

Camus – Absurdity and Suicide

Primary Sources:

Camus, “Absurdity and Suicide” and “Absurd Walls” in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, pp. 3-28

Background:

From the *Routledge Online Encyclopedia*:

Albert Camus was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1957 for having “illuminated the problems of the human conscience in our times”. By mythologizing the experiences of a secular age struggling with an increasingly contested religious tradition, he dramatized the human effort to “live and create without the aid of eternal values which, temporarily perhaps, are absent or distorted in contemporary Europe”. Thus the challenge posed by “the absurd” with which he is so universally identified.

Camus’ most celebrated work is *L’Étranger* (*The Stranger*). Depicting the “metaphysical” awakening of an ordinary Algerian worker, Camus concretizes the Pindarian injunction, provided as life’s answer to “the absurd” in an epigram to *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (*The Myth of Sisyphus*): “Oh my soul do not aspire to immortal heights but exhaust the field of the possible.” (Pindar, *Pythian* iii)

But if the “absurd” defines our world, it was never treated by Camus as a conclusion, only “a point of departure”: “What else have I done except reason about an idea I discovered in the streets of my time? That I have nourished this idea (and a part of me nourishes it still) along with my whole generation goes without saying. I simply set it far enough away so that I could deal with it and decide on its logic.” How and what morality is still possible, then, in view of the experience of “the death of God” which has given birth to the experience of absurdity? While the absurd leaves humans without justification and direction, rebellion bears witness to the refusal of human beings to accept this incipient despair.

In “Absurdity and Suicide” Camus is clear on the problem he is addressing: the meaning or meaninglessness of life. Therefore he begins with a look at suicide. In “Absurd Walls” Camus explains how traditional philosophies ultimately fail to comprehend the world’s intrinsic “absurdity”. This gives Camus the opening he needs in order to develop his “philosophy of the absurd”.

Questions:

- Why is suicide the only truly serious philosophical problem?
- What is the absurd and how do we encounter it?
- Why do the sciences fail to address the absurd? How does it end in poetry?