

Publisher vs. Author: A Conversation about Absurdity

By Ross Hamilton

Setting: A small café in the heart of Paris in 1942. It is a crisp spring afternoon, and the last traces of snow have just melted away. The surrounding streets are full of bustling Parisians running their daily lives, completing task after task in a monotonous fashion.

*M. Guy de Champlain is sitting at a two-person table next to the window. The publisher of French-Algerian writer and philosopher, Albert Camus, is reading Camus' newest paper, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Champlain glances outside where he sees a smartly dressed woman in a navy suit and straw hat crossing the street, her string of pearls glinting brightly in the sun. A blonde German officer walks past the window with a lofty gait, the only evidence he sees of the Nazi occupation that exists in Paris. Yet, seeing children run excitedly down the street and a group of assorted people chatting in an animated manner on the café's sunlit terrace, their salads providing bright splashes of color on the tabletops, provide Champlain with a reminder that life goes on.*

(Camus enters the café and sits down at Champlain's table.)

Camus: Bonjour M. Guy de Champlain. How have you been, my dear friend?

Champlain: Ah mon ami! Albert, comment ça va? I have been well and have just finished reading your latest work. Please sit down and have a drink with me? Waitress! Please bring us two cafés au lait and some of your finest baguettes. So, Albert, what have you been up to?

Camus: I have just returned from a trip to Morocco and Algeria. I've also just completed my latest novel called *L'Etranger* concerning a Frenchman who commits a murder in Algeria. I think you will enjoy it.

Champlain: Sounds intriguing – yes, I must read it. Too bad I couldn't publish your novels as well as your essays – maybe one day, my friend? Now to the point. I wish to discuss your philosophical essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. I do not quite understand the term you describe as “the absurd”. Due to the fact that this industry is about making money while also entertaining and enlightening the reader, I think it is necessary to be aware of your ideologies before I can convince my executives to publish this work. Now don't get me wrong; this is an excellent novel, but the discussion about the meaning of life and suicide did slightly put me on edge. I mean, how will readers react when they find out that their monotonous lives are meaningless? We can't have this novel convince less mentally stable individuals to kill themselves.

(Waitress returns with their coffee and bread.)

Camus: I never intended to be morbid about the human condition. I wrote the essay to address this question: How can humans deal with a life that is absurd? Nazism has caused incredible suffering. I make a case for the affirmation of human dignity and reason in the face of an absurd, unintelligible Universe, made even more apparent by the horrors of

World War II. Let me explain my thought process, and please interrupt me if you have any questions because the concept of absurdism can be difficult to understand.

Champlain: I'll say...I admit that with your creative genius I could get lost because these beliefs you have are quite revolutionary. Anyway, please continue.

Camus: Bien sûr. I have been philosophically concerned with the meaning of life throughout my entire existence. If you realize that your life has no meaning and is completely absurd, then is the only solution suicide? Everyone dreams that tomorrow will be a better day or, if living a wretched life, that hope still exists for tomorrow. Yet, the thought that frustrates me is that, as you keep looking for a better tomorrow and hope for the future, a contradiction arises because you are moving one step closer to death. Most people do not think about this situation.

Champlain: Wait, so you believe that there is no point in hoping for a better tomorrow? That instead someone in a horrible situation should just give up and think life is pointless? See this is where I disagree. (*Shakes his head slightly.*)

Camus: Let me try to find a way to explain so that you understand my point. (*Pauses.*) Okay, think about it like this. If you take away all of the naïve, romantic views of the world, all you are left with is this cold, dark, inhuman place. When looking at the bigger picture, have humans not done terrible things to each other? Throughout history, mankind has been covered in bloodshed, yet generation after generation continues. Once this knowledge is gained about the inhumanity of the world, you begin to realize how meaningless one's existence is. Your life is infinitesimally minute on a Universal scale. Are you starting to see where I am coming from?

Champlain: Yes, but why are you so obsessed with this concept?

Camus: Once the meaninglessness of life is understood and absurdity is recognized, then it consumes you and *becomes a passion, the most harrowing of all* (22). Several existential philosophers have tried to analyze and understand absurdity such as Chestov and Kierkegaard, but *all of them without exception suggest escape [...] deify[ing] what crushes them and find[ing] reason to hope in what impoverishes them. That forced hope is religious in all of them* (32). However, they contradict my thinking, failing to understand that, while a life of meaning is impossible, mortal man can still create human dignity in an incomprehensible, absurd Universe by rebelling against the absurd.

