

From Solitude to Solidarity

How Camus Left Nihilism Behind

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A virtual stroll reveals that nothingness is in full flower. The libertarian *American Thinker* condemns as “compassionate nihilism” a proposed Belgian law extending euthanasia to Alzheimer’s patients. *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat decries the “lunatic” nihilism that infuses the Batman trilogy, while critics lob the charge of “Darwinian nihilism” at that happy warrior for atheism, Richard Dawkins. In England, a columnist for the *Guardian* lambastes the “dysfunctional nihilism” of the Republican Party, a sentiment shared by Andrew Sullivan in the Daily Beast. It is easy, of course, to cherry-pick the Internet for abuses of any philosophical concept; positivism and Epicureanism are, no doubt, equally misused. But nihilism is a concept unlike any other: There is something about nothingness that gets to us. Nihilism, which raises the possibility that existence lacks value and purpose, may well be the philosophical question most worth considering. To the extent that nihilism has a human face to American readers, that face belongs to Albert Camus.

This year is the centenary of the birth of Camus. For most of us, especially those who took high-school French, Camus will always be the author of *The Stranger* (1942), the novel whose hero, Meursault, we were taught, believed in nothing. But the centenary offers the occasion to recall that nihilism, or what Camus called the “absurd,” did not begin with Meursault. Camus’s thinking about nihilism was deeply shaped by another figure who, like Camus, was less a philosopher who wrote than a writer who philosophized: Friedrich Nietzsche. A century after his birth, Camus is still mislabeled and misunderstood in too many quarters. He was not a brooding, self-absorbed existential poseur, but a man of political and ethical commitment whose primary value was solidarity, the proper valuing of our ties with those around us. Grasping Camus’s deep connection as well as his dispute with Nietzsche will help clarify why Camus turned away not just from nihilism, but from the antidote to nihilism that Nietzsche proposed, the cultivation of a self-sufficient, solitary life.

Almost 125 years ago, Nietzsche collapsed on a street in Turin, hugging the neck of a horse being whipped mercilessly by its owner. Nietzsche never recovered, remaining, until his death in 1900, in the grip of insanity. Before he went mad, Nietzsche had been working on an explanation of nihilism—its motives, its prospects, how to recover from it. In the 1880s, Nietzsche wrote hundreds of pages of notes on nihilism that were published a year after his death as *The Will to Power*. This work, which remains fragmentary, is a brilliantly authoritative description of what Nietzsche called the “uncanniest of all guests.” Nietzsche took nihilism, then associated with bomb-throwing Russian political extremists, with dire seriousness. But he saw it as a world-threatening metaphysical danger, rather than as a terrorist threat. Nihilism was “despair and the leap into nothing,” he wrote, and it was born of the exhausted conviction that life has no meaning, and therefore no value. Overcoming nihilism would require inventing new values and imposing them on life, refusing to surrender to meaninglessness.

A passionate reader of Nietzsche, Camus insisted on confronting, unflinchingly and uncompromisingly, the nihilist “guest.” A few years before his death, Camus wrote: “I owe part of what I am to Nietzsche.” In a literal sense, only death finally separated them. In the briefcase Camus was carrying the day of his fatal car crash in 1960, there was a dog-eared and marked-up copy of Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science*. The collision killed Camus immediately, but flung to safety the briefcase. What did Camus owe to Nietzsche on the subject of nihilism, and what might Camus offer us that Nietzsche did not? In his philosophical essay *The Rebel*, Camus declared that in the “history of human intelligence, apart from Marx, there is no equivalent for the adventure of Nietzsche. We shall never finish repaying the injustice done to him.” For Camus, however, that repayment did not mean emulation, much less adulation. While the young French Algerian writer shared Nietzsche’s diagnosis of the human condition, he eventually came to offer a dramatically different prescription.

For Nietzsche, nihilism was not an eccentric, fringe phenomenon, but a condition we all suffer from in the modern age. For the ancients, Nietzsche argued, morality required people to be truthful, to look honestly at themselves and their faults. Socrates and his champion Plato agreed with the ancient Hebrews and their successors, the Christians: All made claims for true, absolute values, and all imposed ironclad moral systems.

