

# The Absurdity of the World - and the Meaning of Life. Albert Camus

Camus's revolt against injustice.

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*In the seventies and eighties of the last century, in a time of material prosperity and diverse future prospects, the author avidly read the works of the Nobel Prize winner for literature, Albert Camus, but did not really grasp or feel their historical, philosophical and psychological depth.*

A quarter of a century later, after a “life lived” and in the midst of dark times (Brecht), he wants to encourage people to reread Camus’ dramas, novels and philosophical essays: On the one hand, they offer orientation and support in the individual coping with the absurd world; on the other hand – and this is just as important as one’s own “survival” – they signify training in the spirit of revolt, that attitude of mind that wants to realise justice already on this earth, and not only in heaven. It is painful to experience that fellow human beings can only be won over to this with great difficulty.

Despite all the absurdity of the course of the world and the demonic nature of human history, Camus’ gloomy descriptions are outshone by a great love for the world and for fellow human beings. Thus his last message (handed down in writing) is: “Give if you can. And not hate, if that is possible.” (1)

## The absurdity of the world – and the meaning of life

The problem of human existence is the basic motif of existentialist philosophising. According to Camus, the decisive question that every human being must ask is the question of the meaning of life. First, however, people must know whether they can unreservedly affirm this

existence. Only then can they decide how they want to shape their lives.

As a rule, most people want to avoid this important problem, but excuses are useless: one must say yes or no. If it were no longer worthwhile to exist because everything has been recognised as absurd, there seems to be no other solution than suicide. Suicide is preceded by despair: the conviction that there is no way out, no confidence. The resolution that matures in the silence of a despairing soul is the most absurd of all resolutions and therefore the most difficult to grasp.

One should not believe that the problem of suicide belongs only to “pathology”, to the study of abnormal and pathological processes and conditions in the body and their causes. Even “normal” people know – especially in dark times – life situations in which the desire arises in the human heart to throw away the toil and agony of this existence. Thus, in the first Corona year 2020, suicides among young people also increased sharply (2).

According to Camus, however, the suicide is a philosopher whose attitude of cognition ends in failure. The suicide cannot stand the absurdity of the world that he grasps and escapes from it. Only a few are able to withstand the insight into the absurdity of the world; escape from it is the rule, both in everyday life and in philosophy, religion and science. The religious person excludes the absurdity of the world by hoping that a divine authority will guarantee a higher meaning.

## The myth of Sisyphus – a happy man



Suicide – factually or in a philosophical sense – is not the only possible attitude of man towards the absurd. If life really has no meaning any more, this does not mean that one is compelled to kill oneself. The flight into earthly or supernatural hopes can also be avoided. The realisation of the absurd contains within itself the call to become master of absurdity.

In the saga “The Myth of Sisyphus”, Camus describes a man who has recognised absurdity and smilingly tries to assert himself in an illusionless universe. Like all ghosts, the spectre of absurdity escapes if one only has the courage to confront it. This is only possible if people do not flee to their gods, but get used to seeing an indifferent sky above them, and a sun that looks down unconcerned on both its joys and its sorrows. Renouncing the gods teaches men to take up the lifelong struggle against absurdity. And this with the intention of imposing a measure of meaning on this senseless world after all.

The legend says that the gods condemned Sisyphus to roll a stone up a hill in the underworld, and to do so for all eternity, since the stone rolls down the slope every time the summit is reached. In a word, Sisyphus, the hero of the absurd, is doomed to eternal torment. His efforts have no meaning, for he knows that the stone will roll over and over again. The incessant toil leads to no success, and escape into hope is denied Sisyphus. Nevertheless, he rolls his stone.

One can only understand Sisyphus by looking at him on the way down to his stone. The descent is the time of consciousness. Sisyphus surveys the useless effort he has wasted himself on, and he thinks of the futile effort that awaits him again. Yet he is far from giving up the struggle. He realises that fate depends on man and that life has meaning only when one rolls the stones.

The painful torment, which lasts as long as human life itself, incorporates Sisyphus into his existence without his being willing to seek consolation. He confesses to earth and denies heaven. He makes his way through the land of hopelessness without asking how far he has come towards his goal.

