

**Manchester  
Lit&Phil**

Philosophy Forum

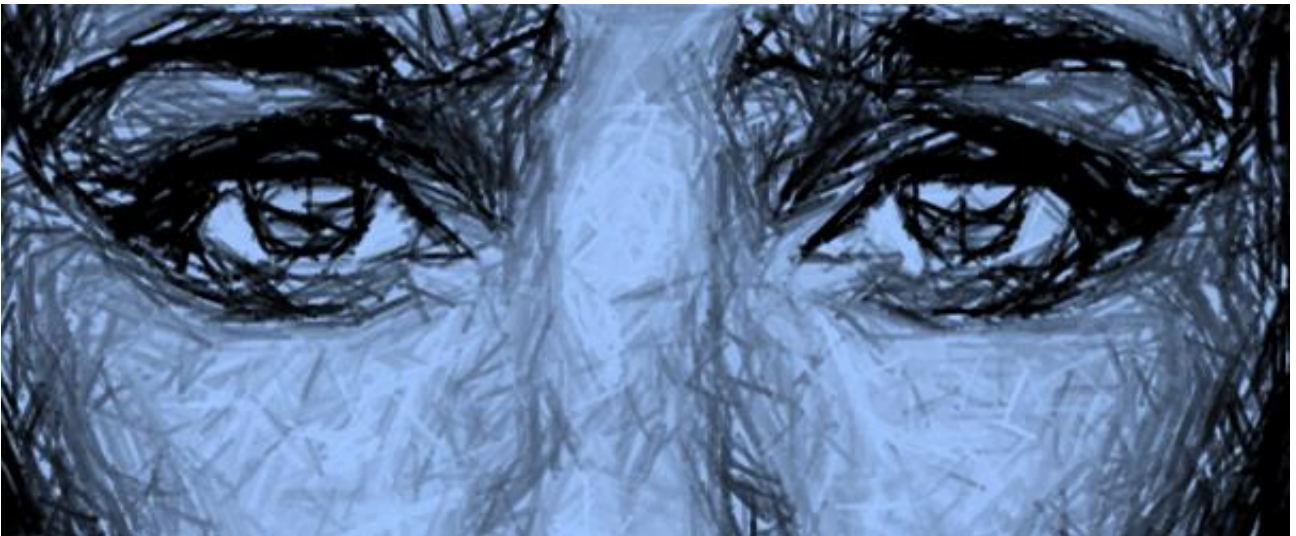
**I'm an absurdity – get me out of here!**

Absurdism and Albert Camus

Focus paper for the Manchester Lit & Phil Philosophy Forum

Robert Mears

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French-Algerian Albert Camus (1913-60) – the great novelist and existentialist philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – thought life was fundamentally irrational and absurd. It was meaningless. But does that imply a life of despair or is there a path to hope? Camus came up with some fascinating answers.



# Forword on Absurdism

Christopher Burke

## Warning

Bobby's paper is concerned with the writings and philosophy of the French-Algerian Albert Camus (1913-60). It deals with possible responses to the absurdity of life ...

**suicide and hope.**

Camus believed life to be meaningless, a 'fact' which he felt everyone should recognise and face up to in some way. Personally I think there is a flaw in Camus' thinking: he has an *ultimate* idea of meaningfulness. But just because the physical world seems to have no meaning, doesn't mean that the phenomenal world ... our thoughts and feelings ... has no meaning.

Indeed I would maintain that the glory of life is that despite being describable in physical terms as a thin carbon-based coating on a miniscule planetary speck in an incomprehensively vast cosmos, it is the *only* known element of that cosmos to have *created* meaning.

Life has an inherent purpose ... to maintain and propagate life itself. Thus life automatically generates meaning. And human life takes this to fabulously Baroque heights in our ideas and actions.

**To have created meaning in a vast cosmic  
meaninglessness is a glorious achievement.**

It is worth living for.

Even the curmudgeonly Camus acknowledged that hope could be found.

