Camus and Existentialism

What Is Existentialism?
It’s not:

- Necessarily atheistic (though Sartre is)
- Just Sartre (though he is most famous)
- Limited to philosophy (it’s influenced literature, psychology, art, film)
- A specific theory or definite ideology
- Easy to define
- Just anything about existence and death

Some Basic Existential Themes

- There is no objective meaning in life
- Each individual has freedom to create (not discover) meaning in life
- The truth about human existence is not comforting: hence, despair, anguish
- Most people hide this from themselves
- Nietzsche: “superior” people can embrace this and become creators of value, replacing God
One person’s characterization

- *Freedom* that is total,
- *Dread* in the face of that freedom, and
- The concealment of dread in the comforting frauds of everyday—

such is the nexus of concerns that make up the existentialist conception of human life.” —Marjorie Greene

A 3-Step Process

- **Everydayness**: just accept view of life given by culture or authority
- **Rebellion**: breakdown of accepted framework that gave life meaning
  
  Can one move beyond this?
- **Commitment**: Life creating meaning in spite of lack of objective meaning

Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus”

“There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether or not life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.”
Camus’ fundamental concept: “the absurd”

Human being striving for meaning in life \[\leftrightarrow\] Universe that has no objective meaning

(to negate this is suicide)

(to negate this—to imagine a meaning that is not there—is philosophical suicide)

• Life has no objective purpose
• Life has no objective meaning
• Therefore (?) Life is not worth living
• Suicide is reasonable.

“The subject of this essay is precisely this relationship between the absurd and suicide

Does the Absurd Dictate Death?

“People have pretended to believe that refusing to grant a meaning to life necessarily leads to declaring that it is not worth living. In truth, there is no common measure between these two judgments.”

(p. 7)

Does [life’s] absurdity require one to escape it through hope or suicide?
Camus’ Key Concepts

- Absurd
- Elude: to avoid the truth of the absurd through
  - Hope (what most people do)
  - Suicide
- Lucidity: a key virtue for Camus

First, the “feeling” of the absurd

- The “stage sets collapse” (p. 10)
- The “primitive hostility of the world” (p. 11)
- DEATH...

Death and Lucidity

“I come at last to death and to the attitude we have toward it...You will never be sufficiently surprised that everyone lives as if no one “knew.” (p. 12)

Value of lucidity: clarity about one’s true condition