

# The Notion of Absurdity and Meaning of Life in Albert Camus Existentialism

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## Abstract

Camus unreservedly condemned and strictly criticized and rejected suicide and existential leap because suicide is a total surrender to absurdity and a total confession that life is too much on the individual. His interest in existentialism is to explain the meaninglessness of life through his explication of the absurd which is found in human existence; and which continues to torment man until the finality of his existence which is death. The knowledge that life is absurd is already a step towards conquering the meaninglessness of life. For Camus therefore, since absurd has no meaning, man must hold himself apart from it and revolt against it. This is why he suggested philosophical suicide as a solution to reverse the absurdity of life. The question then is, since man's belief in the absurdity of existence, then how and where should he direct his conduct, does suicide solve this problem? The consequences of Camus' submissions are enormous; but be that as it may, this work attempts a study of the absurdity inherent in human existence with a view to answering the following questions: How far did Camus achieve the idea of absurdity of life? How realistic is Camus' attempt to analyze life as meaningless apart from the meaning we give to it? Did Camus actually succeed in his attempt to show that life is absurd? Finally, what are the implications of Camus' absurdity to philosophy and to life in general? This work will adopt expository and analytic methodological approaches. Here we shall with a detailed and deep reflective inquiry expose the place of absurdity in Camus' philosophy in order to fully understand his understanding of life.

## Keywords

Absurdity, Meaninglessness, Reasoning, Futility, Revolt

## 1. Introduction

The early works of the philosopher of the absurd Albert Camus were preoccu-

plied with the task of determining if and how a person can live with full awareness of the absurd. As such, Camus maintained in most of his books that human existence is absurd. Although the world for him is neither absurd nor human thought, it is the resultant effect of the meeting of human needs and the unreasonable nature of the world. This is pointing to reality of not being able to reduce the world to reasonable principle at the meeting of the appetite for the absolute and unity (truth). Man is a being whose uniqueness lies in the fact of his constant search for the meaning of his existence, in the bid to answer the question “why I am existing”. Unfortunately, man from the perspective of Camus has not been able to understand the finality of his being and the objective meaning of human existence.

Absurdism as a belief system was born out of the European existential movement when Albert Camus rejected certain aspects from the philosophical line of thought and went ahead to publish the “Myth of Sisyphus” his manuscript. For the proponents of absurdity, absurdity “... arises from the confrontation of human appeal with the irrational silence of the world” (Copleson, 2008). Hence, according to Camus thus:

The feeling of the absurd can arise in many ways from the perception of the inhumanity and indifference of nature, from the realization of man’s temporality or of death which reveals the uselessness of human life or from the shock occasioned by perceiving the ultimate pointlessness of daily life and its routine (Camus, 1942).

It is only through man that the absurd originates and it cannot exist apart from him: the world in itself is not absurd but simply irrational. However, one can say that for Camus, the world and human life are absurd or at least, they appear as absurd once their irrational and meaningless character is clearly perceived (Copleson; 2008). The absurd does not exist in the human mind alone or in the extra-mental world alone, but in their presence to one another. The absurd, like all other things ends with death (Copleson, 2008). The experience of the absurd thus brings into focus what Camus calls “the fundamental question of philosophy’: whether life stripped of its illusions is not worth living” (Michel-man, 2008). However, the absurdity of human existence expresses itself in clear terms in the benign indifference of the universe in the face of human suffering, the pointless monotony of human labour and the finality of death.

Nevertheless, does the full acknowledgement of the meaninglessness and absurdity of life necessarily require suicide? Although much of our life is built on the hope of tomorrow, yet tomorrow comes and brings us closer to our grave which is the final enemy of human existence. Camus objected here that suicide will only amount to surrendering to absurdity, even to give in to a leap of faith into metaphysical domain is irrational and self-deceptive. His solution therefore is a total “revolt” against the absurd even though we have no hope of final victory.

## 2. The Geneology of the Term Absurd

The term, “absurd” has acquired wide and diverse connotations in modern philosophy, theology and the arts in which it expressed the failure of values to fulfill man’s needs. The word has its etymological origin from the Latin word, “absurdus-a-um”, meaning unreasonable, out of place, foolish, ridiculous, discordant, etc. The absurd therefore means something marked by an obvious lack of reason, common sense, proportion, or accord with accepted ideas. It is that that is illogical or logically contradictory, thus, meaningless.