Sisyphus deserves credit for being willing to carry his burden to death. He also does not complain because he knows that complaining does not move the stones. In his joyful heart, which does not submit to any god, no resentment grows against this world in which the adventure of a human life takes place. Since there is only this one world, it would be perverse not to affirm it, even when it holds for man only the stones to be rolled. The rebellion and endless struggle of Sisyphus contain no bitterness. Camus says, "One must think of Sisyphus as a happy man."

Sisyphus is not just a hero of legend – he is a reality of everyday life, becoming visible in as many variations as the absurdity of the world. In his novel "The Plague", Camus transferred the drama of Sisyphus to the present. Both the characters and the scenery of this play point beyond themselves. The actual setting of the drama is not the city of Oran, but the world – and in various characters whom Camus describes in their lives, loves and deaths, one glimpses the living, loving and dying human being who basically outlasts the course of time.

### "Le premier homme": Writing for the Mother and the Motherland Algeria

The autobiographical text "Le premier homme", which Albert Camus worked on after being awarded the Nobel Prize in 1957 until his accidental death in 1960, begins with a dedication to his mother, the widow Camus: "*To you, who will never be able to read this book*". (3)

In the novel "The First Man", Camus describes in the third person and under a fictitious name the childhood of a poor Algerian Frenchman in the colonial city of Algiers and how his illiterate grandmother and illiterate mother got the family through, their father having been killed in the First World War. He writes of the sufferings and joys of a poor childhood under the Algerian sun and the formative role that the responsible elementary school teacher Louis Germain played in the life of the gifted child.

Camus tells of the hard-working, taciturn, hard-of-hearing and slightly speech-impaired mother, whose silent and enigmatic existence was the boy's whole love. As an adult and successful writer, he spoke and wrote for her to make up for her silence. The lore states:

"What he longed for most in the world, that his mother would read what was his life and his very own, was precisely impossible. His love, his only love would remain eternally mute." (4)

But Camus wrote not only for his mother, but also for his motherland, Algeria. The award of the Nobel Prize and his death coincide with the years in which a war of independence was being waged against France in the French colony of Algeria, the country in which Camus was born and grew up, which official France refused to recognise for a long time as an act of war by the colonised people.

Therefore, Camus wrote in his own language and passion against the injustice:

"Give back the land. Give all the land to the poor, to those who have nothing and who are so poor that they have not even wished to have and to possess anything, to those

who resemble her (the mother), to the countless multitude of the poor, most of them Arabs, some of them French, to those who live here with tenacity and perseverance, or rather survive, with the only honour worth anything in the world, the honour of the poor.”(5)

## Letter to the elementary school teacher Louis Germain after the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature

In the editorial note at the beginning of the novel “The First Man”, the editor, Camus’ daughter Catherine Camus, writes:

“‘The First Man’ is the work on which Albert Camus worked until his death. The manuscript was found in his portfolio in the fatal car accident on 4 January 1960. It consists of 144 pages written down by hand in a hurried, difficult to decipher script, some without full stops and commas, which were never revised.

(...).

After reading ‘The First Man’, one will understand why we also print in the appendix the letter Albert Camus sent to his elementary school teacher Louis Germain after he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, and his last letter to him.” (6)

Camus himself characterises his first teacher in his autobiographical novel as follows:

“In Monsieur Germain’s class they felt for the first time that they existed and were the object of the highest respect: They were considered worthy of discovering the world. And their teacher even took it upon himself not only to teach them what he was paid to teach, he even opened up his private life to them, he lived it with them, told them his childhood and the story of children he had known, presented his views to them and not his ideas, for example, he was anti-clerical like many of his colleagues and yet in class he never said a single word against religion or against anything that concerned a choice or conviction, but he condemned all the more vehemently what was out of the question, namely theft, denunciation, tactlessness, indecency. Above all, he told them of the war that was still very near, which he had been through for four years, of the soldiers’ sufferings, of their bravery, their patience, and of the happiness of the armistice.” (7)

Camus’ letter to this teacher and his reply have been ducked in the appendix of the novel (8):

“19 November 1957

Dear Monsieur Germain,

I have allowed the noise that has been around me these days to subside somewhat before addressing you most sincerely. I have been paid far too great an honour which I neither sought nor asked for. But when I received the news, my first thought, after my mother, was of you. Without you, without your loving hand extended to the poor little child that I was, without your instruction and example, none of this would have happened. I don’t make much fuss about this kind of tribute. But this is at least an opportunity to tell you what you were and still are to me, and to assure you that your efforts, the work and the generosity you put in are always alive in one of your little pupils who, despite his age, has not ceased to be your grateful disciple. I embrace you

with all my heart.

