

Absurdism

I. Definition

All human beings seem to crave meaning, search for it, and create it. We constantly make up stories out of our lives to give them meaning. And we search for explanations for the universe in general. Religion may be the most popular source of meaning for people; believing in a god or gods, a spirit-world, an afterlife, or a holy book, or practicing ritual, prayer, or meditation makes life meaningful for many people. And religion is not the only possibility: people find meaning for their lives in nationalism, science, Marxism, art, and many other beliefs and practices.

Absurdists see all of these attempts as ultimately doomed, in a sense. Not that absurdists think it's pointless to do anything, but they believe that no matter what you do, you cannot escape the absurdity of being a human being. It's not exactly the universe which is absurd in absurdism, but rather the fact that humans are innately driven to look for meaning in an ultimately meaningless universe. Whatever stories we tell to give meaning to our lives are just that — stories, fictions.

So what can we do? Absurdists try to work out how we can live meaningfully in a meaningless universe.

II. Absurdism vs. Existentialism

Absurdism and [existentialism](#) are very closely related, so much so that Albert Camus (the main absurdist philosopher) is usually considered an existentialist, even though he always claimed that he was not one. These two philosophies start from the same place: human beings have a deep need for meaning, but the universe provides no answers. They strongly deny the validity of religion and other pseudo-religious philosophies such as nationalism—because they seem to be based on blind faith and wishful thinking. And they raise the same question: how can we live with this meaninglessness?

From there, however, the two philosophies go very different ways. Existentialism escapes into the idea of [free will](#). Existentialists believe that even though the universe is meaningless, human beings still have freedom, and make life meaningful by exercising that freedom. Although the universe is inherently meaningless, we are free to make *our own* meanings. Thus, existentialism ends up in a hopeful place despite its extremely bleak starting-point. In absurdism, things are not so easy. Absurdists flatly deny the existence of free will, claiming that it is just one more sad fiction invented by human beings to avoid despair. Instead, absurdists take one of two routes (we'll learn more about them in section IV):

- **The Leap of Faith:** Although absurdism starts off from a complete denial of religion, it doesn't necessarily end up there.

- **The Acceptance of Absurdity:** If religion still doesn't seem like an acceptable option, we can always decide to make our peace with the absurdity of the universe; we can try to find sources of happiness that don't involve the need for meaning. It would be a little like a sick person learning to accept their illness and being OK with the fact that they will never be well again.

III. Quotations About Absurdism

Quote 1

“After many years during which I saw many things, what I know most surely about morality and the duty of man I owe to soccer.” (Albert Camus)

We'll learn more about Camus in the next section; he was one of the most important absurdist thinkers. Absurdism seems like a depressing philosophy, not well-suited to the energetic life of an athlete. But Camus had been a goalkeeper for a successful university-level soccer team, and said that he learned lessons from that experience that influenced his philosophy. While Camus never believed in any kind of absolute religious or philosophical morality, he did believe that people should be compassionate, dedicated, and loyal — all lessons he learned from sports.

Quote 2

“Anyone who isn't confused doesn't really understand the situation.” (Edward R. Murrow)

Many people, going all the way back to Socrates, have pointed out that the most intelligent people are often the most confused and the most acutely aware of their own ignorance. Less well-informed people, conversely, are more likely to be confident in their abilities and beliefs (this is called Dunning-Krueger Syndrome). Absurdism is one version of this insight: the more we try to find a comprehensible purpose for the universe, or meaning in life's chaos, absurdists say, the more confused we become.

IV. The History and Importance of Absurdism

Given the anti-religious tendencies of absurdism, it's surprising to learn that it originated in the work of the Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard was a Christian, but he didn't ignore the criticisms of religion that he heard around him. Instead, he listened to those critiques and became convinced that there could be no *rational* basis for believing in God. In fact, he found these critiques *so* persuasive that he ultimately concluded that there was no rational basis for believing in *any* kind of hopeful or consoling story about the purpose of existence. That is, he became an absurdist.

But instead of breaking his faith, this realization caused Kierkegaard to embrace it more tightly. He argued for the **leap of faith**, saying that we can only escape the absurd by jumping beyond the limits of rationality. Reason alone will never prove the existence of God; but we should still place our trust in the divine because the alternatives, he believed, are madness, suicide, or ignorance.

Kierkegaard's philosophy was a fringe view and didn't get all that many adherents. However, after Europe went through World War I and especially the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust, absurdism gained followers. During World War I, an entire generation of young men enlisted in various national armies, usually with religious or patriotic fervor, believing that their military service would give their lives meaning. But the war was a bloodbath, and individual soldiers, in spite of their incredible sacrifice and suffering, found that they had accomplished very little in the end (imagine seeing your friends die in huge numbers just to gain a few miles of territory, which the enemy would simply take back a few months later).

And then, only 20 years after that traumatic war ended, Europe started to slide back into the ocean of blood. This time, the war was equally destructive (if not more so), and involved the added horrors of Nazism and the death camps, which would have been unimaginable to soldiers on all sides in the previous war.

So it's no surprise that many European thinkers started to think that the world was absurd. Many Jewish philosophers felt compelled to abandon their faith, since they couldn't understand why God would allow his chosen people to suffer as they had suffered in Nazi Germany. And philosophers outside the Jewish community questioned how a supposedly moral God could allow such suffering, not only among the Jews, but also among non-Jewish civilians in every European nation, not to mention the soldiers.

Of course, if religion seemed impossible after the war, nationalism seemed even more so. Nationalism had been the *cause* of these absurd wars, after all! So how could it be the solution to absurdity?

The French philosopher Camus argued that Kierkegaard had the problem right, but that his solution was impossible; throwing ourselves into religion is no better than nationalism. So he decided that we should accept absurdity, like a terminally ill patient accepting the inevitability of death. We should stop struggling to make sense of the world and try to live simply in spite of the absurdity.

V. Absurdism in Popular Culture

Example 1

"You are dealing with a reborn icicle age poltergeist,
Uprock, sidewalk cycles stuck at the bus stop.
Wookie foot must not sleep under the invaders, no batteries, no jumper cables." (Aesop Rock, "No Jumper Cables")

Inspired by the absurdist movement in philosophy, many artists and musicians have tried to express absurdism through their creations. Usually, this involves creating art work and lyrics that have no sense or meaning. The idea is that the audience will learn to accept the lack of meaning, finding their own ways to enjoy the art without demanding that it "make sense." This is a kind of practice for living in a world in which nothing truly makes sense in the first place.

Example 2

The TV series *Red Dwarf* is based on a pretty absurdist / existentialist premise: the main character is the last human being alive in the universe. A radiation disaster killed everyone in the solar system, with the single exception of David Lister, who happened to be in the stasis chamber of a mining ship which protected him from the disaster. David wakes up 3 million years after the disaster to find that everyone he ever knew has been dead for thousands of millennia. It's hard to imagine someone staring more directly into meaninglessness! The show follows David's efforts to keep himself sane and even find happiness despite his unending isolation.