Champlain: I'm beginning to understand better what you are trying to convey to the reader.

Camus: I set out in this paper to try and understand the concept of absurdity. I hope this explanation helps you. Absurdity is the condition that arises from the conflict between man's struggle to find reason in an irrational Universe where his life has no meaning and the silent, unintelligible Universe that provides man with no answers. In the grand and infinite scale of the Universe, a meaningful human life is impossible. Man has no essential connection to the Universe. All-powerful Nature marches to its own beat, the seasons come and go, flowers bloom and animals give birth, all according to the Universe's divine plan. Nature exerts force and controls everything in the Universe without regard for human beings, considering man to be inconsequential and incapable of comprehending its secrets and mysteries. Man is not an essential element of the Universe and can never grasp its mysterious power and secrets, but, in addition, man's mortality means that all his deeds, actions, and accomplishments will ultimately come to naught. I believe man must revolt against the absurdity of wanting a meaningful existence in an indifferent Universe, even though he knows that his mortality means all his achievements

are meaningless in the end. Constant revolt is the only way man can cope with his absurdity.

Champlain: What exactly do you mean when you say man must revolt against absurdity? That absurdity requires constant confrontation?

Camus: Guy, *I draw from the absurd three consequences, which are my revolt, my freedom, and my passion* (64). Once man is aware of absurdity, *the meditation on the absurd returns at the end of its itinerary to the very heart of the passionate flames of human revolt* (64). This understanding leads man to revolt and struggle against his condition, by acting as if his life had meaning, despite the fact that he will eventually lose his life in an indifferent Universe. Man has a great hunger for meaning – man possesses a passion to realign himself with a life where he experiences meaning and has a purpose. Once man understands his absurd condition, he enjoys a freedom and can decide to make himself free to restructure his deeds and actions and behave as if life has meaning, despite his awareness of his mortality and cosmic meaninglessness. He rejects thoughts of suicide because it is a sign of acceptance, not revolt. He rejects thoughts of hope because a hopeful person would never be satisfied that all his actions eventually come to nothing in an absurd, unresponsive Universe. He rejects the idea of values in the face of man's cosmic meaninglessness, the futility of his existence – *Where lucidity dominates, the scale of values becomes useless* (63). Man knows the Universe is indecipherable and that he can only depend on himself, which makes him stronger. He can eliminate thoughts of conditions and limitations, knowing that *[s]pread out over the whole length of a life, [revolt] restores its majesty to that life* (55). Paradoxically, his awareness of absurdity creates a strong love of life. He takes a leap of faith and can live in the now and not think about the future. *Being aware of one's life, one's revolt, one's freedom, and to the maximum, is living, and to the maximum* (62-3).

Champlain: I see. So, with death hanging over his head his entire life, man decides he will live life to the fullest. If he lives to be 80 years old, he doesn't want to have a mundane existence living one year 80 times, repeating the same routine, the same conversations, the same experiences over and over and over again.

Camus: Correct. Man's awareness of the transience of all living organisms and the inevitability of change allows him to better enjoy the pleasures of his incomprehensible world while they exist without fear about what will happen in the future. With his new sense of freedom and passion for life, joy and peace arises in man, even though he knows that his time on earth is short. Man can sing, dance, paint, play, and just participate in the dance of life without being attached to the inevitable outcome.

Champlain (*smiling*): It is interesting that out of the conflict between human reason and an unreasonable Universe causing man to feel despair from his state of cosmic meaninglessness and inevitable mortality, man emerges with a love of life where you emphasize that *the point is to live* (65).

Camus: Yes. I can provide more clarification by describing the absurd man, highlighting the three consequences of absurdity – revolt, freedom, and passion. The absurd man *prefers his courage and his reasoning. The first teaches him to live without appeal and to get along with what he has; the second informs him of his limits* (66). The absurd man has integrity so he *has no need of rules, no moral code* (66). He has complete freedom – the rules of society do not apply to him. With no moral code to adhere to, *he has nothing to justify* and is thus innocent (67). He also has no religion because a belief that God exists

would give him hope that he could have a meaningful life and hope for a better future, impossible in the face of man's cosmic meaninglessness and mortality. Don Juan defines the absurd man – he is a legendary Spaniard, infamous for his countless seductions of women. Don Juan revolted against his human condition by creating his own human meaning. He makes it his great passion to love women. He feels no guilt about bedding all these women as he is not living by any moral code. He believes there is no wrong, so he does not have to carry any burden. He is free to act, think, and do what he pleases. Don Juan is not looking for true love; he just beds one woman after another, loving them *with the same passion*, no more, no less, just because he enjoys this lifestyle (69).