But truthfulness, the greatest weapon of morality, could not be stopped: It turned against morality itself. As civilization advanced, so too did our skepticism; we came to resist morality’s demand that we submit to virtuous ideals—for they were, we concluded, nothing but a sham. No longer, Nietzsche remarked, could we “esteem the lies we should like to tell ourselves.” Lies? What lies? Well, lies about how virtue always gets rewarded and vice punished, if not here on Earth, then in another world; or how virtue is its own reward, because nothing is as satisfying as performing selfless actions.

The epistemological gangrene of nihilism gathers in the gap between the made-up world of ideal moral virtues and the actual world we live in. Morality’s dearest wishes—to prove that the universe is meaningful, that history has a purpose, that everything that happens is part of a grand scheme—all these are not just implausible, but impossible. Suddenly, realizing the collapse of ideals, one becomes a nihilist: One believes that life is not worth living, since the values we desperately need are missing.

Nietzsche embraces the truth that there are no truths: The idea that life is worthless and that everything deserves to perish is just as fictitious and distorted as the older belief in heaven and hell. What will save us, he insists, is that we humans are value-positing animals, free to create ourselves as we wish. But which values ought we to create when we start from scratch in this way? By way of answer, Nietzsche offers us a radical, groundbreaking philosopher whom he christens the *Übermensch*, or superman—and who bears an uncanny resemblance to Nietzsche himself. He is a solitary thinker, in possession of a “sovereign disposition” and a “noble being-for-oneself.” Were this superman to seek the welfare of others, Nietzsche warns, he would sap his own individuality and deprive himself of the chance to become an interestingly self-fashioned and therefore truly worthy person.

This severe and selfish ideal captured Camus’s imagination. According to one of his lycée professors in Algiers, Nietzsche was the young man’s “law and prophets.”

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), the philosophical essay he wrote at the same time as *The Stranger*, Camus circles around Nietzsche’s uncanniest of guests, attempting to pin him down. Rather than use the word “nihilism,” though, Camus prefers the term “absurd”—the condition we find ourselves in when our pursuit of meaning shatters against the immovable and absolute indifference of the world. Absurdity does not exist in the world, but instead filters into our awareness when our “irrational and wild longing for clarity” confronts a silent cosmos.

The absurd tackles us at the most unexpected moments. Perhaps the most famous image Camus uses in *The Myth of Sisyphus* to convey the senseless depths welling just below the fragile crust of our beliefs is that of a man, behind a glass partition, speaking on a phone. “You cannot hear him, but you see his incomprehensible dumb show: you wonder why he is alive.”

Or why we are, for that matter, alive. Suddenly, one day, something wakes us from our routine lives. With weariness tinged by amazement, we stare at the empty skies or the mute pantomime of a stranger, and, as Camus writes, the “stage set collapses.” Try though we might to return to what we once knew, the strangeness of our human predicament has been asserted. When the world’s silence persists, where are we to find meaning? What must we do if meaning is not to be found? Can we live our lives without the transcendental moorings that religion had once provided? Echoing Nietzsche, Camus concludes that the essential question is “to find out if it is possible to live without appeal.”

Camus’s Sisyphus, like Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, pursued a solitary, even romantic quest. But for Camus, the growing fury of history stripped all romance from this particular ideal. Between the late 1930s, when he began writing *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, to 1942, when the prestigious publishing house Gallimard released both books, the world had changed utterly. In this short span of time, France had been crushed and occupied by Nazi Germany. Though the novel was a critical success, Camus understood that events had outstripped the meaning of Meursault’s and Sisyphus’ singular rebellions.

By late 1942, shortly before he entered the French Resistance, Camus was reassessing the limits of absurdity. What would the world make of a thinker who announced: “Up to now I was going in the wrong direction. I am going to begin all over”? It didn’t matter, he shrugged. He, at least, knew it was proof that “he is worthy of thought.” Absurdity, he saw, was nothing more than a first step toward the

truth. In his private journal, he wrote that the absurd “teaches nothing.” Instead of looking only at ourselves, as do Sisyphus or Nietzsche’s superman, we must look to others: We are condemned to live together in a precarious, unsettling world. “The misery and greatness of this world: it offers no truths, but only objects for love. Absurdity is king, but love saves us from it.”