If you have been affected in any way by suicide or find yourself thinking about it, please contact the [Samaritans](#) (Call 116 123 day or night)



# 1 Introduction

- 1.1 For reasons we shall discuss, Camus rejected meticulous and logical philosophical frameworks so the appearance of his work in this forum may have him turning in his grave! Indeed, he didn't regard Absurdism to be such a framework, rather a backdrop which informed the life he lived. The work is very much focussed on what we should do with our lives, practically speaking, rather than any abstract metaphysical questions:

“There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest — whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories — comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer.”



- 1.2 This acute focus means Absurdism is both accessible and pertinent to all thinkers. Furthermore, according to Camus, it is necessary to consider it, above all else.

## 2 What is the Absurd?

- 2.1 According to Camus, most of us live mechanical, repetitive lives only to be confronted with the nauseating feeling of the absurd reality of our universe:

“It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm – this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the “why” arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement.”

Though undoubtedly familiar to many, we all interpret and handle this feeling differently. An Absurdist would argue it consisted of three parts: The irrationality of the universe, human nostalgia and the conflict between the two.

- 2.2 Firstly, the irrational: the Universe cannot be explained in its totality in a way that satisfies us. It is too large and complex for humans to ever explain our existence in its entirety.

“I realise that, if through Science I can seize phenomena and enumerate them, I cannot for all that apprehend the world.”

- 2.3 Secondly, human nostalgia: there is an innate and insatiable human desire to ascribe life meaning and explanation. This may be a quirk of evolution to guarantee

our collective survival in a chaotic and dangerous world. Camus would argue it doesn't matter, it is just how we are and before dealing with those questions, we first need to answer *the one truly serious philosophical problem*.

“That nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute, illustrates the essential human drama”

This is reminiscent of a child who continually asks their parents “why?” and then “yes, but why?”. This is human nostalgia, raw and unfiltered.

2.4 Finally, the inability to reconcile those two irreconcilable things is The Absurd.

“The absurd is born out of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. This must not be forgotten.”

Camus describes the absurd as arising from the clash between the human longing for meaning, purpose, and understanding, and the profound silence and indifference of the universe. These three components are universal truths or axioms for Absurdists which they rely upon to decide how to live.

### 3 Responses to the absurd: Death, Hope and Revolt

3.1 Our initial impulse when facing the absurd is to do anything but be at rest with it. People go to extreme and sometimes fatal lengths to avoid it or flat out deny its existence.

“To say that that climate is deadly scarcely amounts to playing on words. Living under that stifling sky forces one to get away or to stay.”

If, like Camus, you regard the statements which make up the absurd as true, then we should live in a way which preserves that truth. This is what Camus means by staying under the stifling sky.

3.2 There are two ways in which we can get away from the stifling sky: plain suicide (Death) and philosophical suicide (Hope). Despite the hopeless statements our response should not be plain suicide if we want to maintain the truth of the absurd. If we remove the human then we have merely removed the human nostalgia element of the Absurd and as such denied its existence.

3.3 Philosophical suicide, on the other hand, is where we abandon the position of the absurd by using logical leaps to deny the irrational. Religious thinking initially comes to mind here as the leap is effectively any system of thinking which requires faith. In Abrahamic religions this manifests itself as faith in a transcendental, omniscient being from which springs explanation and meaning. Instantly soothing to the nauseated mind, leaps of faith, especially from well-established institutions, smooth over the cracks of the irrational, and satiate human nostalgia. Kierkegaard, a major influence on Camus, calls this The sacrifice of the intellect and the sacrifice in which God most rejoices:

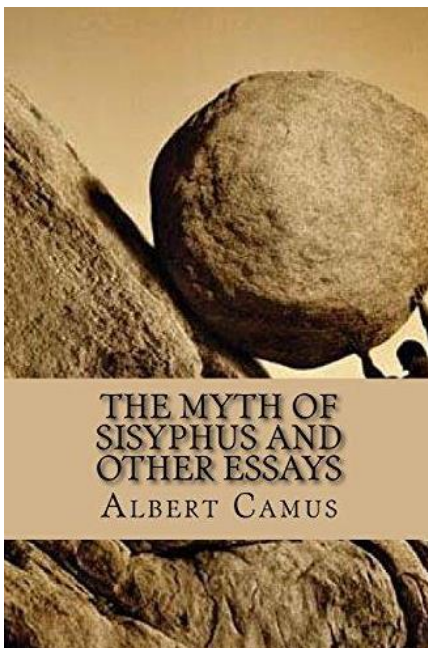
“In his failure, the believer finds triumph.”

