

How Can We Live in the World of the Absurd?

The Humanism of Albert Camus



Jeanette Lowen

Art, in a sense, is a revolt against everything fleeting and unfinished in the world.

—Albert Camus
(1913-1960)

The restless questions of Albert Camus, one of the most discussed and most easily misunderstood writers of our time, continue to gnaw at us. From the first, his writings appear as a succession of explosions—the explosions of a human mind in anxiety and revolt before a world that does not hear, a universe that is indifferent to our demands. Camus expressed both the horror of living during Hitler's rise and World War II and the desire to establish a meaningful life in a meaningless world of war and futile conquest. Not content with the nihilism of his age and unable to ignore the catastrophe of modern life, he developed two related concepts, “the absurd” and “revolt” into a significant philosophy of life. And it was his insistence that an authentic revolt against the human condition had to be a revolt in the name of “the solidarity of man with man” that has kept the questions—and the implicit hope—of Albert Camus alive.

To live in the world of the absurd, and to salvage meaning from such a world, one must live with the belief that absurdity, in the sense of recognizing and accepting the fact that there are no metaphysically guaranteed directives for conduct, can by itself generate a positive ethic. Only by this recognition and this acceptance of the world's absurdity (the lack of order, the lack of guarantees) in contradiction to the anguished demand of our innate need of order and purpose, and only by the conscious espousal of human purpose and action can we transform nihilism from a passive despair into a way of revolting against and of transcending the world's indifference to the human being.¹

This is the response of the man who is said to represent

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a milestone in the development of twentieth-century thought and literature.

Camus Emerges on the Literary Scene

It was with the novel of his generation, *The Stranger*, that Camus burst upon literary Paris in 1942. This was the story that struck a chord in so many young people in Europe, and later in America. They found it understandable, and they were sympathetic to it. A symbolic portrayal of alienation, this is the story of a dazed and benumbed young man named Mersault, a victim of a world lacking the sustenance of any belief that recovery was possible. It is only when he is faced with extermination that Mersault's apathy turns to a violent outburst and he begins his long journey toward a sense of “consciousness.” He is then forced to justify what he has been and done. He is thus on trial as a human being.

We certainly deplore the minimal humanity of *The Stranger*: for example, the fact that not Marie (who exists as a red-and-white-striped dress instead of as a person for Mersault) but a strand of a woman's hair is defended as the alternative to the chaplain's other-worldly values. It is this indifference to humanity, and it is this assigning to life the direct, existential encounter with the concrete as the “ultimate” value that Camus passes beyond (in *The Plague*, *The Rebel*, and *The Fall*). Camus knew that he had to pass beyond this, but first he had to open the door, as he did in *The Stranger*.

The Absurd: *The Stranger*

Jean-Paul Sartre knew from the first that *The Stranger* was a novel about “the absurd” and against “the absurd.” In an essay on Camus's first novel, Sartre expressed his view that the stranger Camus wants to portray is one of those terrible innocents who shock society by not accepting the rules of its game. He lives among outsiders, but to them, too, he is a stranger. And we ourselves, who on opening the book are not yet familiar with the feeling of “the absurd,” vainly try to judge him according to our usual standards. For us too, then, he is “a stranger.”



It is as Mersault faces death, having lived a life where he was unwilling to question anything, that he comprehends for the first time the absurd fact that all human beings must die. He discovers that no one can bear living just to exist, and that to fail to question the meaning of life is to strip down the individual and the world to nothingness.

The Absurd: *The Myth of Sisyphus*

Further probing brings Camus to grips with *the* most vital question: whether it makes any sense to go on living once the absurdity of human life is fully understood and assimilated. In his essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he thus poses for consideration the problem of suicide as the only serious philosophical problem, and he answers with a rejection of suicide as an adequate response. "Suicide," says Camus, "is an admission of incapacity." Such an admission is inconsistent with the human dimension to which he openly appeals. "Only by going on living in the face of their own absurdity, and only by the conscious espousal of human purpose and action, can human beings achieve their full stature."² Camus's response is a moving acceptance of the human condition on its own terms: "revolt," "liberty," and "passion."

What is clear is that Camus from the beginning regarded certain responses to absurdity as morally unacceptable. He interpreted Nazism as one reaction to the very nihilistic vision of the world that he himself had come to accept. But he went

on to condemn Nazism in the severest terms for its denial of human fraternity. So that, early in the development of his thought, Camus already insisted that an authentic revolt against the human condition had to be a revolt in the name of "the solidarity of man with man."

