

# Is Life Meaningful? And Other Absurd Questions

March 15, 2021

Albert Camus grew up surrounded by violence. His homeland of Algeria was mired in conflict between native Algerians and colonizing French Europeans. He lost his father in the First World War, and was deemed unfit to fight in the second. Battling tuberculosis in France and confronting the war's devastation as a resistance journalist, Camus grew despondent. He couldn't fathom any meaning behind all this endless bloodshed and suffering. He asked: if the world was meaningless, could our individual lives still hold value?

Many of Camus' contemporaries were exploring similar questions under the banner of a new philosophy called existentialism. Existentialists believed people were born as blank slates, each responsible for creating their life's meaning amidst a chaotic world. But Camus rejected their school of thought. He argued all people were born with a shared human nature that bonded them toward common goals. One such goal was to seek out meaning despite the world's arbitrary cruelty. Camus viewed humanity's desire for meaning and the universe's silent indifference as two incompatible puzzle pieces, and considered trying to fit them together to be fundamentally absurd. This tension became the heart of Camus' Philosophy of the Absurd, which argued that life is inherently futile. Exploring how to live without meaning became the guiding question behind Camus' early work, which he called his "cycle of the absurd."

The star of this cycle, and Camus' first published novel, offers a rather bleak response. "The Stranger" follows Meursault, an emotionally detached young man who doesn't attribute much meaning to anything. He doesn't cry at his mother's funeral, he supports his neighbor's scheme to humiliate a woman, he even commits a violent crime — but Meursault feels no remorse. For him the world is pointless and moral judgment has no place in it. This attitude creates hostility between Meursault and the orderly society he inhabits, slowly increasing his alienation until the novel's explosive climax.

Unlike his spurned protagonist, Camus was celebrated for his honest philosophy. "The Stranger" catapulted him to fame, and Camus continued producing works that explored the value of life amidst absurdity many of which circled back to the same philosophical question: if life is truly meaningless, is committing suicide the only rational response?

Camus' answer was an emphatic "no." There may not be any explanation for our unjust world, but choosing to live regardless is the deepest expression of our genuine freedom. Camus explains this in one of his most famous essays which centers on the Greek myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus was a king who cheated the gods, and was condemned to endlessly roll a boulder up a hill. The cruelty of his punishment lies in its singular futility, but Camus argues all of humanity is in the same position. And only when we accept the meaninglessness of our lives can we face the absurd with our heads held high. As Camus says, when the king chooses to begin his relentless

task once more, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

Camus' contemporaries weren't so accepting of futility. Many existentialists advocated for violent revolution to upend systems they believed were depriving people of agency and purpose. Camus responded with his second set of work: the cycle of revolt. In "The Rebel," he explored rebellion as a creative act, rather than a destructive one. Camus believed that inverting power dynamics only led to an endless cycle of violence. Instead, the way to avoid needless bloodshed is to establish a public understanding of our shared human nature. Ironically, it was this cycle of relatively peaceful ideas that triggered his fallout with many fellow writers and philosophers.

Despite the controversy, Camus began work on his most lengthy and personal novel yet: an autobiographical work entitled "The First Man." The novel was intended to be the first piece in a hopeful new direction: the cycle of love.

But in 1960, Camus suddenly died in a car accident that can only be described as meaningless and absurd. While the world never saw his cycle of love, his cycles of revolt and absurdity continue to resonate with readers today. His concept of absurdity has become a part of world literature, 20th century philosophy, and even pop culture. Today, Camus remains a trusted guide for moments of uncertainty; his ideas defiantly imbuing a senseless world with inspiration rather than defeat.