



Albert Camus (1913-1960)

Albert Camus was a French-Algerian philosopher, author and journalist. He is generally considered an “existentialist”, though he rejected that description. Unlike other “existentialists” like Heidegger and Sartre, he showed little interest in metaphysics or speculative philosophy and remained concerned with the down-to-earth human condition. He is most famous for two ideas, the Absurd and Revolt. He defended an anarchist view that favors revolutionary industrial unions as a means for workers in a capitalist society to achieve control of the economy. He authored many novels, including *The Stranger*, *The Plague*, and *The Fall*, two philosophical books, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*, and numerous short stories, essays and plays. He aspired to negotiate a rapprochement between the native Muslim population and the French minority in Algeria but without success. He was a leftist political activist who came to oppose Soviet Union totalitarianism and reject Marxism-Leninism – which led to his break with his former friend and compatriot Jean-Paul Sartre and with the *Algerian National Liberation Front*. He was awarded the *Nobel Prize* for Literature in 1957 at the age of 44, three years before his death. He is the second youngest recipient in the prize’s history.

Biography

Camus was born in Mondovi, Algeria, a small village near the seaport city of *Boné* in northeast French Algeria, to French parents. Soon after the beginning of World War II, when he was less than a year old, his father, a military veteran and shipping clerk, died of shrapnel wounds at the battle of the Marne. Although Camus never knew his father, he had been told that his father had once become violently ill after watching a public execution, a fact that strongly influenced him. After his father’s death, the family moved to Algiers where they lived in a cramped second-floor apartment, with no bathroom, electricity, or running water, with his maternal uncle and grandmother, in the working-class district of Belcourt. Since Camus’ mother was illiterate, had a speech pathology, and was partially deaf, they suffered harsh poverty, which also left a strong impression on him. He attended elementary school at the local *Ecole Communale*, where several teachers nurtured his literary interests. He was awarded a scholarship to attend high school at the *Grand Lycee* in the Kasbah district of Algiers, which brought him into close contact with the native Muslim community. At this time, he became fascinated with Gide, Proust, Verlaine and Bergson, learned Latin and English, and acquired a lifelong interest in literature, the arts, theatre and film. He was also an avid sportsman and pursued boxing and soccer. During this period, he also had his first serious bout of tuberculosis, a disease that was to plague him, on and off, throughout his life. He enrolled at the *University of Algiers* in 1930, studied philosophy, psychology, and sociology, and completed his *Baccalauréat* degree in June of 1932. During the

next four years he worked at various jobs, married his first wife, Simone Hié, got divorced, joined the *Communist Party*, and began his literary and theatrical career. In 1936, he became a co-founder, with a group of other young intellectuals, of the *Théâtre du Travail* (Labor Theater), a professional acting group emphasizing drama with leftist political themes. In the same year, he was awarded his graduate degree in philosophy for his thesis on the influence of Plotinus and Neo-Platonism on the thought of St. Augustine. He became disillusioned with the communist party and was eventually expelled from it. He then reorganized his theatre company with a new emphasis on classic drama and avant-garde aesthetics and renamed it *Théâtre de l'Equipe* (*Theater of the Team*). Over the next few years, he worked as a journalist on the *Alger Républicain* and published his first literary works. In late 1940, without steady employment, he returned to France, married his second wife, mathematician and pianist, Francine Faure. Camus and his new wife soon left France for Algeria, where he taught part-time in primary school while completing his first novel, *The Stranger* (*L'Étranger*, also translated as *The Outsider*). The novel, published in 1942, propelled him international literary fame. He returned to France in 1942 and worked for *Combat*, the newspaper of the French Resistance movement. Despite recurrent bouts of tuberculosis, he published *The Myth of Sisyphus*, his philosophical treatment of suicide and the absurd, and joined *Gallimard Publishing* as an editor. After the liberation of France, he continued as editor of *Combat*, oversaw the production of several plays, and joined the Parisian intellectual society that included Sartre, Simon de Beauvoir and others. In 1947 he published *The Plague*, a fictional allegorical novel about the duty of revolt against the Nazi occupation. He also did lecture tours in the United States and South America. In 1951, he published *The Rebel*, a novel about the nature of freedom and the necessity of rebellion against tyranny. His rejection of Marxism-Leninism and revolutionary violence as a legitimate means of human liberation led to a break with Sartre and to his being branded as a reactionary by many European communists. In other quarters, he was viewed as a passionate champion of individual freedom and a critic of tyranny and terrorism from both the Left and the Right. On January 4, 1960, he died tragically in a car crash in France. His friend and publisher Michel Gallimard, the driver, also died. Upon hearing of his death, his former political rival, Sartre wrote a moving eulogy in the *France-Observateur*, praising Camus both for his contributions to French literature and especially for his heroic moral courage and the “stubborn humanism” with which he confronted the “massive and deformed events of the day.” There have been controversial claims that Camus was murdered by the KGB for his strong criticism of the Soviet Union.¹

The Absurd

Camus' philosophy of The Absurd may be caricatured as the trite observation that human life is paradoxical, depressing, confusing and frustrating, but is more accurately characterized as a description of the inherent feature of the *human condition*, specifically, that although human beings inherently demand rationality, purpose and transcendence they find themselves confronted by the blank, indifferent “silence of [a] universe” that does not make sense: “The absurd is not in man nor in the world but in their presence together...it is the only bond uniting them.”² Camus' view that existence is “absurd” is a reaction to the recognition that the

longstanding view, from the Ancients to the Renaissance, that the world is inherently rational and purposeful has collapsed.

Revolt

Camus held that there are only three possible reactions to the absurdity of the universe, physical suicide, religion, and revolt. He rejected physical suicide as cowardly. He also rejects the religious solution, faith in a transcendent world that restores meaning to human life, as tantamount to philosophical suicide. The third choice, in Camus's view the only authentic one, is Revolt, that is, to *embrace* absurdity and to continue living unflinchingly in spite of it. Camus' model of revolt is the mythical Sisyphus who, chained for eternity to his rock, fully conscious that his task is hopeless, heroically continues to push the rock up back the hill knowing it will for all eternity roll back down. The meaningless indifference of the universe makes a new kind of heroic life of defiant freedom possible. The absence of meaning in the universe is not a curse. It is an opportunity. Life can be lived all the better if it has no meaning.

The Nobel Prize

When, in 1957, Camus learned that he had been awarded the *Nobel Prize*, he reacted with mixed feelings of amazement, humility, and gratitude. At his acceptance speech in Stockholm, he admitted that he is still full of doubts and generously remarked that his friend, novelist Andre Malraux, was more deserving. His bewildered words at the time, focused on others rather than himself, reveal the tenor of the man: “[W]ith what feelings could [a man like myself] accept this honor at a time when other writers in Europe, among them the very greatest, are condemned to silence, and even at a time when the country of his birth is going through unending misery?”³

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2020

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¹ Kim Willsher, "Albert Camus might have been killed by the KGB for criticizing the Soviet Union, claims newspaper". *The Guardian* (Aug, 7, 2011) URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/aug/07/albert-camus-killed-by-kgb>

² Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 23

³ Albert Camus Banquet Speech. *The Nobel Prize*. URL: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1957/camus/speech/>

Author Citation Information

How to quote this article:

McDonough, Richard, "Camus", *ODIP: The Online Dictionary of Intercultural Philosophy* (2020), Thorsten Botz-Bornstein (ed.), URL = <www.ODIPhilosophy.com/camus>.