

PHILOSOPHY FOR BEGINNERS

THE MEANINGS OF LIFE

Camus on the Absurd
Week 8. 13th June 2018



What we'll cover today

- Introduction to Albert Camus
- The absurd: or facing a life without meaning
- The problem of suicide
- Seneca and affirming life amid difficulty
- The role of the rebel



‘The realization that life is absurd cannot be an end, but only a beginning.’

Albert Camus (1913-60)



- French philosopher and journalist
- Grew up in French Algeria in a poor household
- Early football career ended by TB
- Member of French Resistance and lifelong political activist
- Untimely (and unlucky) death in a car crash
- Famous works include *The Stranger* (1942), *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and *The Rebel* (1951)

Defining existentialism

- What common threads can we draw between “Before the Law” and “The Grand Inquisitor”, and Nietzsche and Kierkegaard in previous weeks?

Defining existentialism

- The struggle of the individual against authority
- The collapse of traditional ideas about morality and God, be it the 'Law' or role of religion in society
- The emphasis on the individual's self-determination to be who they are *despite* the uncertainty or absurdity of their condition
- But is this all about the *death of God*, or the *birth of human freedom*?
- Can we make meaning in a meaningless world?





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We wish you a
journey.

...

10:29:00



**WORK HARD
SO YOU CAN
SHOP HARDER**

- How would you define *absurdity*?

The Absurd

- How would you define *absurdity*?
- For Camus, facing the absurd is a common theme in his novels and essays
- ‘The fundamental subject of “The Myth of Sisyphus” is this: it is legitimate and necessary to wonder whether life has a meaning’ (Preface)
- But what does confronting the absurd amount to?
- This is what the *Myth of Sisyphus* investigates...

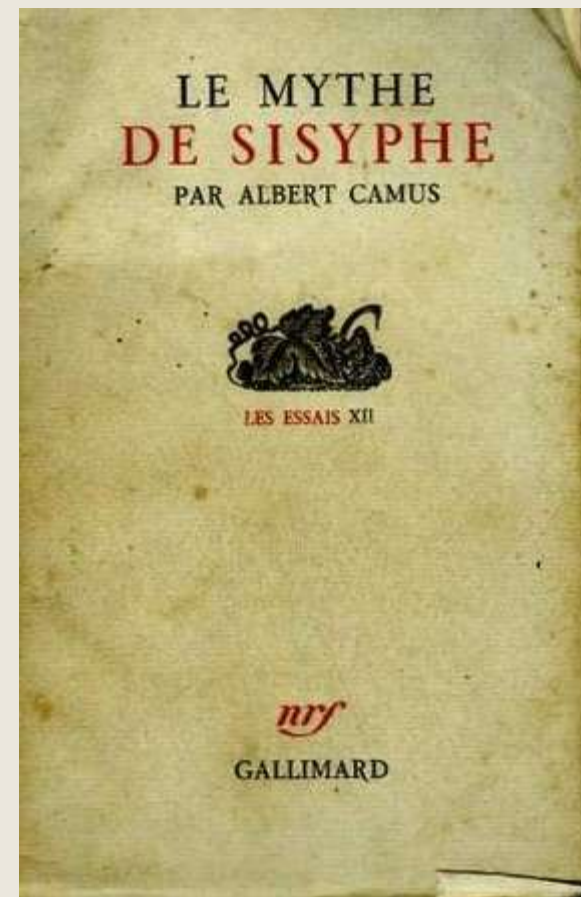


- 'At this point of his effort man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.'
- 'the feeling of absurdity does not spring from the mere scrutiny of a fact or an impression, but that it bursts from the comparison between a bare fact and a certain reality, between an action and the world that transcends it. The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation.'

The Absurd

- Let's turn to what Camus's getting at
- At the beginning of the essay, Camus sets out the problem
- Read the second extract on the handout and then discuss in pairs:

What is the key problem facing philosophy, and why?

