

Camus on Absurdism

Many people believe that the most fundamental philosophical problem is this: what is the meaning of existence? That's a question that Albert Camus dug into in his novels, plays, and essays. His answer was perhaps a little depressing. He thought that life had no meaning, that nothing exists that could ever be a source of meaning, and hence there is something deeply absurd about the human quest to find meaning. Appropriately, then, his philosophical view was called (existentialist) absurdism.

But why did he think life was inherently without meaning? Don't people find meaning in many different ways? Take religion. It certainly seems to provide *comfort* to many people, but this could not amount to genuine meaning for Camus because it involves an illusion. Either God exists or he doesn't. If he doesn't, then it's obvious why he could not be the source of life's ultimate meaning. But what if God does exist? Given all the pain and suffering in the world, the only rational conclusion about God is that he's either an imbecile or a psychopath. So, God's existence could only make life more absurd, not less.

The solution Camus arrives at is that the absurd hero openly embraces the absurdity of his condition. Sisyphus, condemned for all eternity to push a boulder up a mountain only to have it roll to the bottom again and again, fully recognizes the futility and pointlessness of his task. But he willingly pushes the boulder up the mountain every time it rolls down.