- 3.4 These particular rejections of faith are familiar to us in our physicalist dominated era. However, Camus extends these same criticisms to philosophers who 'deify' logic and reason. Even if they acknowledge that science currently doesn't have a full explanation of the universe they have faith that it one day will. Even more guilty of this leap are followers of the teachings of science who take as gospel any results which flow from it. In these, physicalists/positivists can be guilty of making a similar leap of faith and thus smoothing over the irrational.

"It is futile to be amazed by the apparent paradox that leads thought to its own negation by the opposite paths of humiliated reason and triumphal reason. From the abstract god of Husserl to the dazzling god of Kierkegaard the distance is not so great. Reason and the irrational lead to the same preaching. In truth the way matters but little; the will to arrive suffices. The abstract philosopher and the religious philosopher start out from the same disorder and support each other in the same anxiety. But the essential is to explain. Nostalgia is stronger here than knowledge."

- 3.5 The final route is Revolt. That is to stay and maintain consciousness of the absurd rather than attempting to dissolve it. We must live with

"... total absence of hope (which has nothing to do with despair), a continual rejection (which must not be confused with renunciation), and a conscious dissatisfaction (which must not be compared to immature unrest)."



This sounds pretty bleak but it refers to the act of rebellion and defiance in the face of the inherent meaninglessness and irrationality of existence. It is a call to confront the absurdity of the world with a spirit of resistance and revolt, rather than resigning oneself to despair or seeking illusory solutions. This rebellion involves asserting one's autonomy, refusing to succumb to despair, and actively engaging with life in a meaningful way. Revolt against the absurd is not a search for ultimate answers or a denial of the absurdity of existence. Instead, it is an acknowledgement and acceptance of the absurd, accompanied by a refusal to be defeated by it. It is a rejection of resignation and a call to action, encouraging individuals to find value and significance within the very struggle against the absurd.

- 3.6 In essence, Camus' notion of revolt against the absurd encourages individuals to confront the inherent absurdity of existence, actively resist the nihilistic implications that may arise from it, and find freedom and dignity in the face of a seemingly meaningless universe. It is a call to embrace life's challenges, engage in acts of rebellion and creation, and cultivate a sense of autonomy in the midst of the absurd.



## 4 Questions

- 4.1 Camus rejects traditional logical philosophical frameworks as attempts to give life meaning, yet uses logic to define his philosophy, is this a contradiction?
- 4.2 Does the meaninglessness of the universe permit any ethical action?
- 4.3 To what extent does absurdism reject science?
- 4.4 Camus talks about truth as if it should be respected and preserved. Could you argue this is his meaning?
- 4.5 Is believing in the irrational and human nostalgia itself a matter of faith?

## 5 Appendix: further reading Camus and Absurdity

Laura Maguire  
[philosophytalk.org](http://philosophytalk.org)

Many people believe that the most fundamental philosophical problem is this: what is the meaning of existence? That's a question that Albert Camus dug into in his novels, plays, and essays.

His answer was perhaps a little depressing. He thought that life had no meaning, that nothing exists that could ever be a source of meaning, and hence there is something deeply absurd about the human quest to find meaning. Appropriately, then, his philosophical view was called (existentialist) absurdism.

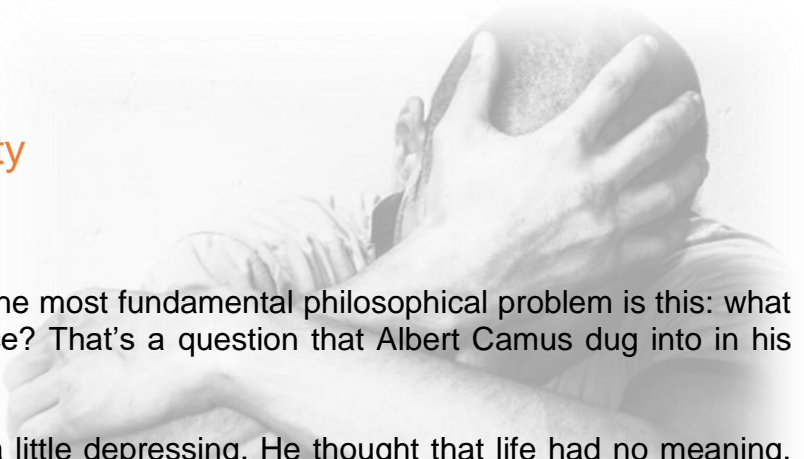
What would be the point of living if you thought that life was absurd, that it could never have meaning? This is precisely the question that Camus asks in his famous work, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He says, "There is only one really serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide." He was haunted by this question of whether suicide could be the only rational response to the absurdity of life.