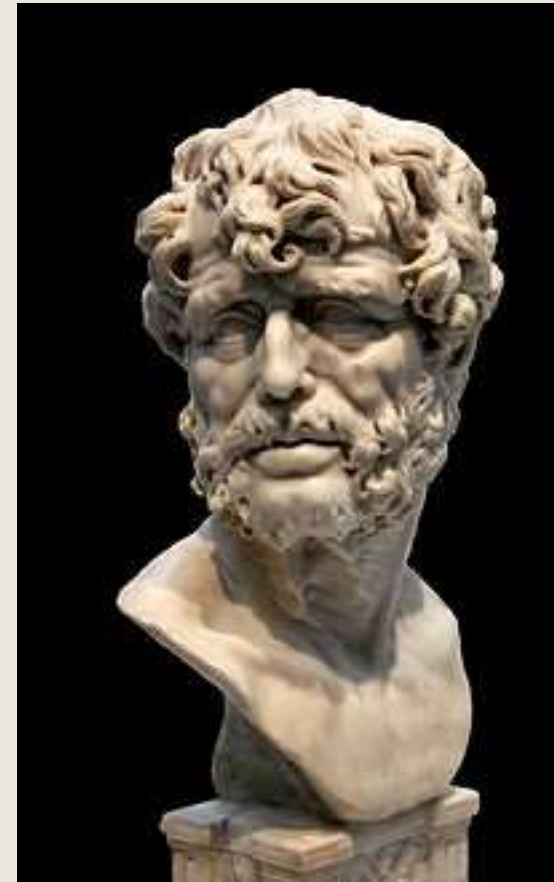


Suicide

- The Absurd emerges from the conflict between a human desire for reason, order and God, and the indifferent silence of the universe
- Faced with a totally meaningless world, our first reaction is to escape it, through suicide
- Suicide is a reaction to the ‘absence of any profound reason for living’
- While taking this to be a logical response (the other is religion), Camus wants to explore how we can resist the absurd and live fully
- This means developing a philosophy not attuned to reason, but to real life, as we live it

Seneca (4BC-65CE)

- Reflections on the shortness of life have produced some of the richest philosophical and religious work
- In the Roman world, Marcus Aurelius and Seneca both encourage not to fear death, but to face it
- The playwright, essayist and political advisor of Nero, Seneca, captures this beautifully in his essay *On the Shortness of Life*
- Nature has given us plenty of time (generally...), so why do we not make the most of it?



Seneca

- We avoid confronting the inevitable through distractions and wasting our time
- While people are often frugal in guarding their money or possessions, we are far too wasteful of dividing up and squandering our free time
- We postpone our dreams for future years
- Instead Seneca calls on us to wake up to the present, face our fate, and begin to live fully instead of merely exist
- Our time can be best used in studying philosophy, which is immortal...

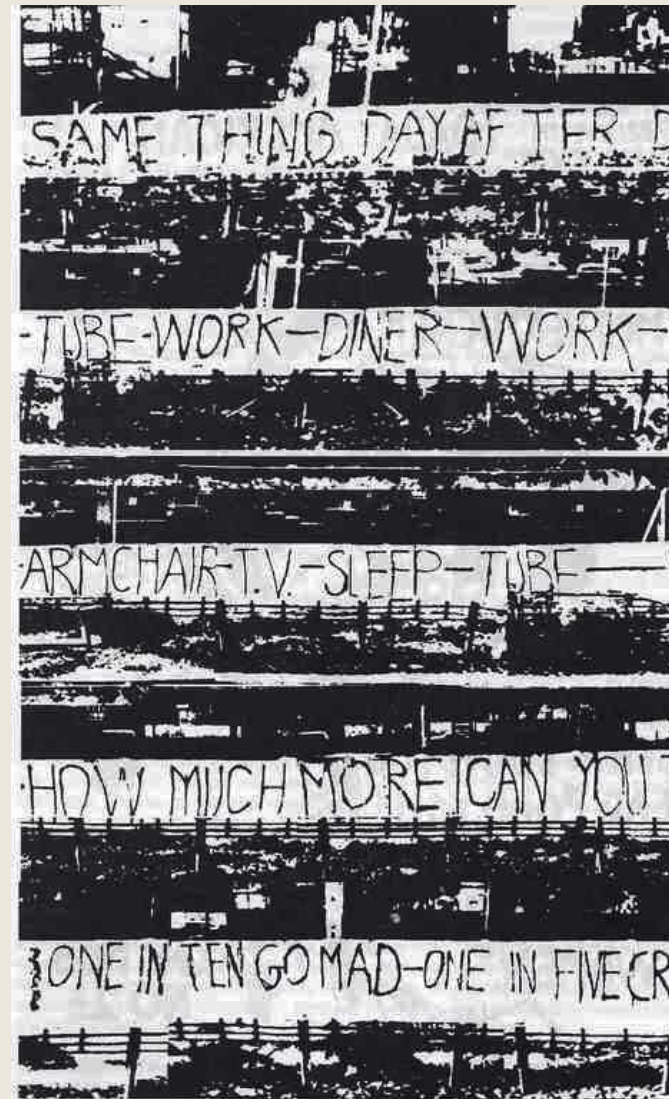
‘You will hear many people saying: ‘When I am fifty I shall retire into leisure; when I am sixty I shall give up public duties.’ And what guarantee do you have of a longer life? Who will allow your course to proceed as you arrange it? Aren’t you ashamed to keep for yourself just the remnants of your life, and to devote to wisdom only that time which cannot be spent on any business? How late it is to begin really to live just when life must end! How stupid to forget our mortality, and put off sensible plans to our fiftieth and sixtieth years, aiming to begin life from a point at which few have arrived!’ – *On the Shortness of Life*