Albert Camus”

Elementary school teacher Louis Germain replied to Camus on 30 April 1939:

“My dear little one,

(...). I cannot find an expression for the joy you gave me with your charming gesture and the way you thanked me. If it were possible, I would hug tightly the big boy you have become and who will always be ‘my little Camus’ for me. (...). The teacher who wants to do his job conscientiously never misses an opportunity to get to know his pupils, his children, and it is constantly offered. A response, a gesture, an attitude are extremely revealing. So I think I know well the nice little fellow you were, and the child often contains in its germ the man it will become. Your joy at school was evident everywhere. Your face betrayed optimism. (...).

I believe that during all my professional years I respected the most sacred thing in the child: the right to seek his truth. I have loved you all and I believe I have done my utmost not to express my ideas and thus burden your young intelligence. When talking about God, (he is on the syllabus), I said that some believed in him, others did not, and that everyone, in full possession of his rights, did what he wanted. Likewise, on the subject of religions, I limited myself to stating the ones that existed and belonged to whoever pleased. To be honest, I added that there were people who did not practise any religion. I know this displeases those who want to turn teachers into sales agents for religion and, to be more precise, for Catholic religion. (...).

Sincerely, Germain Louis”

The last message from Albert Camus: “Give when you can. And not hate, if that is possible.”

In Lou Marin’s (ed.) publication “Albert Camus - Libertarian Writings (1948-1960)”, “The Last Message of Albert Camus” is published under “Section V. Epilogue”. In the editorial preface of the libertarian journal “Reconstruir” (Reconstruction) (B.P. 320, Buenos Aires) it says: “We translate here from the Spanish the questions that ‘Reconstruir’ had asked, as well as the written lines of our great friend, whose mother, as is known, was herself Spanish. That this message, which by virtue of the event has testamentary value, may inspire the coming generation, of which Camus remains the best spiritual voice.” (9)

The final question to Camus was:

“Reconstruir: how do you see the future of humanity? What would one have to do to arrive at a world less oppressed by necessity and freer?

Albert Camus: Give, if one can. And not hate, if that is possible.” (10)

An unauthorised version, available to the author, adds:

“Recover as much strength as possible, not to dominate but to give.

Not to complain. Do not emphasise what you are or what you do.

When one gives, remember that one has received.”

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#### Notes

(1) Marin, Lou (ed.). (2013). Albert Camus – Libertarian Writings (1948-1980). Hamburg, S. 363

(2)

[https://www.unzensuriert.at/content/153791-noch-nie-so-viele-jugendliche-wegen-psychischer-erkrankungen-im-spital/?utm\\_source=Unzensuriert-Infobrief&utm\\_medium=E-Mail&utm\\_campaign=Infobrief&pk\\_campaign=Unzensuriert-Infobrief](https://www.unzensuriert.at/content/153791-noch-nie-so-viele-jugendliche-wegen-psychischer-erkrankungen-im-spital/?utm_source=Unzensuriert-Infobrief&utm_medium=E-Mail&utm_campaign=Infobrief&pk_campaign=Unzensuriert-Infobrief)

(3) Camus, Albert (1995). The first man. Reinbek near Hamburg, p. 11

(4) Bouchentouf-Siagh, Zohra / Kampits, Peter (2001). On the topicality of Albert Camus. Vienna, p. 17

(5) op. cit., p. 17 f.

(6) Camus, Albert (1995). The first man. Reinbek bei Hamburg, p.7 f.

(7) op. cit., p. 168

(8) op. cit., p. 376 ff.

(9) Marin, Lou (ed.). (2013). Albert Camus – Libertarian Writings (1948-1980). Hamburg, p. 363

(10) op. cit., p. 364

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