But why did he think life was inherently without meaning? Don't people find meaning in many different ways?

Take religion. It certainly seems to provide comfort to many people, but this could not amount to genuine meaning for Camus because it involves an illusion. Either God exists or he doesn't. If he doesn't, then it's obvious why he could not be the source of life's ultimate meaning. But what if God does exist? Given all the pain and suffering in the world, the only rational conclusion about God is that he's either an imbecile or a psychopath. So, God's existence could only make life more absurd, not less.

Of course, God is not the only possible source of meaning to consider. Think of our relations to other people—our family, our friends, our communities. We love and care for others in this cruel world, and perhaps that's why we continue to live. That's what gives existence meaning.

The problem here is that everyone we know and love will die someday, and some of them will suffer tremendously before that happens. How is that anything but absurd?



Before everyone gets too depressed, let's think about some possible solutions to the problem. Let's assume, with Camus, the absurdity of the quest for meaning. Let's assume that any route we attempt to find meaning in the world will be for naught. They are all dead ends, so to speak. How do we avoid the conclusion that suicide is the answer?

Consider Nietzsche's approach. Like Camus, he thought that life was devoid of intrinsic meaning. But he thought we could give it a kind of meaning by embracing illusion. That's what we have to learn from artists, according to Nietzsche. They are always devising new "inventions and artifices" that give things the appearance of being beautiful, when they're not. By applying this to our own lives, we can become "the poets of our lives." Could this be a possible solution?

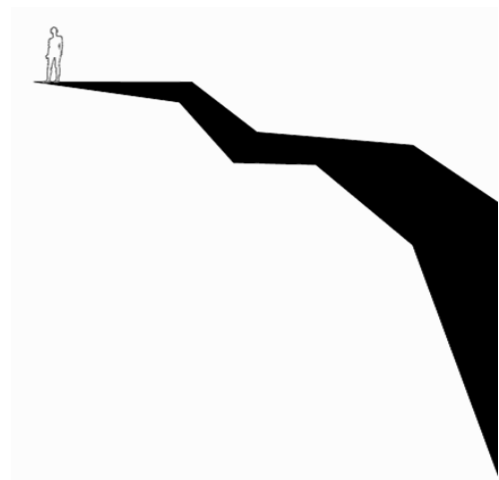
The solution Camus arrives at is different from Nietzsche's and is perhaps a more honest approach. The absurd hero takes no refuge in the illusions of art or religion. Yet neither does he despair in the face of absurdity—he doesn't just pack it all in. Instead, he openly embraces the absurdity of his condition. Sisyphus, condemned for all eternity to push a boulder up a mountain only to have it roll to the bottom again and again, fully recognizes the futility and pointlessness of his task. But he willingly pushes the boulder up the mountain every time it rolls down.

You might wonder how that counts as a solution. Here's what I think Camus had in mind. We need to have an honest confrontation with the grim truth and, at the same time, be defiant in refusing to let that truth destroy life. At the end of *Myth*, Camus says that we have to "imagine Sisyphus happy."

Perhaps my imagination is limited, but I'm not sure I find that thought comforting. Exactly how does confronting the absurdity of his situation give Sisyphus a reason to keep going? Maybe it's not supposed to be comforting. But maybe it's all that there is.

So, what do you think? Is life truly absurd? If so, can there be any point in living?

In the end, I guess my own approach to life's absurdity is similar to Peggy Lee's, who says that "if that's all there is, then let's keep dancing. Let's break out the booze and have a ball, if that's all there is ..."





Your notes