The theory of absurdism is in a way closely related to the theories of nihilism and existentialism. It was first with its modern implications by the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard who developed existentialist philosophy by confronting the crises humans faced with the Absurd. The social environment that stimulated absurdist views and allowed for their popular development was provided by the aftermath of World War II. As a belief system, Absurdity was born particularly when Albert Camus abandoned certain aspects from the philosophical line of thought of the European existentialist movement (Solomon, 2001).

According to Camus, the origin of the absurd was from the conflict of man not being able to rationalize and explain his existence in human terms. He holds that reality as a whole poses its peculiar problem for man, whose rationality cannot help searching, looking, struggling and critically looking at life in general. So he said, “... that odd state of the soul in which the chain of daily gestures is broken, in which the heart vainly seeks the link that will connect it again, it is as if it were, the first sign of absurdity” (Camus, 1955). In the *Myth of Sisyphus* which is the chief work of Camus, he

... considers absurdity as a confrontation, an opposition, a conflict or a “divorce” between two ideals. Having specifically defined the human condition as absurd, as the confrontation between man’s desire for significance, meaning and clarity on the one hand, he concludes that recognition is the only defensible option (Camus, 1955).

For Camus, the full awareness or sudden experience of the absurd leaves the individual with a choice: suicide, a leap of faith or revolt.

## 3. The Conceptual Analysis of the Term Absurd

The word absurd refers to the conflict between the human tendency to seek inherent value and meaning in life and the human inability to find any. In this context, absurd does not mean “logically impossible”, but rather “humanly impossible” (Kierkegaard, 1991). As a philosophy, absurdist explore the fundamental nature of the absurd and the way individuals persons, should respond to it when encounters with the absurdity. Absurdity admits of two distinct lines of interpretation:

One developed primarily in existentialist literature, understands by “absurd” a sense of the radical contingency of all things that exist: the sense

that everything might be otherwise than it is because there is no ultimate plan or purpose according to which things might be justified. The other, more explicitly philosophical conception of absurdity is limited to actions and choices of human beings, and they a foundation outside of themselves. Absurd is used originally “to describe a violation of the rules of logic” ([Encyclopedia Americana, 2001](#)).

Thus it refers simply to the lack or absence of connecting links that holds things together, like when things are breaking up and falling apart. Camusian perspective of the absurd is in terms of this lack of connecting links that hold things together. He summarized this view thus:

If I accuse an innocent man of a monstrous crime, if I tell a virtuous man that he has coveted his own sister, he will reply that this is absurd ... The virtuous man illustrated by that reply the definitive antimony existing between the deed I am attributing to him and his life-long principles. “It’s absurd” means “it’s impossible” but also “it’s contradictory” ([Camus, 1955](#)).

From this, we can see that absurd refers to the lack of harmony between two or more things, like the virtuous man and his being accused of covetousness. It is thus unreasonable to say that a virtuous man coveted his sister. Even if it happens in a possible but probable situation, it is unreasonable and contradictory because both poles have no common link holding them together. In this regard, absurdity becomes an absence of connection between what is and what ought to be. In affirmation to this, Eric Fromm holds “... that breaking up of connecting links holding things together is absurdity” ([Fromm, 1969](#)). Also that which defies the human reason is said to be absurd. Since by nature, man desires to know; he wants everything to be explicable in human terms. Once it is not, it is absurd.

#### 4. Explanation of the Concepts

Before we fully understand how Camus treated and viewed the human conditions and predicaments, it becomes pertinent to explain some of the concepts he employed to achieve this.

#### 5. Absurd Man

Albert Camus holds in almost all the pages of his work most especially “the *Myth of Sisyphus*” and “*The stranger*” that life is full of absurdity; that human nature and existence is absurd. In his effort to explain the absurd nature of human existence, he told various stories like the ancient Greek myth of Sisyphus, the story of Don Juan the serial seducer, the story of the conqueror-the warrior, the story of Meursault as found in the stranger and others. The ancient Greek myth of Sisyphus brings out fully what absurd man is. According to the story, Sisyphus committed numerous sins against the gods which ranged from stealing their secret, his hatred for death, his scorn for them to his passion for life. He was relegated to the underworld for these reasons. He was given the punishment

of rolling the rock up to a hill and allowing the rock to roll back to its starting point. Having seen this punishment as what would last forever; Sisyphus accepted this as his faith by constructing a passion which helped him in serving this penalty.