The Myth of Sisyphus is a study that defines the absurd as the encounter between the human being's innate need for order and purpose and the blank indifference of nature, that insists upon the recognition of the fundamental "absurdity" of life, urges the living out of this absurdity in a constant tension of "revolt," and finally arrives at an acceptance of life symbolized by the labor of Sisyphus.

"It is the very essence of human nature," Camus declares, "to struggle against the inevitable and perpetual impediments to a decent life. It is, however, an 'awareness' of this tragic destiny that renders a man or a woman heroic." Throughout his works, the same idea is presented: that the "awareness" of the hero's absurdness will help him to wrest meaning from absurdity itself.

Revolt: *The Plague* and *The Rebel*

To refuse the world for what it is does not mean that one gives up and flees it—rather it means that one lives it under different terms.³ Five years after he emerged on the scene, Camus capped his reputation with his second novel, *The Plague*, in which he examines at length (as he does later in *The Rebel*) the concept of revolt.

Striving to find some satisfying answer to the absurdity, suffering, and injustice that the human being must endure, Camus seeks to discover a lesson plan that will guide us in how to live in the world. We may despair, he says, of a universe, an order of things, that is indifferent to our demands; and we may despair because of the discovery that we have no "absolute" place or guarantee in this existence. When we discover this, however, we have only lost an illusion about the world. "And to stop here and go no further," Camus warns, "would mean personal sickness and social disorder." Once we discover "finitude" and "uncertainty" and once the old certitudes and confidence and ease have passed away, although we may despair of such a world, this does not mean that we despair of ourselves nor of the validity of our own demands and aspirations. What a person demands and aspires to (Camus urges), remains the one thing that he can cling to, the one thing that is his or hers and that gives life meaning.

In *The Plague*, the best known of his books, Camus portrays the chronic incidence of evil. He draws a dramatic tableau of how humankind confronts its plagues: the weak succumb to despair; the cowardly try to evade it; the religious receive it as due punishment for their sinfulness and pray that they may be forgiven and spared; the racketeers traffic in and plot to profit from it; and "the engaged man" (a doctor in the novel) undertakes to heal its lesion and is prepared to die in the attempt.

This last is where Camus stands and in the work he expresses his growing belief that "there are more things in man to admire than to scorn." He is moving away from the "nihilism" of

The Stranger and *The Myth of Sisyphus* toward the “humanism” of *The Rebel*, *The Plague*, and later *The Fall*.

Camus struggles with and redefines the idea of “revolt,” leaving the solitary world of Mersault for a world in which the individual is concerned with “the human being in society.” Camus becomes more and more focused on the relation between “individual” happiness and the attitude and behavior of others. He sees that a world in which the individual is free to act in accordance with his own desires, could and often does lead to a total inconsideration for the life and well-being of others.

The changing attitude, as expressed in *The Plague*, reveals a shift from the absurdity of abstract man’s aspirations, as they were presented in the earlier writings, to the problems of the human being living with other human beings and the need for finding meaning in life. He still lives in the world of the absurd, but has discovered that he is no longer alone, and through this knowledge that “the shoemaker and he are both in trouble,” he can challenge, if not, remake the world.

Such alliance is graphically expressed in a dialogue that takes place between the priest and the doctor (two of the major characters in *The Plague*), during which Dr. Rieux concludes his conversation with Father Paneloux by saying:

What does it matter that you haven’t convinced me? What I hate is death and disease, as you well know. And whether you wish it or not, we’re allies, facing them and fighting them, together. So you see, God Himself can’t part us now.⁴

Camus thus informs us, as he does on other occasions, of his belief that “we are in this together,” and that if at bottom we are fighting the evil in the world, we will not set ourselves up against one another. As he himself revealed, *The Plague* (and *The Rebel* as well) indicated Camus’ evolution from an attitude of “solitary revolt” to that of seeing ourselves as part of a community whose struggles must be shared by all. He is now saying that the human being can no longer be a “detached stranger.”

Beyond Nihilism

In the words of the Nobel citation he was awarded in 1957, “Albert Camus illuminated the problems of the human conscience in our time.” More than three decades have passed—decades of unprecedented change—since the automobile accident that took his life; and yet the challenges that Camus confronted—the violence, the divisiveness, the aloneness—continue to haunt us.

