

# ABSURDITY & PARADOX

**“The Stranger” and Camus as the Anti-Existentialist**

# ALBERT CAMUS

Born in 1913 in French Algeria

Second child of Lucien Auguste Camus and Catherine Helene Camus

Father was a military veteran and wine-shipping clerk, mother was housekeeper and factory worker

Father died in 1914 from shrapnel wounds

Camus as a child was told a story about his father becoming violently ill after witnessing a public execution

Grew up in poverty





Very bright student, won a scholarship to attend secondary school where he learned English and Latin

In 1930 a bout of tuberculosis sent Camus away from school to live with his aunt and uncle who were butchers – his uncle was well educated, and an anarchist

Earned his Baccalauréat degree in 1932 and went to work as a journalist for *Sud*

1933–1937 Camus attended further college, married and divorced his first wife, Simone Hié, joined the Communist Party and started his career in theatre

1937 Camus was expelled from the Communist Party

1939 Camus tries to enlist but is rejected due to health

1940 Camus moves to Paris



France was invaded, and Camus' paper began publishing anti-Semitic content

1940 Camus married Francine Faure and returned to Algeria

1942 *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* were published and Camus fell ill again

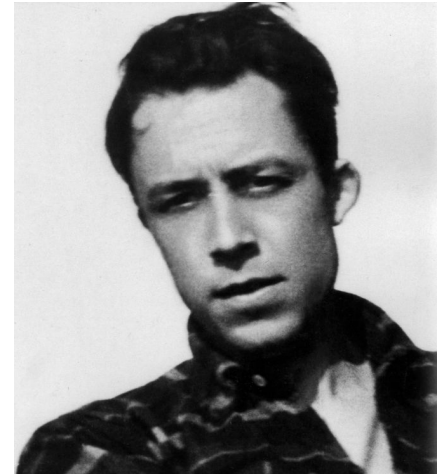
1943 Camus met Maria Casares, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir

Camus starts writing anti-Nazi articles for the clandestine Resistance newspaper *Combat*

1945 Robert Brasillach was executed and Camus cut all ties with the Communist Party

1951 *The Rebel* was published and Sartre and Camus split

1960 Camus died in a car accident



# A MAN OF PARADOX: CAMUS AS ANTI-EXISTENTIALIST

“I’m not a philosopher, because I don’t believe in reason enough, to believe in a system. What interests me is knowing how we must behave, and more precisely, how to behave when one does not believe in God or reason.

I’m not an existentialist, although of course critics are obliged to make categories. I got my first philosophical impressions from the Greeks, not from 19th century Germany, whose philosophy is the basis for today’s French Existentialism.

I’m not sure I’m an intellectual. And as for the rest, I support the left wing in spite of myself, and in spite of itself.”

Source: Olivier Todd, “Albert Camus: A Life”, trans. Benjamin Ivry (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), pages 408, 379, 408 respectively.

# THE PARADOX OF THE ABSURD

For Camus, the absurd is the tension between mankind's desire for meaning and a universe which is fundamentally unable to provide it

This differs from Sartre, for whom the absurd is a kind of contingency with no external justification

Camus criticized Sartre for regarding the absurd as “tragic” rather than as an opportunity to create value and meaning

“What, then, is that incalculable feeling that deprives the mind of the sleep necessary to life? A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.”



“Here Camus claims that the absurd arises out of the **“confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world”**. Human beings are naturally inclined to want and expect the world to be intelligible **“in the full and familiar ways that religious and philosophical systems have portrayed it”**. This kind of intelligibility purports to be comprehensive, to explain the world as a whole, and crucially, it purports to explain the world **“in terms that human beings care about”**, in ways that make sense **“with respect to human values”**. In Camus’s view, neither human existence nor the world are themselves absurd. Instead the absurd arises because the world is resistant to this kind of intelligibility: “we want the world to make sense, but it does not make sense. To see this conflict is to see the absurd” (Kamber 2002: 52). **“If there is an absurd,” Camus says at one point, “it is in man’s universe”** (MS: 38;E:124). What normally brings the individual into confrontation with his absurd condition, suggests Camus, is the awareness not of human mortality per se, but of his own personal mortality.

In the case of Camus himself, this awareness came with his first attack of tuberculosis, in 1930 or 1931, at the age of seventeen. For someone whose juvenile writing displayed a profound bond with the natural world, the sudden visceral awareness of his own mortality, the imperviousness of nature to the private traumas of humankind, the feeling of dying slowly from the inside the painfully asphyxiating experience of the pneumothorax treatments that denied him even the pantheistic prayer of uninhibited respiration, left clear fissures in the latent pantheism of his earliest, mainly lyrical, writing. **However, this is not to say that the absurd is born of an irrational response to the realization of human mortality. While feelings of the absurd may thus be awoken, awareness of the absurd, Camus insists, is specifically a rational, intellectual discovery, deduced from the recognition of the division between our expectations of the world and the world itself, unresponsive to those expectations** (MS: 26;E: 112). Camus finds the strongest evidence for this concept of the absurd in what seems the unimpeachably empirical domain of the physical sciences. He argues that science ultimately relies on poetry, metaphor or art to explain itself.”





“While Camus is convinced of the world’s unintelligibility in the sense described, he nevertheless believes that there are certain claims about which one can be reasonably confident: my existence as a conscious being and the existence of the world I can touch. “This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. This world I can touch and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge and the rest is construction” (MS25;E: 111). Camus insists that no other knowledge is available to him, that beyond these claims regarding his own existence and the existence of an external reality, all is invention and speculation, in logic and science as much as in psychology and philosophy. Despite this view, Camus’s absurd is not a prelude to nihilism, to a rejection of all value-claims, and he himself compares it (with a due sense of proportion) to Descartes’s systematic doubt, in so far as it is a sceptical deconstruction of ingrained assumptions about our knowledge of the world, designed to identify what grounds, if any, can be found on which to construct a positive ethics.”

# THE STRANGER



# MEURSAULT AS THE ABSURD HERO

“A long time ago, I summed up *The Stranger* in a sentence which I realize is extremely paradoxical: **In our society any man who doesn't cry at his mother's funeral is liable to be condemned to death.** I simply meant that the hero of the book is condemned because he doesn't play the game.”

Meursault is acutely aware of the absurdity of the situations he finds himself in, but refuses to say more than he feels - he is honest

The murder he commits was meaningless, but the courts refuse to accept this

Meursault has an instinctual (and understandable) fear of death, but understands rationally that it does not matter - and refuses to fall back on religion to comfort himself

He realizes in his darkest moments that he sees Marie's face in the stones on the wall, and not God's. He also tells the priest that the afterlife for him would have to look like this life - he affirms his existence, and has no regrets

# CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING...

Why did Camus never consider himself an existentialist or a philosopher? Do you think this is accurate? And if so, how is it that he became such a cornerstone of existential study?

Does Camus' conception of the absurd allow for an ethics not afforded to us by Sartre? Does his humanism fit with his philosophy of the absurd?

Camus tells us that Meursault was condemned because he was honest. Do you agree with that?