

Laurence Stott

## The Absurd Teacher

*There is a presumption about the enterprise of education, that the generation that teaches knows where the generation that learns should go. This presumption swiftly reduces itself either to an instruction in imitation, of the teaching generation's present state of organization and of mind — or to an exhortation to achieve some state of organization or of mind that ought to be. In this essay Stott elegantly contemplates Camus contemplating the unacceptability of either conviction — the first because of the purely accidental reasons for any society's current customs and beliefs, the second for want of any evidence as to a purpose in human existence. For him the ideal teacher is one who, recognising the futility in either rationale, accepts the absurdity of life and deals with it as it is. He hopes his children may find such a teacher.*

“Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined”\*

In Greek legend, Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to rolling a stone to the top of a mountain, seeing it roll back down again, returning to roll it up again, and doing this for ever: “. . . that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing.” (p. 89) Sisyphus was, for Camus, a graphic illustration of the absurd man, of the man Camus' reflecting on life led him to admire.

Reflecting on life, Camus found that he wished to understand that of which he was a part; he wanted to know the point, and rules, of life.

I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a

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\*This quotation (p. 4) and those that follow are all from Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955).

reason for living (what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying). I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions. (p. 3)

It became transparently clear to Camus, at the time of writing anyway, that not only did he not know the meaning of life, but that neither he nor anyone else had any conceivable hope of ever knowing. Why there is something, rather than nothing, is clearly beyond the grasp of reason; we cannot know the origin of all things (though we can make defensible guesses). It seems equally clear that nobody can know, though we can always guess, the ultimate destiny, or destination, of all things. And to whom do we go in order to discover the values we ought to live by? And how does he or she know? We are evidently caught up in a situation where the beginning, the end, and how one ought to live in the present, is beyond the knowing of man. Logic ends up in paradox; science ends up in paradigm and the uncertainty principle; reason has its limits. The fact that the society we grow up in has its own brand of order and purpose, of "ought," can hardly be taken as a definitive answer to the larger questions, though we may well take comfort from the answers it proffers.

To be alive then and to reflect on this as Camus did, is like waking up on a bus and discovering that nobody knows where it came from, where it ought to be heading, or how they ought to operate within the bus. The bus is orderly and moving in a certain direction, for a bus (that is, cultural) game has been historically imposed and is being imposed, but whether the game is the one the passengers ought to be playing, no one can know. And looking around the bus, Camus sees many instances of pain, suffering and death. He is seared, estranged, by the uselessness of suffering and by the evident lack of profound meaning, of high purpose. Longing to understand, and unable to, Camus senses the universe as hostile. Radically alienated, afloat on a sea of incomprehensibility without a star to steer by, he clings desperately to his own lucidity and to the absurdity it reveals: the absurdity of rational man locked into an irrational, that is, incomprehensible, situation.

... in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. (p. 5)

I said that the world is absurd, but I was too hasty. This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the moment it is all that links them together. It binds them one to the other as only hatred can weld two creatures together. This is all I can discern clearly in this measureless universe where my adventure takes place. Let us pause here. If I hold to be true that absurdity that determines my relationship with life, if I become thoroughly imbued with the sentiment that seizes me in face of the world's scenes, with that lucidity imposed on me by the pursuit of a science, I must sacrifice everything to these certainties and I must see them squarely to be able to maintain them. Above all, I must adapt my behaviour to them and pursue them in all their consequences. I am speaking here of decency. (p. 16)

## He sticks to what he knows

Certain of the absurd, Camus is nevertheless well aware of the keys which liberate one from it. One key is the leap of faith. Religion, ideologies, and some philosophies will answer questions regarding the purpose of life, will declare the true values and the right ethic, and some will even tell you why there is something rather than nothing and how the whole show will end up. They give life a profound meaning, a high purpose, and thus give birth to the evangelical, the missionary, the revolutionary. But Camus has made a fateful decision: he prefers lucidity, that is, he will stick to what he knows. "Hence, what he demands of himself is to live solely with what he knows, to accommodate himself to what is, and to bring in nothing that is not certain." (p. 39) It is not that the religions, ideologies, and philosophies are false, but rather that we cannot know that they are true. A second key is the plunge into the everyday, the submersion of oneself in the current bus game. "In *The Castle* the surrender to the everyday becomes an ethic." (p. 98) The everyday is replete with manifold meanings and understandings — getting to work, watching your kids grow up, understanding what is going on when it thunders and lightens, understanding why certain legislation was passed, and so on. The everyday is meaningful and has its attendant pleasures. By immersing ourselves in it, we push aside the question of profound meaning, of high purpose, of understanding why there is something rather than nothing; we play to the hilt the cultural game, the rules and point of which we were inducted into.