His writings still speak to us. In his central characters, today’s readers feel the pulse of our everyday world. Like his characters, Camus’s audience questions what purpose and meaning can be sustained and struggle with finding a way. Like his heroes, we have inherited the “incertitudes” of our age, when the moral and religious beliefs formerly taken for granted are no longer applicable.

In rejecting the old views—the “absolute” values—a vacuum was created; many have found this vacuum difficult to fill. For some, the discrediting of traditional beliefs has led to

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believing in *nothing*—nothing but the freedom to do what one desires and wills. It is an “individualistic” view that is often attributed to the Existentialists, a point of view that Camus and Sartre themselves tried to refute. Even Nietzsche a century ago saw us heading in the direction of nihilism, “unless,” he warned, “we could/would determine a universality of beliefs to live by.” He called for “a re-evaluation of all values,”⁵ and Camus likewise explores human values on universal grounds. In his drama *Le Malentendu*, Cherea finds certain actions “more beautiful than others.” Camus is saying here that there is a standard of values inherent in human nature.

He tells us that the world is absurd, that this is a fact that has to be accepted; but he also tells us not to stop here. “We cannot change the absurdity of the world,” says Camus, “but we can change the ways we live in it. We can change how we live with one another.” Camus tells us that we must create *new values* so that we can come to grips with “the” vital question: How to find meaning in being a human being?

Desperately Seeking Morality: *The Fall*

Camus’s struggle with the problems of the human conscience persists right up to his last novel, a controversial work called *The Fall*, in which he tugs at the very core of Jean-Baptiste Clamence, his central character. The depth of Camus’s characterization of this man is seen in the way he wrestles with that inner-outer dialectic: “the individual-as-he-functions-in-society” and the “individual-as-he-is-to-himself.” Camus points to this as the most important fact a person can learn about his existence; and how one reacts to this discovery tells *who* and *what* that person will be. Clamence is caught in contradictions; he is torn between wanting to be free and yet afraid of freedom and the responsibility it brings. He is aware of his duplicity. He cannot feel a oneness between himself and his fellow creatures. The values of freedom and solidarity and forgiveness and innocence beckon within him, but Clamence will/can not respond.

Camus recognizes this Clamencelike state of mind to be typical of modern man. He is depicting individuals who are incapable or fearful of existing in terms of the *existential warning* that they see as modern man’s only possibility of moral health. And it is perhaps in seeing what Clamence has given up hope in that we have Camus’s most piercing insights into the unique values that are buried in the hearts of humans.

In the novel, he portrays twentieth-century man as treading through an emptiness without definition or limits or providential guides. Through Clamence, he shows present-

day mortals as wandering about in a desert without laws or paths. Unlike Mersault, *the stranger*, unaware, innocent, and unlike Dr. Rieux, *the engaged man*, who takes the position of “revolt,” Clamence shuttles back and forth between the two. He is in limbo. Like all men, he awaits the coming of a better time. Clamence is waiting: “The unexpected time will come, it must come!” This is his certainty. He knows that freedom and forgiveness and solidarity and innocence are necessary for human beings.

Camus’s entire work presents itself as a groping within these basic moral categories: freedom/slavery; judgment/forgiveness; solidarity/solitude; and innocence/guilt. And in his last novel, Camus engages the readers as participants in a dialogue with Clamence toward the “seeking of the moral act.” Such engagement makes for a feeling of discomfort, being torn in opposing directions, conflicts unresolved.

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The Fall, which is the most controversial of all of Camus’s novels and which was written back in 1956, is poignantly reflective of today’s world. The 1990s evoke a world that is in trouble, where values have become moot and questionable, and where personal and public biographies reveal an escalating moral breakdown. Living in the late twentieth century has come to mean living in a state of limbo—the Clamencelike state, where we know what must be done but we won’t/can’t bring ourselves to do it.

