

## **6. Cate Leonard (Prof. Katie Terezakis) Philosophy**

Existentialism may be characterized by its unremitting honesty in approaching the issue of contingency and its consequences. If being or the universe is radically contingent, then human existence is absurd, which is to say that for the conscious being, the goal of finding absolute meaning or truth is unachievable. In the face of this incessant, often painful absurdity, the conditions for the good life entail a form of personal authenticity that Nietzsche associates with self-overcoming, Sartre with taking-responsibility and Camus with defiant happiness.

Cate Leonard's essay "Absurdity" methodically treats these issues, ranging with critical acumen from Pascal's Wager, to Camus's Sisyphean hero, to Nietzschean values and Sartrean ethics. Framed as an analysis of absurdity, the essay presents a lineage from Cartesian subjectivity to Kierkegaardian inwardness, and it treats with insight subtle aspects of the existential handling of anguish, nausea and our constitution under the gaze of the Other. But "Absurdity" is not merely a work of secondary literature. It is a project, in the existential sense, in which the author commits herself with uncompromising honesty to investigating the way in which the issues at hand actually involve and shape her. The careful conceptual investigation of absurdity is developed through the particular, very real ways that existential absurdity remains coiled at the heart of the author's experience. In other words, this essay is itself an existential undertaking in the definitive sense of the word; it is a realization of authenticity that, as such, explicitly and courageously thematizes its own limited character.

## Absurdity

Once you have seen absurdity, you can never un-see it. If Pascal's Wager worked, I would be a Christian – not because, as the Wager states, it is safer to believe in God than not to believe, but because religion is comforting.

Pascal asserts in his Wager that we should believe in God because it is the safe thing to do. If one believes in God and is right, one is granted an eternal, happy afterlife. If one believes in God and is wrong, no harm is done. If one does not believe in God and is right, again, nothing good happens and nothing bad happens. But if one does not believe in God and is wrong, one is punished in Hell eternally. Therefore, claims Pascal, it is the best bet to believe in God, just in case He exists as the Bible states He does. If one does not believe in God, Pascal suggests that adopting Christian practices will eventually make a believer out of anyone.

There are two glaring problems with the Wager. The first is the assertion that going through the motions of Christianity will eventually lead to a true belief in God. The second, and even more problematic, is the assertion that devoting one's life to God when God does not exist is harmless. If I were to devote my life to God, I would be losing a piece of myself, even before I started losing all the little pieces that would come with adopting Christian practices, beliefs, and rules.



The first bit of self that is lost is that which embraces absurdity. It is the part of Sisyphus that causes Camus to say we must imagine Sisyphus happy. It is the part of self that affirms life itself, the part that says, "yes, this is absurd, but it *is*."

What is absurdity? According to Camus, life is absurd because of consciousness. We are in the habit of living. We are all, like Sisyphus, pushing the rock. The difference is in affirming or denying the absurdity. The "divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity" (Solomon 189). Writing about absurdity is necessarily absurd because the reader either has the experience or not. If not, reading about it will not touch them.

I suspect that most people spend nearly their entire lives fighting the idea of absurdity. They turn to religion to comfort them. It is possible that they could not handle the thought of absurdity, but I am pretty sure I cannot handle it sometimes, either. Religion provides for them a structure and some feeling of absolutes. Like Nietzsche describes in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, their suffering in this life is justified and rewarded by their eternal afterlife. Similarly, God will hand out the punishments to those who have wronged them and did not obey these religious rules – the believers need not even enact their own revenge. Passivity equals good. Let go and let God. I do not have this structure. I make my own lines and then I cross them when I feel they no longer serve a purpose. I have the power and the freedom to change my mind and re-evaluate my values. For example, I used to value family loyalty above all else.

I am struggling with the idea that one must have a profound experience of the absurd, in which one noticed absurdity, to be truly aware of it. Perhaps it need not be a profound experience, but some single moment when absurdity is realized and the one experiencing it does not turn away from the idea of absurdity. Is it possible that Sisyphus could push the rock up the mountain for half of eternity before realizing absurdity? Camus states "at any streetcorner, absurdity can strike any man in the face" (Solomon 190). We go through life according to our habits and patterns and do not realize absurdity until we ask "why." He considers the "revolt of the flesh" to be absurd – it is absurd for humans, as beings in time and as beings who will each eventually run out of time, to long for tomorrow (Solomon 192). Each tomorrow brings us closer to death. I have to laugh at this because, even though I will assert again and again that I am not afraid of death, I long for yesterdays as often as I long for tomorrows. Maybe this is because I feel anguish – I already know that I did not kill myself yesterday and therefore it is infinitely safer than tomorrow.

