

## Albert Camus: Philosopher of the Absurd<sup>1</sup>

*NOTE from Sophie Editor: Life is absurd, but that does not necessarily render it meaningless to find your way in it or to engage in struggle with evil. That was the conviction of the French author and philosopher Albert Camus (1913-1960), who was born a century ago. He was an emotional social theorist who met his death in a tragic (absurd) manner.*

Albert Camus was born on November 7, 1913, in French Algeria. His father was killed in action in the trenches of World War I, when Albert was only one year old. Albert studied philosophy in Algeria and began working as a journalist. He left for France in protest against, as he saw it, lack of free and critical journalism. He worked at *Paris Soir*. After the German invasion, he became active in the resistance. As Editor-in-Chief, he was largely responsible for the illegal paper *Le Combat*.

In Paris he came to know Jean-Paul Sartre. They found each other in the practice of critical, engaged journalism. After the war they became the spokesmen of liberated France and verbalized as journalists their left ideas in their own papers. In 1952 a public break between the two took place. Camus loathed Sartre's flirtation with Communism and regarded all totalitarian regimes with horror.

### **Many-sided Body of Work**

Camus has created a wide range of publications comprising novels, stories and philosophical essays. In 1947, he created a kind of writing plan in his journals that would have three parts. Because of his early death he unfortunately reached only the beginning of the third series. The plan is organized round a Greek myth: 1. *Sisyphus* = The absurd (*L'Etranger* – *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* – *Caligula* – *Le Malentendu*); 2. Prometheus = De

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<sup>1</sup>"Albert Camus, Filosoof van het absurd." Transl. Jan H. Boer. *Sophie*, 3/2013, pp. 22-25.

opstand (*La Peste*, *L'Homme Revolte*, Kaliayev [became *Les Justes*]); 3. Nemesis = The Keeping of time-in music-(already in "*Homme Revolte*, but especially in *L'Exil d'Helene* in *L'Ete*).

Camus is especially famous as the philosopher of the absurd. By absurd he meant a life without a higher meaning, without God or an absolute system of meaning. There is neither hope for or comfort from an afterlife. The only life we have is the one facing death. Therefore our knowledge is also restricted: humans can never penetrate through to the kernel of things. Our longing for unity and absolute knowledge never gets fulfilled.

If life has no meaning, suicide is the only solution. For Camus, suicide is the only philosophical question. There is only one truly serious philosophical problem, he writes in his famous and influential *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942): suicide. The question whether life is worth the trouble is to answer the fundamental question of philosophy.

But Camus rejects this option and wants to hold on to the confrontation with the absurdity of life. Christendom is no option for him either. Anyone believing in a hereafter, revokes the earth. However, it is possible for a human to decide to accept this absurd world, to extract strength from it, to refuse to hope and to stubbornly witness to a life without consolation. In his *The Myth of Sisyphus* he explains human destiny: As Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to continually push a rock up to the top of a mountain, from which it would roll down again on its own, so is the fate of humans. The struggle *an sich* to reach the top is sufficient to fill the human heart. We must consider Sisyphus a fortunate person.

## **Revolt**

Camus' most famous novel, *The Pest*, is all about not accepting the situation but to ascribe meaning as well as possible to a life without meaning and order. In this book, a believing priest, Paneloux, works side by side with an unbelieving medical doctor named Rieux against the pest in the Algerian city Oran. It is an attempt to challenge the absurd, so that the human himself becomes an object of admiration in the struggle against evil. But even then suffering has no higher meaning in the sense of purification.

It is to accept things as they simply are, inevitably and, by definition, senseless, even though resistance is not without meaning.

Camus developed himself into a socially engaged thinker who could not acquiesce in the evil and misery of the world. That is the theme of his book *Man in Revolt* (1951), in which the revolt against God and earthly powers that seek to deprive humans from their freedom is central. He deeply examines various revolutions and their cultural-historical backgrounds through the centuries and asks how it can be that total freedom always ends up in massive slaughters.

Camus pits revolt against revolution. Revolution is based on the belief that history has meaning and develops towards some sort of ideal society. All totalitarian regimes promote the myth that society is on its way to the promised land. Just like the Christian faith, according to Camus, this vision creates a life-threatening fanaticism, a disdain of the present in which we live. Totalitarian regimes destroy millions of people with the argument that the end justifies the means. Camus asks, if the end justifies the means, who justifies the end? Doing one's best is the human value for which he steps into the breach, but he mistrusts and rejects long justifying tales. The time for ideology is past, he declared already way back in 1957, long before the beginning of postmodernism.

As already said, Camus pits revolution against revolt, the resistance of humans over against their *condition humaine*, against the meaninglessness of sickness, misery, war and death; in short, against all that obstructs happiness and peace in life. Camus sees humans as created for happiness and for harmony with nature and neighbor. Many scenes of sun, sea and carefree friendship witness to that, "the thinking of the South," as he learned that in Algeria.

Over against that there is "the thinking of the North, on the surface, dark and full of mystery. His little book *The Fall* (1956), an allusion to the Biblical fall into sin, takes place in dark and disconsolate Amsterdam, where he spent a total of two days, his only visit ever to The Netherlands. He pictures

this city as representing the decor of hell as in Dante. A judge interrogates his guest in a manner that recalls memories of the last judgement.