Camus as Humanist

In decrying our moral ambivalences, I hear Camus making an appeal for humanism—a humanism that is committed to *the cultivation of moral excellence*. To humanists, “there are normative standards that we discover together”; and, to humanists, “moral principles are tested by their consequences.”⁶

Such a manifesto is the challenge of today. Humanists know something must be done. We know that it is only by coming together and figuring out what kind of world we want to live in, only by giving our attention to why “values” have been eschewed and why so many people seem to have given up, that we can pursue our vision, the humanist vision of a cosmic world-view. The questionings must go on: “Can we,” as Camus asked, “find meaning in being a human being unless we share the struggles inherent in *living together*?” His response—the insistence that an authentic revolt against the human condition had to be a revolt in the name of “the *solidarity of man with man*”—continues to be ever more relevant in our times.

“Alone is not enough!” has become the encapsulated

response today to the rage and the despair, exemplified in what followed the Rodney King verdict. This outcry is a symbol, echoing the writings of Camus. As the Nobel commendation stated, “He emerged as the staunch defender of our positive moral values.” He tells us that we need not struggle alone, and that, although the world may appear beyond understanding, although so much of what takes place may be unexplainable, we can seek out that which we share in common and which can serve as a solidifying bond between us. In keeping with humanism, he affirms the interdependence of all human beings. He urges that by probing into the problems of existence, we can get something out of life other than isolated satisfaction and selfish pleasures. Unlike most spokesmen of this century, once Camus subscribes to the human being’s “aloneness,” he is not willing to stop.

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Epilogue

Recently, Camus burst upon literary Paris once again. A “new” book—his last, unfinished manuscript, found by investigators near the scene of his death thirty-four years ago, taken in by hand by his daughter Catherine, and published in April 1994 in France—instantaneously created an uproar. There have already been seven printings and foreign publishers are moving quickly.

“The voice of Camus,” asserts Jacques-Pierre Amette in the newsmagazine *Le Point*, “more resonant than ever in its trembling solemnity, addresses itself to today’s generation”:

I tried to discover as a child what was right and wrong
since no one around could tell me.
And now I recognize that everything abandoned me,
that I needed someone to show me the way. . . .
I need my father.⁷

These piercing words from the opening section, subtitled “Search for the Father,” set the tone for the autobiographical novel that Camus was working at the time of his death, which he called *Le Premier Homme* (*The First Man*).

In confessing his need and consequent search for “a father,” this twentieth-century novelist-playwright-philosopher speaks to our contemporary world: not only to the growing numbers of children who live in homes “without” the love and guidance of a father, but, perhaps even more importantly, he illuminates the pursuit of a *standard* of moral values. He is still asking the questions; he is still deploring the anguish-ridden abandonment. He perseveres in the quest for a “moral authority.”

Le Premier Homme, as it reveals Camus’s warm feelings for the Algeria of his childhood, brings to mind the difficulties that he encountered politically on “the Algerian question,” especially from Sartre and his followers, with whom he shared a bond on many fronts. In the present-day context—the “isms” that seem to have disappeared in our time—some reviewers of the book are attempting to glean new philosophical insights

on Camus. Much speculation is going on. The hunger persists: what new meanings can Camus provide?

And the Interest in Camus Lives On

A recent issue of the *New Oxford Review* features the Reverend John Warrick Montgomery, a Lutheran minister, who writes "of the unmitigated catastrophe of humanism, . . . of humanism as incapable of sustaining human value because it is entirely lacking in an absolute ethic." Reverend Montgomery goes on to relate that "he learned not too long ago from a now retired pastor of the American Church in Paris that Albert Camus was to have been baptized there within the month of his tragic death in a car accident" and that "Camus had seen the bankruptcy of humanistic existentialism, and, like intelligent souls across the centuries, had found the Gospel narratives no obstacle to belief."⁸

Why the desire to claim Camus as being "on their side?"

What is this fascination with the legend of Albert Camus? More than half a century since he emerged on the literary scene, we are still paying attention to his restless questions.

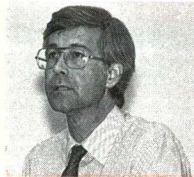
Notes

1. Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970).
2. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1955).
3. Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).
4. Albert Camus, *The Plague* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).
5. Friedrich Nietzsche, from *Toward A Genealogy of Morals: The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Viking Press, 1954).
6. CODESH, Inc., *The Affirmations of Humanism* (Buffalo, N.Y.: FREE INQUIRY, 1991).
7. Paul Gray, "A Mesmerizing Encore from Camus," *Time*, May 16, 1994, p. 91.
8. John Warwick Montgomery, "Letter From England," "On the Reliability of the Four Gospels," *New Oxford Review*, May 1994, pp. 22-24.

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