

Albert Camus

Absurdity and Immortality



Camus was influenced by Edmund Husserl's phenomenological methodology.

He endorses the phenomenology of Husserl that 'declines to explain the world' but seeks to give a description of actual experience (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, p.44).

'This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. This world around me I can feel, and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction' (ibid., p.24).

Although Camus denied that he was an existentialist, like other existentialists Camus was concerned with our ways of being / existing in the world.

The Outsider (1942)

Outline of the text:

Meursault is presented as being detached and indifferent. At the funeral home he feels little emotion (*The Outsider*, ch.1). When Marie suggests marriage, he responds by saying he doesn't care if they wed or not, but that he will if it will make her happy. Marie asks if he loves her and he tells her that the question doesn't mean anything and that, no, he

probably does not love her (ibid., p.45) About simply going up the stairs to the bungalow he says, 'Whether I stayed there or moved, it would come to the same thing' (ibid., p.58).

However, he is also presented as being true to himself or 'authentic'. He doesn't conform to expectations of society or attempt to falsify his emotions. Meursault exists as he is, not trying to be anything more than himself. He accepts that he has no remorse for killing the Arab and doesn't try to provide a rational explanation that society will accept.

When examined by a magistrate, Meursault is asked if he believes in God. He responds honestly, saying that he doesn't. This response threatens the magistrate's view of the world:

He told me that it was impossible, that all men believed in God, even those who wouldn't face up to Him. That was his belief, and if he should ever doubt it, his life would be meaningless. 'Do you want my life to be meaningless?' he cried (ibid., p.68).

As he awaits execution, Meursault rages at the Chaplain for taking up what little time he has left:

He seemed so certain of everything, didn't he?' And yet... he couldn't even be sure he was alive because he was living like a dead man. I might seem to be empty-handed. But I was sure of myself, sure of everything, surer than he was, sure of my life and sure of the death that was coming to me. Yes, that was all I had. But at least it was a truth which I had hold of just as it had hold of me. I'd been right, I was right, I was always right. I'd lived in a certain way and I could just as well have

lived in a different way. I'd done this and I hadn't done that. I hadn't done one thing whereas I had done another. So what? It was as if I'd been waiting all along for this very moment and for the early dawn when I'd be justified. Nothing, nothing mattered and I knew very well why. He too knew why.... What did other people's deaths or a mother's love matter to me... the others too would be condemned one day. He too would be condemned. What did it matter if he was accused of murder and then executed for not crying at his mother's funeral?... What did it matter that Raymond was just as much my mate as Celeste who was worth more than him? (ibid., p.115).

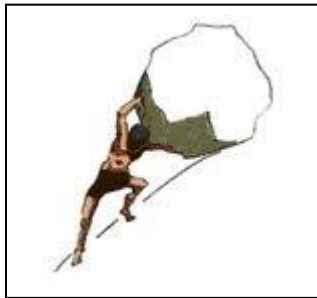
The Chaplain's insistence that Meursault turns to God does not so much represent a desire for Meursault to turn to Christianity, as a desire for him to accept the idea that man's existence in the world has meaning.

In his last hours, Meursault recognises a common bond between human beings, which is found in the absurdity of their existence in the light of their knowledge of their inevitable death. At the beginning of the novel he appears indifferent to life and doesn't give it much thought, but it is only at the very end of the novel that he finally grasps the realisation of life's meaninglessness. Meursault realises that just as he is indifferent to much of the world, so is the world indifferent to him. Like everyone else, Meursault will die, the world will carry on, and his life will have no importance. It's only after this realisation that he's able to attain peace and happiness. Meursault sees that his hope for his continued life has been a burden. Free from this false hope, he's free to live life for what it is.

Camus is suggesting that human existence has no rational meaning. However, because people have difficulty accepting this, they attempt to identify a rational structure and meaning in their lives.

The world in which Meursault lives does not possess any rational order. Meursault has no reason for his actions, such as his decision to marry Marie, his decision to walk to the beach rather than go inside the bungalow and his decision to kill the Arab.

But the idea that it's death itself that makes life absurd is undermined by the story of Sisyphus.



For a crime against the gods, Sisyphus was condemned to an eternity of hard labour. He was to roll a massive boulder to the top of a hill. Every time Sisyphus reached the top, the boulder rolled back down. What makes his life absurd is the fact that he's condemned to an everlasting lifetime of futility.

But an immortal lifetime of futility (as in the case of Sisyphus) appears more absurd than a mortal one, which suggests that it cannot be death itself that makes life absurd. The tale of Sisyphus gives us a picture of life where all our joys and achievements, all our experiences, amount to nothing. That's the absurd. So the absurd is much more than the fact that death is inevitable – it is to do with death, but it's also to do with the futility of life. There's a sense in which we expect our life to add up to something, but it doesn't.

The absurd in Camus's philosophy is a confrontation between the rational mind and 'the benign indifference of the world' (*The Outsider*, p.117). The world doesn't care about what we care about, about our demands, or about what we want from the world. Camus says that the 'absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world' (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, p.32).

Albert Camus, *The Outsider* [1942], trans. Joseph Laredo (London: Penguin Books, 1983)

Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* [1942], trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin Books, 1975).

Albert Camus, *The Rebel* [1951], trans. Anthony Bower (London: Penguin Books, 1962).

READING

Necessary

Albert Camus, *The Outsider* [1942], trans. Joseph Laredo (London: Penguin Books, 1983). Feel free to use an edition other than the Penguin one. You may wish to buy a copy of this.

Recommended

Sharpe, M., Kałuza, M., & Francev, P. (2020). Introduction: Camus as Philosopher amongst Philosophers. In *Brill's Companion to Camus* (Vol. 5). BRILL.

Further

Sharpe, M., Kałuza, M., & Francev, P. (2020). Part 2 Themes. In *Brill's Companion to Camus* (Vol. 5). BRILL.