

Scratching an Itch
By
Daniel E. White May 26, 2025

Four and one-half years; that’s how long it has taken for me to write about *Albert Camus and the Three Antidotes to the Absurdity of Life*, a blog by Maria Popova in her The Marginalian. My main hurdle has been to grasp the meaning of absurdity. Popova’s commentary was the seed for over 50 months of on-and-off thinking about the word absurd.

Haven’t we all, People of a Certain Age, reacted to some comment or concept so alien to our thinking that our response has been “that’s absurd?” Used in this way, the word is intended to be dismissive, a short-handed way of saying that the matter is not worth further thought. So, to write about my reaction to Camus’ “absurdity of life” risked my being misunderstood as asserting that life is not worthy of further thought. Obviously, I think differently.

My familiarity with Camus prior to bookmarking the relevant reference on my desktop had been limited to reading his essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus* as a freshman in college. Looking back sixty years later, I realize, once again, that the meaning of the myth and Camus’ essay had been lost on a 17 year-old. I couldn’t fathom Camus’ assertion that he imagined Sisyphus happy, condemned as he was to push the rock to near the top of the mountain only to have it roll back down to the bottom, endlessly. In despair, yes, but happy? What was the deal?

I didn’t know that Camus’ thinking helped to sustain a school of philosophy called Absurdism which was, by no means, a discipline of despair. Rather, the *Get Pocket* article notes Camus’ intent in writing about absurdity: “Accepting the absurdity of everything around us in one step, a necessary experience: it should not be a dead end.” He was writing just after the end of World War Two, a brutal war considered by some to have been completely avoidable.

Camus contended that expecting there to be meaning to life, a predictable logic to what happens when and why, was fruitless. Individuals supply meaning, according to one’s experience and beliefs. Otherwise, how could one make sense of such things as good people, who are making a positive impact on the world, dying young and people whose lives are remarkable for their destructiveness and despicable treatment of others persisting? What about the randomness of natural disaster or some folks being born into plenty and many more into poverty?

To seek meaning in such randomness was pointless, its pursuit absurd.

Perhaps it was reflecting on birds that helped me past my four and one-half years of a form of writer’s block.

Camus was hardly the first writer to have wrestled with the meaning of life. In *East of Eden*, John Steinbeck wrote:

“A child may ask, ‘What is the world’s story about?’ And a grown man or woman may wonder, ‘What way will the world go? How does it end and, while we’re at it, what’s the story about?’ ...I believe that there is one story in the world, and only one, that has frightened and inspired us, so that we live in a Pearl White serial of continuing thought and wonder. Humans are caught — in their lives, in their thoughts, in their hungers and ambitions, in their avarice and cruelty, and in

their kindness and generosity too — in a net of good and evil. I think this is the only story we have and that it occurs on all levels of feeling and intelligence. Virtue and vice were warp and woof of our first consciousness, and they will be the fabric of our last, and this despite any changes we may impose on field and river and mountain, on economy and manners. There is no other story. A man, after he has brushed off the dust and chips of his life, will have left only the hard, clean questions: Was it good or was it evil? Have I done well — or ill?”

Writing about Steinbeck, Susan Shillinglaw said about his philosophy: “At the most fundamental level, the triumph of good over evil presupposes an openhearted curiosity about what is other than ourselves and a certain willingness for understanding — the moral choice of fathoming and honoring the reality, experience, and needs of persons and entities existing beyond our own consciousness.”

In Portugal, Judy and I watched several pairs of European Bee Eaters, flashing their remarkable colors at us each time they caught the sunlight, flying circles around their nesting areas, alternately catching food and checking on their nests. They did not think about the meaning of life, but their lives had a purpose; to continue the line of European Bee Eaters. They were completely attuned to their role in nature.

Presumably the role of humankind is more than just to continue the line. Camus supplied his answer to the challenge of absurdity: “In a world whose absurdity appears to be so impenetrable, we simply must reach a greater degree of understanding among men, a greater sincerity. We must achieve this or perish. To do so, certain conditions must be fulfilled: men must be frank (falsehood confuses things), free (communication is impossible with slaves). Finally, they must feel a certain justice around them.”

In another context, his answer was reduced to “Love is what provides the antidote to absurdity.” Perhaps, in the end, that is our role in nature, to love.

So simple: greater sincerity, justice, love--all help to shape meaning. Aren’t those parts of the “rock” you and I push up the mountain only to see it roll back to the bottom? But, in that endless work, happiness awaits.

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