Love saves us from absurdity. At this point, Camus shed Nietzsche: Commitment to others becomes primordial in a world streaked by the absurd. This is the subject of *The Rebel*, a book conceived during the occupation and published in 1952. The rebel, affirms Camus, rejects not just metaphysical, but also political absurdity: namely, a state’s insistence on giving meaning to the unjustifiable suffering it inflicts on its citizens. The rebel not only says “no” to an unspeaking universe, but also says “no” to an unjust ruler. The rebel “refuses to allow anyone to touch what he is. He is fighting for the integrity of one part of his being. He does not try, primarily, to conquer, but simply to impose”—to impose himself on a meaningless world, as well as on those who deny his humanity.

Most critically, however, the rebel seeks to impose a limit on his own self. Rebellion is an act of defense, not offense; it is equipoise, not a mad charge against an opponent. Ultimately, it requires an active watchfulness in regard to the humanity of others as well as oneself. Just as the absurd never authorizes despair, much less nihilism, a tyrant’s acts never authorize one to become tyrannical in turn. The rebel does not deny his master as a fellow human being, he denies him only as his master; and he resists the inevitable temptation to dehumanize his former oppressor.

For Camus, rebellion lives only as long as does the balance between daring and prudence. Hence Camus’s embrace of a profoundly un-Nietzschean “philosophy of limits.” Since we cannot know everything, this philosophy argues that we cannot do anything we please to others. Rebellion, unlike revolution, “aspires to the relative and can only promise an assured dignity coupled with relative justice. It supposes a limit at which the community of man is established.” Revolution comes easily, while rebellion “is nothing but pure tension.”

Ultimately, rebellion means unending self-vigilance: It is the art of active restraint. At the end of *The Rebel*, Camus declared that our task is to “serve justice so as not to add to the injustice of the human condition, to insist on plain language so as not to increase the universal falsehood, and to wager, in spite of human misery, for happiness.” His many critics dismissed this phrase as mere grandiloquence, a heroic glibness disguising an absence of deep thought. Yet the truth of the matter is that there is nothing glib or easy about Camus’s claim. Instead, it recognizes the difficulty, doubts, and desperation tied to true rebellion, and the realization we must live with provisional outcomes.

In 1954, shortly after the publication of *The Rebel*, Camus traveled to Turin; he wanted to visit the place where Nietzsche wrote his last works. He trudged across the fog-bound city to 6 Via Carlo Alberto and the house where Nietzsche was living as he slid into madness. Standing outside, Camus tried in vain to think about the man “whom I had always loved as much as I admired.” At that moment in Turin, Camus recognized that, in spite of his admiration for Nietzsche, he would be forever separate from the man who proclaimed in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) that “we think solitude is a virtue, a sublime, exceeding need for cleanliness, born from knowing what unavoidably unclean things must transpire when people touch one another (‘in company’).” Camus refused to follow Nietzsche into solitude to overcome nihilism. Instead, Camus’s confrontation with nihilism drew him toward the solidarity we share with others when we rebel against a world that tries to isolate and imprison us in absurdity.

I rebel, therefore we are? Camus’s axiom is often hard to apply; the heroism of the French Resistance appeals more as a moral example than most instances of rebellion, from the bloody revolt that engulfed Camus’s homeland Algeria in the 1960s to the chaotic upheavals that have spread across the Arab world in the last few years. In the end, violent resistance is hard to keep within bounds, and therefore hard to see as a work of love, as Camus wished us to. Yet he insisted that we make the effort. If we don’t, we will remain haunted in solitude by that uncanny guest, nihilism. Camus calls on us to turn toward each other, and to turn nihilism to a humane purpose: A difficult project but, he asserts, not an impossible one.

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A critique of his ideas & actions



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