### **Internally Estranged**

Camus belongs to the interpreters of the modern post-war cultural climate. He has also experienced the pain of contemporary inner emptiness, as he verbalized in his novel *The Stranger* (1942), that received a second printing this year, 2013 (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij). The main character, Meursault, experiences nothing at critical moments. He sheds no tears at the death of his mother whose funeral he attends; has sex without any passion; and on the beach without any emotion he shoots an Arab who threatens him with a knife. It costs him his life, but he has no regrets for anything ever. He is the example of someone who disregards all and every social convention.

This book made a great impression on the post-war generation; it sold seven million copies. It represents the modern person who lets out a scream into the empty universe and hears only the echo, after which all is silent.

Meursault's life has no meaning. It is not focused on any goal; it just unfolds itself blindly, automatically. It is the image of the modern person surfing his way through life, who lives in a world of relativity without anything absolute. He sees the absurdity of a dying world, of which he no longer is a part but, rather, an outsider and stranger. This way life becomes more livable, because it has no meaning. No one should any longer look for the absolute. With Meursault, the prototype of the modern human, such questions don't even arise anymore.

### **Literature**

Camus became influential through his novels and stories. We think only in images. If you want to be a philosopher, according to him, you must write novels. That connects him with Sartre, who became more influential with his novels and plays than with his frequently obscure philosophical works.

Camus' emotional involvement in the world's suffering and his continual struggle with Christian themes led some to hope he would become Christian. That did not happen.

Camus regarded himself as a stranger searching in vain for contact with life, and throughout his life wrestled with tuberculosis of his lungs. Recognition of his life's work came in 1957, when he received the Nobel Prize for Literature. On January 4, 1960, he was killed in a car accident during a journey from his house in Provence (Mourmoulin) to Paris. In his baggage a train ticket was found that he did not use, since he rode with his publisher Gallimard. His sudden death has sometimes been regarded as proof of his absurd philosophy of life.

### **Separated from God?**

Camus was an atheist, but not because he could not believe in God. He did not want to, for he considered it dishonest, as ethicist Frits de Lange once correctly observed. He knew Christianity only as a form of escape, a flight from the human condition. If you want to live an honest life, you must be willing to live without illusions.

The word "atheist" had no meaning for Camus. I don't believe in God, he once remarked, but neither am I an atheist. Throughout his life he was interested in the relationship between Christian and Greek thought, which he considered irreconcilable. His dissertation dealt with a comparison between Plotinus (Greek thought) and Augustine (Christian thought): Neo-Platonism and Christian metaphysics. In Christian thought, the meaning of life and human fate are determined by one unfathomable God. The Greeks were basically concerned with the question whether mankind dares to flout or defy his fate.

In his *The Myth of Sisyphus* he writes that with respect to God the problem is not so much that of freedom, as it was with Sartre, but, rather, the problem of evil. We know the alternative, he wrote: Either we are not free and the omnipotent God is responsible for evil, or we are free and responsible, but God is not omnipotent. All scholastic hairsplitting has neither added to nor undone the sharpness of this paradox.

For Camus the issue was to be willing to live in the face of the absurd. The absurd arises out of the confrontation of the searching human who asks questions and the world that is irrationally silent. We may lack both ground and goal, but the human still tastes happiness and experiences goodness and beauty, especially in the small things. Camus mistrusts the dream, the illusion, the religion, and the flight to an advanced and better life. Perhaps human life is more livable to the extent it is less meaningful. That is to say, that it is not betrayed by an ideal that may perhaps elevate life but does not remain faithful to it.

That life is absurd and contradictory means neither that we must capitulate nor that we grant it an explanation or meaning, for then we are once again caught in an ideology, a system or an abstraction. Camus describes mankind with its hope and suffering in a world hard as a rock without any point of contact with other-worldly happiness. He reproaches Christians that their individualistic hope makes them failures in social ethics and engagement. In a presentation to a group of Dominicans he once said, "I share your revulsion of evil, but I do not share your hope and will continue to wrestle against a world in which children suffer and die."

During my high school years in the early 1970s, the works of Sartre and Camus were devoured.... They capitalized on the cultural atmosphere of the 1960s and 70s, the climax of existentialism, the glorification of freedom and revolt against civic authority. That's the time Camus was in his glory.

Is life absurd? Tertullian (155-240 AD), a Church Father, coined the famous expression "*Credo quia absurdum est*" or "I believe because it is absurd." The redemption in Jesus Christ as revealed in Christianity is, after all, contrary to human reason. Camus once said, "The absurd human is the opposite of the reconciled human." Whoever is not reconciled, actually lives in the same empty absurd universe as did Camus. He is then like Sisyphus, who climbed in vain with his rock to the mountaintop and then tumbles down with it.

The Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, also typified faith in terms of the absurd. Not that for him the truth of Christianity as such is irrational or

meaningless, but it is that when it comes to reason. He frequently referred to the faith as the “happy” meeting with Christ as the Absolute Paradox, so called because of the fact that He was both God and human. Over against the absurd, reason fails, but not the faith. According to me, Tertullian had it right: “I believe because it is absurd.”