We can find the rebellious character which is man in the episode of rolling up a rock to a mountain against the gravitational force and seeing the rock that weighs him down roll back to its starting point.

Meursault in the novel "The Stranger" is also another key note to understanding the absurd man. He was indifferent to life and showed no remorse for whatever happens. This was reflected from the beginning when he got the telegram that announced his mother's death, "Mother died today" He never visited his aged mother for the three years she spent in the home and saw no need to cry at her burial. He was indifferent to life and seeing no meaning in all these, instead he preferred smoking cigarette and making love to Maria after the burial. He lacked feeling as was seen in his answer to Maria when she proposed marriage to him that the question has no meaning but declares his willingness to marry her if that would make her happy (Camus, 1955).

Another was the conqueror, the warrior that forgot all promises to eternity to affect and engage in human history. Our weapon for happiness amidst all these absurdities of death, agonies, frustration etc, are the smile on the faces of our loved ones, and good memories etc, and our losing them constitute death, just as you are. Many a time, most of what serve as happiness to people like love and friendship become nothing again to the absurd man that lives an absurd life and thus Camus stated:

"everything is permitted, is not an outburst of relief or of joy, but rather a bitter acknowledgement of a fact" (Camus, 1942).

## 6. Absurd World

For Camus, man's salvation is not achievable in God; it must be achieved here on earth by man's hand; thus the world for him is devoid of God; for God is dead, he is no longer in existence and can no longer guarantee our existence. Thus man in order to exist must decide to act (Camus; 1942). From the moment man accepts that the world has no direction according to Nietzsche, he must give it one which will eventually lead to a superior type of humanity (Nietzsche, 2011).

The art of absurd is limited according to Camus to the extent of the myriad experiences in the world since explanation is impossible. This is owing to the fact that if creation and the world is clear, art would not have existed. Asking the question how art can create their own meaning, Camus answers that "in a world, it is a problem of civilization and it is essential for us to know whether man, without the help either of the eternal or of the rationalistic thought can unaided create his own values" (Camus, 1975). Camus holds life to end with death but for him, until then, everything is up to us. We can live as we choose and let the

world become entirely ours if we skip the notion that there is a greater being that determines wrong or right and that there is a life hereafter.

## 7. Absurd Reasoning

For Camus, since everything, the world and life is absurd, facing it is like struggling against it. Having expressed man's fruitless endeavours in the world that is devoid of God and meaning, with no eternal truth or value, Camus raises a vital question whether the full awareness of this meaninglessness and absurdity inherent in life worth suicide. His solution to this is a constant revolution against the absurd instead of suicide which comes from the awareness of the absurd. For him, from the moment the absurd is recognized, it becomes a passion, the utmost harrowing of all (Camus, 1975).

Absurdity derives from the juxtaposition of two incompatible ideas, (Camus, 1955) and to hold on to the absurd means the acceptance of all the difficulties that the world presents with these incompatibilities. Hence when there is meaningless in life, there is scale values.

## 8. Camus and the Absurd

Albert Camus seeing the meaninglessness hidden in life declared that human existence is absurd. He found out that there is no purposeful link between the individual part and the world after thinking deeply on the meaning of human existence, whether the individual part of human life are together in a purposeful web, or whether there is any meaning for human life in general.

He holds that human existence cannot be understood and unreasonable thus, absurd Camus refused to dissolve the disjunction between man and the world.

For him, there should be no pretence that the world is imbued with the intelligible meaning, and yet one should not kill oneself. We must unflinchingly sustain consciousness of the absurd with no respite. We cannot deny the existence of absurdity for at every corner of the street, the feeling of absurdity strikes us in the face. Camus holds that absurdity is the feeling that one must have to experienced at some point in one's life; and that the existence of absurdity depends on metaphor gotten from our daily experiences of the ordinary absurdity like any clash that is incongruous.

When familiar things are juxtaposed in the unexpected ways, absurdity comes into place which often seems to be funny. Thus anything out of place creates a sense of disharmony. Many things might differ in our perception and conception but the reality of the world is common to us all. If we deny that the absurdity exists, we have nothing to lose except everything, for the existence of absurdity is indubitably witnessed at the unprepared intermittent happenstances of our experiences, albeit in an inexplicable human terms. For even when we are being confronted by it, we will not know. Perhaps, the denial is solving the long-term problems with short term solutions. In moments of uncertainties of life's situations, we might ask what point is in doing anything. The mere presen-

tation of this query is necessarily the awareness of absurdity, the awareness that from at least one point of view, there is need of doing anything at all. This is well depicted in these lines:

Once we have acknowledged the validity of the perspective of a world without values, ..., there is no turning back. We cannot simply forget or ignore this perspective. The absurd is a shadow ...; and even if we choose to live as if life has a meaning, as if there are ..., the absurd will linger in the back of our minds as a nagging doubt that perhaps there is no point for ... (Camus, 1955).