It would seem that the only way out of absurdity, if the habit of living itself is absurd, is to die. The only way to actually choose death is suicide, which Camus considers to be the wrong choice. Suicide is ridiculous, but it is not absurd. In fact, suicide, actively choosing to end one's own life and succeeding, appears to be the only act that is *not* absurd. Camus describes it as a giving up, a declaration of weakness. "Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit [of living], the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering" (Solomon 189).



It is absurd to long for tomorrow and it is ridiculous to die voluntarily because, for Camus, quantity of life is more important than quality. Because we are sensual beings, we are constantly experiencing and longer life will therefore always bring about more experience. Longer life is *more* life. "Living is keeping the absurd alive...above all, contemplating it" (Solomon 193).

I think part of accepting absurdity is realizing there can be no absolute Truth. This is the most difficult part for me. This is why, even though I know Descartes' proof of God is flawed, his description of an evil genius disturbs me. Rationally, I realize this is ridiculous, mostly because all I have is my perception, so even if I am being deceived by an evil genius, the deception is my reality. The problem, then, is with other people.

My father has a problem with remembering his dreams too well. He admits he sometimes does not know if something actually happened or if he just dreamed it. He frequently recalls conversations with me that never happened. But there is the problem. It is entirely possible that these things do happen and I am the one with the memory flaw. There is no objective way to determine which of us has the properly functioning memory (this is assuming, of course, that one of us does, which should probably not be assumed but can be for the sake of argument). He realizes that this can happen and why it frustrates me. I know where he is coming from, too. For the first couple of years after my mother died, she would show up in my dreams and do and say all of the things she normally did and said. Once or twice I dreamed that she was hiding in the house because

she was not really dead. When I woke up, I had trouble convincing myself that she was, in fact, just a pile of ashes dumped in a hole in front of a church.

I have a similar problem when considering myself and who I actually am. If two people perceive me in two very different ways, how do I know which I am?

My mother is my best argument for believing Camus when he says life is absurd and for believing Sartre's idea of contingency. For as long as I can remember, I have been trying to decide between becoming the person she wanted me to be and becoming who I am. I wanted to be what she wanted me to be because I thought it would make her accept me. The most absurd part is that this is still happening. I, with no belief in an afterlife, am letting a dead person influence my daily decisions. If I gain a pound, if I wear something trashy, if I get a good grade in a math class I know she would be disappointed and it still affects me. What is most absurd, though, is that I am not sure if I have the ability to be authentic because I think about what other people want from me so much that I do not think I know what I want. I do not know who I am without the context of other people. I can make sense of this when I consider Nietzsche's claim that consciousness develops out of society or Sartre's claim that we know ourselves through conflicts with others. But I wonder if these are true and if other people feel the way I do, how can we possibly be authentic? How can I make an authentic choice if I have three or four nagging voices in my head telling me what I "should" be doing? And why is it that my mother can make decisions on whom she should be as well as who I should be, and I can do neither? Interestingly (or maybe not), this is the reason that my very first reaction,

my gut feeling, when I found out she was dead was relief. There was this flash of relief, like I had been suffocating and could finally take a deep breath. That was an authentic feeling and I hate myself for it. I have a fear that if I were to be completely authentic, I would be a horrible person.

It does not matter who I want to be. It does not matter what I want to do with my life. What matters now is now. I feel that am not anything now, other than one who pushes the rock. I do not know how to choose myself. I am both unlimited potential and already wasted potential.

I am not smart or strong. I am not fast, creative, artistic, vibrant, cheerful, altruistic, or friendly. But I am honest. I know that life is absurd and I know that I have to take responsibility for myself. I know that I may spend the rest of my life alone and inadequate, but I have this honesty about life.

As for contingency, my mother's death convinced me that there is no force, no plan, no god, no order to things that happen. Thinking about contingency actually eased a small amount of my guilt surrounding her death. It started in August when I was sixteen. I had just gotten my driver's license and was about to start my senior year of high school. My mother had a severe depressive episode and was hospitalized at the request of her family. She received treatment for the depression and for her alcoholism. My father went into a rehabilitation program for his alcoholism. He told me one night he was leaving for this and was gone the next morning. I spent almost two weeks alone with my brother.



When they came home, I told them if they ever just left like that again, with no plan and no warning, I would not be there when they returned. It was mean and it was selfish and horrible. I am really good at feeling guilty and this started the guilty feeling for the whole chain of events.

My mother and I had a fight about her car on a Thursday morning before school. I wanted to drive to school because I had to be there until 5:00. I told her she could not leave me for two weeks to fend for myself and then come back and pretend nothing had happened and I would just submit to her again. This was also mean and selfish and horrible. I won the battle and drove to school. I never won the battles before. I doubt I even fought that hard before. I nearly always just gave in.