Champlain (*nodding his head*): I understand. Don Juan knows that his life and his career of seducing women are meaningless. However, in living life passionately this way, Don Juan finds meaning in his actions – it is his way to deal with his absurdity, and he makes it a point to keep living even though life is meaningless and he will ultimately lose in the end due to his mortality.

Camus: Absolument! That is exactly what I believe. You will become a philosopher yet, Guy. Sisyphus also was an absurd hero. When Sisyphus failed to return to the underworld after enjoying the pleasures of the upper world, the Greek gods were very angry and offended. They noticed *[h]is scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life*, and they decided to condemn Sisyphus for eternity to roll a huge stone up a hill in the *infernal darkness* of Hades only to see it roll down again, at which point he had to start all over again (120). His status as an absurd hero is *as much through his passions as through his torture* – he has a passion for life, yet must suffer a life of futile toil (120). The hard labor of Sisyphus' efforts reflects his struggle against the condition of his wretched existence doing tough, meaningless work. Yet, during the time that he releases the heavy stone and proceeds to walk down the hill to retrieve it, *[t]hat hour [is] like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness* (121). I believe he became conscious of the absurdity of his fate, and once he became enlightened, his acceptance of his fate enabled him to value life, no matter what kind of a life he had. Despite the futility of human existence, his awareness victoriously crowns him with the belief that he had to live life to the fullest. During his hour of consciousness, armed with this understanding, *he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock* (121).

Champlain: Yes, I can imagine that, as Sisyphus walked down the hill, his heart somehow urged him to remember his purpose and his own human meaning and rise above his absurd condition.

Camus: Exactly. During these lucid moments walking down *toward the torment of which he will never know the end*, he realizes that he, like all other people, cannot escape his fate (121). Yet, when he becomes aware of the absurdity of his futile existence during the hour that he is free from his hard labor and accepts his fate, this decision to accept his lot in life makes him free to affirm human dignity – and even feel joy and bliss – in an indifferent, absurd Cosmos. His lot is exactly the same as *[t]he workman of today [who] works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd* (121).

Champlain: I believe that, free from his toil walking down the slope during his hour of consciousness, Sisyphus was able to find the inner place within him, the center where peace, fulfillment, and bliss live, immaterial of his horrific, surrounding environment in the underworld where he will continue to toil for eternity in this absurdity. Despite his

punishment and wretched condition, Sisyphus' awareness makes him able to feel joy and happiness in his environment without fear about the future.

Camus: Yes, he is completely aware of the absurdity of his condition. *Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition* (121). During the hour he descends, he is aware that no matter how long he struggles against the condition of his difficult existence, nothing will change it, just like humankind is aware that nothing can eliminate the cosmic meaninglessness and mortality wrought by an absurd universe. Thus, he accepts his fate and rises above it, making him a stronger person who is capable of living happily.

Champlain: I understand, Albert. Our conversation has inspired me, dear friend. I find it reassuring to know that, although a meaningful life in an indifferent world is not possible and the Angel of Death will inevitably come calling, people have the ability to create their own human dignity and meaning by revolting against the absurd. Albert, I will go to the executives tomorrow and present this information. I am bold enough to say that publishing your essay is almost guaranteed. (*He turns to the waitress.*) Check, please, mademoiselle.

Camus: Merci, Guy. I always enjoy discussing the confrontation between man and the Universe. My justification of the absurd continues with *L'Etranger* – I will send you a copy as soon as I receive one. Thank you for the café au lait. Au revoir. (*He stands up to leave the café.*)

Champlain (*shuddering as he notices a swastika-adorned vehicle storm past the café*): You have greatly heightened my awareness today of the precious, ethereal nature of life. See you soon, mon ami.

This essay contains italicized text from *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* by Albert Camus (Vintage Books, New York, 1991).