For Camus, certainty of knowledge is not possible and it is equally irrational. In this vein, he firmly maintains the inability of science to explain the world. Every scientific endeavour necessarily ends up in abstraction, metaphors and meaninglessness. In emphasizing the absurdity of human existence, Camus though insisting that the world is meaningless, and yet maintains that he is very sure of something that has meaning in it. This something is no other than man, as man is the only creature that persistently insisting on having meaning.

Seeing the background that cannot be explainable in human terms, we say that absurd is unintelligible and irrational. As such, the limitations of human reason stand bare to us. Since it means that man cannot account for certain phenomenal manifestations in his spatio-temporal existence, he sees himself perhaps; looking like stranger in his own abode, where he should be in charge of what happens. On this, Frankz Kafka stresses: "To say that something is absurd is to speak of that as denying the authority of reason" (Kafka, 1975). The idea of absurdity is that it hinders the smooth flow of reason. Paschal Blaise did not resist the protest that "the last proceeding of reason is to recognize that there is limitation to its reason" (Blaise, 1996). As regards the absurdity of man's place in the world, Camus points out that;

So long as the mind keeps silent in the motionless world of its Hope, everything is reflected and arranged in the unity of nostalgia. But with its first move, the world cracks and tumbles, an infinite number of shimmering fragments is offered to the understanding. We must despair of ever reconstructing the familiar calm surface which would give us peace of heart (Camus, 1955).

Reflecting on the above passage, the idea of the world being in the working order until human mind is exercised, by itself seems absurd. To the question of what part is essentially absurd, Camus thus emphasizes:

This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the moment it is what links them together. It binds them one to the other as only hatred that weld two creature together (Camus, 1955).

From this, the absurdity jumps out and it is not the universe or man. The concept of absurd as that which cannot be comprehensible is seen in the finality of man which is death. For man in every era has been haunted by the terrifying possibility of total extinction as he lives in a constant presence of the inevitability of death. Death is therefore seen as that which is related to the meaning of life. It is one of those things that is bound to happen sooner or later. For whenever it is used, it is in reference to life. Man's life is in motion towards death and that is why the existentialists believed "that existence which is absurd ends with death" (Internet, 2010).

## 9. Absurdity in Human Labour

Absurdity is evident in the frivolities of human labour; for man's effort seems abortive and not focused at any purposeful end. Thus being pointless and absurd, "who indeed is the absurd man? He who is without negating it does nothing for the eternal. Not that nostalgia is foreign to him, but he prefers his courage and his reasoning" (Camus, 1955). In the Myth of Sisyphus, Camus espoused the futility of human labour which was well represented by Sisyphus who was condemned by the gods to the meaninglessness and futile endeavour of rolling a rock to the apex of a mountain, whereby the rock rolls back to its base. This he does constantly with every effort and energy, but each time he succeeds in rolling it up, the rock goes back and he starts again unendingly. Hence, Human labour is but a pointless and futile venture, for nothing has changed, the same thing every day. In making clear the futility of human labour, Antonio Perez-Esclarin said, "You get up every morning, take a bus, go to work, go to lunch, then back to work and so forth. Then one day you ask yourself suddenly 'Why?' and filled with boredom and disgust" (Perez-Esclarin, 1980). This shows the futility of human labour on two grounds: it is completely monotonous and it is purposeless. Thus Camus said, "There is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labour" (Camus, 1955). Furthermore in the novel "The plague", Camus exposed the futility of human labour when he made it clear that man in "existential experience" learns that all the experiences of his "everydayness" are in the final analysis nonessential (Reinhardt, 1952). So all human endeavours for Camus, is but a futile task since at the end death will eventually strike.

## 10. Meaning of Life

For Albert Camus, life is full of absurdity. Nevertheless, the realization of the meaninglessness and absurdity of life does not necessarily require suicide. Even though much of human existence on earth is grounded on the hope of tomorrow, yet this tomorrow comes only to bring about our nearness-ness to the grave, which is the final enemy of earthly life. Albert Camus, hereby, maintained that resorting to suicide as a means of escaping the absurdity of life will surely imply a total failure on the part of the individual person. This then will amount

to surrendering to absurdity instead of bringing meaning to life. Hence, he advocates a total “revolt” against the absurd even though we have no sure hope of ultimate victory.