At some point during the day, she decided to walk to the gas station for cigarettes. She never came back. Exactly a month later, a construction worker found her dead body in the woods. I would tell myself nearly every day that if I had not picked that fight and taken her car, she would not have been there. She would have driven to the grocery store. There was no doubt in my mind that I could have absolutely prevented her murder. When I started to consider contingency very recently, I started to wonder if I was wrong in thinking that. Maybe it would not have happened if she had gone an hour earlier. And what if she had sent my brother instead? Just for some more absurdity (or maybe ridiculousness, I am not sure), I feel guilty for using the concept of contingency to absolve myself of some of the guilt I used to feel. In addition to wishing I had the comfort of religion to deal with or ignore absurdity, I think I may have missed my



calling. My incredible ability to feel guilty all the time would surely have a better place in organized religion than it has in a contingent world.

I do not believe in luck. My friend tells me this is because I have the worst luck of anyone he knows. I cannot reconcile luck and Sartre's idea of contingency. If I believed in luck, I would have to believe that there is some force that has the ability to influence contingency. If that were true, it would not be "contingency."

When someone dies, it seems to be normal for the people close to that person to become hyper-cautious, at least for a time, about whatever killed the person. If it is heart disease, everyone must go get screened. If it is some horrific accident, extra precautions must be taken. If it is a murder, suddenly everyone must be less trusted. This is absurd. It is as if the world is suddenly more dangerous for the rest of us. No, this is not right. Even in the case of hereditary disease, where your chances of developing it are affected by family history, your chances of dying from that disease have nothing to do with someone else dying of it first.

This relates to Sartre's concept of fear versus anguish. We experience fear of the outside, of the other. We fear that an external force will act upon us in a harmful way. We fear death (if we are not all committing suicide) because it comes from an external force. I suppose I find this absurd because I think I feel anguish more than fear. I am more concerned, to use Sartre's example, that I will throw myself off the precipice than that someone will do it for me.

This also relates to the thought that contingency is potentially freeing. I find it sort of ironic that my mother's family, who believe that God has a master plan and everything that goes along with that, are the ones who are afraid. If God has a plan and it includes having them all murdered, I would think being afraid would be an affront to God. If someone wants to murder me, I have to assume it will be motivated by something I have done (for which I must take personal responsibility) or contingent (for which I will not be responsible). Either way, I see no purpose in being afraid now. This is not to say that we should not take precautions against accidents and disease, because that would be showing a serious lack of personal responsibility. For example, if I run out in front of a bus and it kills me, this is not contingent. If I am standing on the sidewalk and the bus hits me, this is contingent. This is also unlikely.

Nietzsche claims we invented religion (and art, simultaneously) to seduce ourselves into living. If we believe someone is watching our suffering, it has meaning. But the justification of suffering is only aesthetic. There is no meaning in suffering. There is no justification without the aesthetic. I think this is an externalization of suffering. If not for society and consciousness, would we know that we were suffering (and, if we did not know, surely it would not be suffering)?

My mother's death confirmed my atheism and at the same time cemented my brother's faith in God. He believes he will see her in Heaven someday and that is a comfort for him. It amazes me that two children growing up in the same family in the



same house so close in age (he is only older by a year and a half) can become such radically different people. Though, my brother and I have in common this either general inability or simple unwillingness to stand up for ourselves.

Being a girl put me at a disadvantage. My mother had very strong and often contradictory ideas of what women should be. If I am feeling charitable, I will assume she really believed she was doing what was best for me. If I am feeling sympathetic, I will assume she was trying to make me into something better than she felt herself to be. And, if this is true, maybe I should not feel I was at a disadvantage because my brother did not get the same rigid shaping I did. I think, though, that even if these were her intentions, my mother needed a better method. Clearly, I remember and struggle with a lot of her ideas about women, and about how I should be in particular, especially compared to my brother. But if these were her intentions and she were successful, surely it would be the case that I would hold these beliefs and not struggle against them.

The most absurd thing of all is that I feel like everyone else surely *must* think about all of these things that I think about. How could it be that they do not all consider absurdity? That they are not all “nauseous,” as Sartre would say? Sure enough, I find more and more that the majority of people do not think about these things. I am jealous because I feel so incurably alone.

Kierkegaard claims that the crowd is “untruth.” This is consistent with Sartre’s claim that we act in an absurd way in social situations. The crowd is not just a gathering

of individuals because of the way they act and influence each other. We say and do things in a crowd that we would refuse to do as individuals. For this reason, the crowd can never be authentic. Even if everyone thought about absurdity, then, I suppose I would be no less alone if I wanted to be authentic.

Nietzsche asks us to consider eternal return. He describes a demon coming to us at night, telling us everything that has happened in this life will happen again, exactly as it did before, with nothing subtracted and nothing new. Would we affirm this or would we fight it? Every time I come back to this, I feel apathetic. I would not joyfully affirm it, but I think I would give an apathetic, "sure, why not?" I am not sure if I believe that which does not kill me makes me stronger, but I do believe it does not make me any weaker. As Camus says, longer life is more life and I have not yet broken the habit.