suddenly valuable.

A marked change in Camus's discussion of the absurd existence comes up in his post-war novel "*La Peste*" (The Plague). However, this change is more a reevaluation of his thinking than a rejection of previous ideas. In "*La Peste*" there is no contradiction of the absurd world of "*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*" or "*L'Etranger*," but "the war years and the consequent human suffering made Camus aware of the inadequacy of his earlier philosophy, and ... he emphasizes the need for the fragile joys of life. Men and women discover that they are not alone and gain the strength to resist the world." "*La Peste*" marks Camus's first attempt to establish solid values without the help of religion. His conclusion is that although there is no higher power or god that dictates what is right and wrong, it is unjustifiable to deny the value of human life by destroying it, because all human life is priceless in and of itself.

Camus's second attempt to discover a "mode of action that will teach us how to live in the (absurd) world as it is" is found in his 1951 work "*L'Homme revolte*" (The Rebel). Again, after witnessing all of the injustice and suffering in World War II, Camus felt the need for an answer to all that people must endure. To find this answer without negating his entire philosophy of the absurd, Camus again reevaluates his argument presented in "*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*." That argument asserted that since death is the absolute end, all actions are inconsequential, and therefore all actions are in theory permissible. Under closer inspection, however, the argument for the absurd really emphasizes that the only absolute good is human life. Therefore it would be against this common, absolute good to destroy human life. Therein Camus finds his one moral absolute.

In Camus's following, final works: "*La Chute*" (The Fall) and "*L'Exil et le royaume*" (Exile and the Kingdom), and the unfinished "*Le Premier Homme*" (The First Man), as well as his later theater works, he turns away from philosophy in favor of humans in real situations. The most notable trend in these works is the characters' freedom to choose and act in quest to find meaning in a world without god. They, like Sisyphus and Meursault, must also try to reconcile their desires with the unchanging natural fact of death, but are finally not bound by any philosophy at all.

Camus's literary and philosophical work, can, of course, be analysed in simple terms in respect to moral psychology. What is emphasized as the best – and in fact *only* – way to live is to do so with the constant awareness of the finite nature of life, and therefore a heightened sensitivity to all the joy the world has to offer. The only moral

code in the absurd world is a common regard for all of human life, for in the end that is the only thing that has value or meaning.