‘Dream as if you’ll live forever, live as if you’ll die today’ – James Dean

Everyday life

It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, bus, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, bus, 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. “Begins”—this is important.



Absurd reasoning

Take a look at the next excerpt:

How does revolt emerge?

Do you agree with Camus' picture?



Absurd reasoning

- 'Time is out of joint – O cursed spite, That I was ever born to set it right' – Hamlet
- Camus calls on us to face this silent, uncaring universe, a 'waterless desert' where objective meanings are lost, with no God or immortality
- The challenge instead is to face this inherent meaninglessness, and through it, live our lives fully
- Our freedom is 'not the best living but the most living', deriving pleasure in our fate (*amor fati*)

	Atheistic existentialism	Monotheistic existentialism	Absurdism	Nihilism
1. There is such a thing as meaning or value:	Yes.	Yes.	Maybe.	No.
2. There is inherent meaning in the universe:	No.	Yes, but the individual must have come to the knowledge of God.	Maybe, but humans can never know it.	No.
3. The pursuit of meaning may have meaning in itself:	Yes.	Yes.	Maybe.	No.
4. The individual's construction of any type of meaning is possible:	Yes, thus the goal of existentialism.	Yes, thus the goal of existentialism, though this meaning must incorporate God.	Yes, though it must be personal and face the Absurd; moreover, there is no way to verify whether one's constructed meaning conforms to any inherent meaning.	No.
5. There is resolution to the individual's desire to seek meaning:	Yes, the creation of one's own meaning.	Yes, the creation of one's own meaning involving God.	Maybe the creation of one's own meaning, but not with regard to the inherent meaning of the universe (if one exists)	No

Sisyphus

- Does anyone know the story of King Sisyphus?
- Take a look at the excerpt...
- Again in pairs, discuss:

*How can one imagine
Sisyphus happy?*



I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.



The Rebel

- Camus' work often returns to the figure of the rebel or outsider
- To live without appeal is to find self-sufficiency, self-determination and freedom without relying on transcendent ideas or escapism
- Sisyphus becomes heroic in carrying on with resilience, facing the world without giving in, fighting on with compassion and purpose
- *Are you sympathetic to Camus' interpretation?*

A lifelong rebel

- Camus was involved in Communist, Anarchist and Resistance struggles across his life
- His essay “The Rebel” is a reflection on how revolt is fundamental to our freedom
- The rebel engages in an ethical struggle, committing her/himself to the common good, and affirming the intrinsic value of life
- ‘I rebel – therefore we exist’
- The self’s worth is realised in its commitment and solidarity with a community

A lifelong rebel

- Unlike Sartre, Camus refused to condone any form of politically-motivated violence
- In “Neither Victims nor Executioners”, he makes an impassioned case for pacifism
- ‘I will never again be one of those, whoever they be, who compromise with murder.’
- This meant that he controversially didn’t support the rebellion in Algeria



Rounding up on Camus

- The absurd worldview is one in which God, reason, immortality or objectivity of any kind have collapsed
- The human condition is defined by suffering, anxiety and the inevitability of death
- But Camus encourages us to face this depressing situation and embrace it as *ours*
- Ignorance is not bliss....
- Instead it is only through the lucid recognition of the absurdity of existence that we can truly start living, abandoning delusions, enjoying the beauty, pleasure and loving relationships that make up our lives

Next week...

- We turn to Sartre!
- Look out for: bad faith, authenticity, anguish, and ‘existence precedes essence’
- Sartre was a prolific writer: I recommend reading “Existentialism is a humanism” on Moodle
- Any questions, do email me
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