Camus, therefore, resisted existentialist interpretations of his philosophy. This might be as a result of the fact that Camus, unlike existentialists, did think that there were times when circumstances or situations in life actually do force our actions. However, his position is surely very controversial. Nevertheless, for Camus, the awareness that life is absurd is already a move towards overcoming the meaninglessness of life. As absurd has no meaning, man must firmly hold himself against and apart from it and revolt against it in all its entirety. Man can be able to hold himself apart from the absurd because he has the freedom to choose not to succumb to the absurdity or meaninglessness of life. With that freedom, man should possess some grace that will enable him give some sort of meaning to his existence.

Freedom, for Camus, is unachievable beyond what the absurdity of existence permits: however, the nearest one could approach being absolutely free is by way of accepting the absurd (Camus, 1955). He, therefore, introduces the idea of “acceptance without resignation” as a means of dealing with the recognition of absurdity. In world devoid of higher meaning, the human nature becomes as close to absolutely free as is humanly possible (Camus, 1955). With this Camus’ notion of “acceptance without resignation” in mind, the only means through which man can be free from absurdity of life, Brad admits that we are slaves to our uniquely human condition. The absurd binds us to its terms and we protect ourselves from the temptation of treating sources of meaning or values as absolute (Brad, 2011).

Baggin speaking on this freedom, holds that we find ourselves in a universe we did not create, subject to conditions we did not choose, and vulnerable to injury, loss and death. However, we equally know ourselves as capable of creating beauty, developing deep and loving relationships, of finding nature that is intelligible and glorious, and seeing the possibility of some fuller existence beyond the limit of time and circumstances. In this regard, therefore, he holds that our possibility is that life has meaning to the extent that we give it such (Wikipedia, 2006).

The question at this point is: Is there any purpose in human life? Is it worth living? These two kinds of meaning are very prominent in human existence. First, there is that of all living things, each of which can be assessed against a specific developmental order. Secondly, there is meaning that life acquires as it unfolds as a story built up out of episodes, sequences, sections and chapters. This is a matter of dramatic meaning in relation to which we are author, actor and audience: sometimes shaping events, sometimes living them and sometimes, observing them with amusement or edification. With this Baggini supported Camus and borrowed his view on freedom. Camus purports to determine how best to live in absurd world where there is no apparent reason to deem one course of action better than another. Admittedly, he concludes that although rationality does not impose reason for preferring one action or course of life to another, we

in essence create the reason for ourselves. Hence, Camus struggled with the question of whether it is really true that one can simply shrug off any “horror” or injustice. Nevertheless, with his notion of freedom he maintains that this effort is possible. It is within man’s ambience to choose either the condemns himself in absurd and its accompanying meaninglessness or to uphold his freedom and hold himself against and apart from the horrors of life and thereby bringing meaning to life as well as creating reason for his continued existence.

## 11. Conclusion

Although the solution of Camus has stricken various readers into response, it has nonetheless contributed in no small measure in forming the conception of man into deep reflection on the meaning of life and giving new task to philosophy which is finding the ultimate solutions to the absurdity of human existence. His place in the history of philosophy is preserved by the invaluable contributions he made towards giving deep thought to life’s meaning. Camus holds that life is absurd and man finds himself in this undeniable absurdity of life. It is his solution then that:

... in order for man to remain true to the conditions of absurdity in which he undeniably finds himself; he must reject suicide and the leap to faith, and enter into that hopeless confrontation between man’s questioning and the silence of the world. Thus the most fundamental human act which is the first decisive revolt against the meaninglessness of life is to choose life and to establish it as the only necessary good. In other words, it is revolt that gives a man’s life its value and meaning (Camus, 1999).

The proffered solutions by Camus do little or nothing in the extinction of absurdity, for it seemingly looks as if it has no end, rather it is an avenue for man to affirm his existence in the senseless world. That life is absurd, ridiculous and inconsequential does not mean it is not worth living, rather it engenders a call to surmount it by giving it our meaning. Since Camus solution to the problem of absurdity of life has not helped in the extinction of absurdity which is inherent in life, his idea is subject to further improvement.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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