Thus one key gives you profound meaning and purpose, and understanding of the 'whole', whilst the other key gives you manifold meanings, purposes, and understandings such that not only are the larger questions shut out but, if raised, they strike one as incongruous, stupid, absurd. Camus, in full consciousness, rejects both the leap of faith and the plunge into the everyday. He is trying to base his living on the truth, on what an insistent demand for lucidity brings forth — and to that extent at least, he embodies the traditional quest of philosophy.

Standing only on lucidity, shedding his world of leaps and plunges, Camus finds himself radically innocent. "He feels innocent. To tell the truth that is all he feels — his irreparable innocence." (p. 39) The heavy ethical codes typically spawned by religions, ideologies, and philosophies, and the societal rules taken so seriously, have disappeared along with the rejection of the leap and the plunge. Camus can feel no guilt, neither can he feel virtue. All is given, nothing is explained, nothing prescribed from beyond men. This does not mean that Camus will scoff at societal rules, for to do so would be silly — the bus needs a game. And although he can feel no guilt, he can feel regret.

There is but one moral code that the absurd man can accept, the one that is not separated from God: the one that is dictated. But it so happens that he lives outside that God. As for the others (I mean also immoralism), the absurd man sees nothing in them but justifications and he has nothing to justify. I start here from the principle of his innocence.

That innocence is to be feared. "Everything is permitted," exclaims Ivan Karamazov. That, too, smacks of the absurd. But on condition that it not be taken in the vulgar sense. I don't know whether or not it has been sufficiently pointed out that it is not an outburst of relief or of joy, but rather a bitter acknowledgment of a fact. The certainty of a God giving a meaning to life far surpasses in attractiveness the ability to behave badly with impunity. The choice would not be hard to make. But there is no choice, and that is where the bitterness comes in. The absurd does not liberate; it binds. It does not authorize all actions. "Everything is permitted" does not mean that nothing is forbidden. The absurd merely confers an equivalence on the consequences of those actions. It does not recommend crime, for this would be childish, but it restores to remorse its futility. Likewise, if all experiences are indifferent, that of duty is as legitimate as any other. One can be virtuous through a whim.

All systems of morality are based on the idea that an action has consequences that legitimize or cancel it. A mind imbued with the absurd merely judges that those consequences must be considered calmly. It is ready to pay up. In other words, there may be responsible persons, but there are no guilty ones, in its opinion. (p. 49 ff)\*

Deeply alienated, radically innocent, the absurd man defies the surrounding darkness by living, by consciously rolling the stone day after day until he falls victim to the final, inscrutable incomprehensible. Camus rages at the night. Death and suffering are never explained away; the desire to understand, always thwarted, is as strong as ever. But he defiantly rolls his rock. Freed from the demanding ethics of quality, with their attendant loads of virtue and guilt, freed from the weight of a demanding future (in the sense that he does not know he will have a tomorrow, and in the sense that his life style is not to be dictated by promised heavens, classless societies, the Oneness of Being, or whatever), freed from the dictates of a profound meaning-purpose of life, consciousness is liberated into a heightened awareness of the present.

Completely turned toward death (taken here as the most obvious absurdity), the absurd man feels released from everything outside that passionate attention crystallizing in him. He enjoys a freedom with regard to common rules. . . . The return to consciousness, the escape from the everyday sleep represent the first step of absurd freedom. (p. 43)

Despite all the futility, all the straining, Sisyphus rolls the rock with his own hands. He feels the texture of the rock and the tension exerted on him by the slope. He sees the sky, the vast blueness, the wisps of white, the subtle shades of colour on the horizon. He is sensitively conscious of the teeming diversity around him. He feels, dramatically, his own existing — and the beauty, and sense of wonder, overwhelm him. "One must imagine Sisyphus happy." (p. 91)

### **He gets no pleasure from victory**

The absurd teacher is one who sees his condition clearly, who rails against the incomprehensibility, and who dwells heavily in the present. Not that he

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\*I quote this at length since to understand this passage is to understand the heart of Camus' thinking.

never thinks of tomorrow, or next year, for that would be stupid. But the present is where he finds his wealth: John's smile, Mary's face, the clamour of kids, the everyday drama seen by one who has seized awareness. This sensitivity to people and things in the present creates a warmish atmosphere in the class. His sense of wonder counters his sense of the tragic, and what eventuates in his teaching is a quiet enthusiasm, an openness and amazement toward the natural world.

Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols. In the universe suddenly restored to its silence, the myriad wondering little voices of the earth rise up. Unconscious, secret calls, invitations from all the faces, they are the necessary reverse and price of victory. There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night . . . (p. 91)

The absurd teacher, quiet, aware, finds it very hard to be aggressive and violent, for he has no high calling, no profound meaning, no righteous cause. On the other hand, he is not stupid about the need for social order, nor will he sit back if lucidity, awareness, and beauty are threatened, for these are his values. Students quickly become aware that his tolerance has limits, that he does have values, but they notice he gets no pleasure from victory. Similarly, the absurd teacher does get involved in the day to day disputes of the school; he understands and accepts that one should not flee the concerns of the day. But his heart is not in it. Perpetual struggle to impose or gain power in some form or other may be necessary but it is ignoble; it is a bore.

"The secret I am seeking lies hidden in a valley full of olive trees, under the grass and the cold violets, around an old house that smells of wood smoke. For more than twenty years I rambled over that valley and others resembling it, I questioned mute goat-herds, I knocked at the door of deserted ruins. Occasionally, at the moment of the first star in the still bright sky, under a shower of shimmering light, I thought I knew. I did know, in truth. I still know, perhaps. But no one wants any of this secret; I don't want any myself, doubtless; and I cannot stand apart from my people. I live in my family, which thinks it rules over rich and hideous cities built of stones and mists. Day and night it speaks up, and everything bows before it, which bows before nothing: it is deaf to all secrets. Its power that carries me bores me, nevertheless, and on occasion its shouts weary me. But its misfortune is mine, and we are of the same blood. A cripple, likewise, an accomplice and noisy, have I not shouted among the stones? Consequently, I strive to forget, I walk in our cities of iron and fire, I smile bravely at the night. I hail the storms. I shall be faithful. I have forgotten, in truth; active and deaf, henceforth. But perhaps someday, when we are ready to die of exhaustion and ignorance, I shall be able to disown our garish tombs and go and stretch out in the valley, under the same light, and learn for the last time what I know." (p. 145)

Unwilling to flee the concerns of the day, the absurd teacher inevitably becomes involved in the lurching course of educational bandwagons: from authority to freedom, from freedom to authority, from choice to basics, from basics to choice, from kindness to pressure, from pressure to kindness, from self-motivation to group dynamics, from group dynamics to self-motivation, from the unquantifiable to behavioral objectives, from behavioral objectives to the

unquantifiable, from relationships to technology, from technology to relationships . . . Imbued as he is with a sense of wonder, and having a very clear notion of the limits of reason, the absurd teacher sees the frantic shifts as essentially trivial, as the pursuit of clear answers to muddy questions. It is the lurching of the bus as different people struggle for the wheel. It is history. But behind history is being, behind the future is the present, behind causes are the sky and faces. The absurd teacher does not flee the struggles of his time, but neither does he find therein his riches.

. . . man cannot do without beauty, and this is what our era pretends to want to disregard. It steels itself to attain the absolute; it wants to transfigure the world before having exhausted it, to set it to rights before having understood it. (p. 137)

### **He delights in reason**

The absurd teacher understands monotony and drudgery, the daily grind, the meaninglessness of it all in the time span of the universe — this is life, not to be fled from, to be wept over, or to be dressed up into something better. He willingly, in full consciousness, chooses the teacher's lot, the pushing of that particular rock. Lucidity, awareness, and beauty will dominate and pervade his view, and practice, of education. The absurd man delights in reason, his awareness of its limits notwithstanding. Teaching mathematics, science, literature, social studies, and such, is to the absurd man as good a use of time as any. And the absurd teacher, being sensible, understands the need to get a job. He neither glamorizes nor blackens what is. He sees the joys and the sorrows, the point and the meaninglessness, the ecstasy and the tedium, and accepts all within the arc of his decision to live.

Haunted, then, by ignorance, surrounded by the incomprehensible, seared by suffering and death, bewitched by sky, water, faces, amazed at his own existing, the absurd teacher silences the strident voices of gods and begins to hear the quiet, myriad voices of this world. He is not trying to be better, only consistent. May my children be taught by at least one such teacher.

Admission of ignorance, rejection of fanaticism, the limits of the world and of man, the beloved face, and finally beauty — this is where we shall be on the side of the Greeks. (p. 138)