

Collected Essays on Philosophers

By

Colin Wilson

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Edited by Colin Stanley

Introduced by John Shand

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-8901-6

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-8901-8

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Independent Print Ltd for permission to reprint 'Heroes & Villains: Bertrand Russell'.

Telegraph Media Group for permission to reprint 'The Thinkers'.

EDITOR'S PREFACE



Colin Wilson's first book *The Outsider* was published to great critical acclaim in May 1956. It was the first of six philosophical books, known collectively as 'The Outsider Cycle'¹, compiled by Wilson during the following decade. These non-fiction works were accompanied by a string of novels, Wilson's way of putting his philosophical ideas into action. A summary volume, *Introduction to the New Existentialism*, appeared in 1966. When this was reprinted as *The New Existentialism* in 1980, he wrote in a newly penned introduction:

"If I have contributed anything to existentialism—or, for that matter, to twentieth-century thought in general, here it is. I am willing to stand or fall by it." (*The New Existentialism*. London: Wildwood House, 1980, p.8).

Colin Wilson's new existentialism—a life-affirming, optimistic philosophy—is in stark contrast to that of his more famous Continental contemporaries: Sartre and Camus. His differences of opinion with these two existentialist giants are clearly documented in the essays reprinted in this volume. Proof of his status within the movement came when he was asked to write Sartre's obituary for a London newspaper in 1980 and when an extract of his long essay 'Anti-Sartre' was included in the 2nd edition of Robert C. Solomon's *Existentialism* (Oxford University Press, 2005) (both reproduced here).

¹ 'The Outsider Cycle' comprises: *The Outsider* (1956), *Religion and the Rebel* (1957), *The Age of Defeat* (published as *The Stature of Man* in the US) (1959), *The Strength to Dream: Literature and Imagination* (1962), *Origins of the Sexual Impulse* (1963) and *Beyond the Outsider: the Philosophy of the Future* (1965).

In 1968 *The Daily Telegraph* commissioned him to interview and comment on the work of five prominent philosophers: Ayer, Broad, Popper, Strawson and Warnock (all reprinted here). Apart from Popper, he found little common ground and was clearly at odds with another contemporary, Bertrand Russell, as his essays on him clearly convey.

During the 1970s, Wilson's interests became, on the surface, more varied, publishing books on criminology, psychology and the occult. But he always maintained a philosophical stance, irrespective of subject matter, and continued to write purely philosophical essays for journals, magazines and symposia. In one of the latter, his essay on Spinoza for *Speculum Spinozanum* (1977), he wrote: "Philosophers are never so entertaining—or so instructive—as when they are beating one another over the head." It is that statement, applied to this particular volume, that makes the following essays, from England's only home-grown existential philosopher, so eminently readable, stimulating, instructive and, sometimes, controversial.

—Colin Stanley, Nottingham, UK; January 2016.

Note:

Letter and number references in bold (e.g. **C93**, **A61**), refer to the book/essay as listed in my *The Ultimate Colin Wilson Bibliography, 1956-2015* (Nottingham: Paupers' Press, 2015).

INTRODUCTION

JOHN SHAND



When Colin Wilson started thinking and writing about philosophy in the 1950s the world of philosophy was divided roughly in two: those who were interested in answering the question of how we should live our lives and those who thought that philosophy could have nothing to say about such a question. The first lot were called existentialists and the second were called analytical philosophers. The first often functioned outside universities, and while sometimes writing academic discursive papers and books, they also wrote in the genres of polemical essays, novels, short stories, and plays. The university analytical philosophers stuck to the discursive papers, published in reputable journals, and books. The existentialists existed mainly in France, but also other Continental European countries, especially Germany, with the analytical philosophers existing mainly in Britain and America. This is a very crude picture, as there were exceptions on both sides. Ancient Greek philosophy formed some kind of underlying connecting causeway via the classics. And of course it would be astonishing if the one group did not read and listen to the other to some extent, and be influenced by them. Famously a great party of well-known philosophers, mainly from Oxford, headed to Paris around this time to talk to their Continental counterparts, and by all accounts, spent the sessions talking past each other. In Britain, for example, in the 1950s there grew up a strong tradition that philosophy could say nothing about substantive ethical matters, as philosophers were no wiser in life than anyone else; rather it could only look at what kind of statements ethical statements were and what we were doing when we made ethical statements. In France however, interest was intensely focused on whether life could be construed as having any

meaning, and, if not, what could be made of the absurdity of living such a meaningless life, especially if it meant living life inauthentically as if it had meaning.

When Colin Wilson presented his philosophical ideas they fell on the English-speaking world as water on parched land. A refreshing and welcome opening of a door onto what mattered to people that had seemed to have been slammed shut. Colin Wilson, on the matter of what philosophy could do, sided with the existentialists. But he thought they were wrong. Wrong in the answers they gave to how we should live our life against a background of whether life had meaning. In fact, because of a philosophical mistake, that of how we viewed what the world was really like, their conclusion, that life was meaningless, essentially absurd, and could only be lived authentically, honestly, in full recognition of that human condition, was precisely the truth turned upside down. Coming to this conclusion was a revelation for Colin Wilson. It was a hard fought battle against his own actual, and not just theoretically posited, experiences of overwhelming despair, or as he called them ‘vastations’. Existential despair, nihilism; despair at the world, the human condition. The attempt to see a way out of this, to answer the question of why one should not simply commit suicide, led him to a mammoth exploration of every scrap of writing addressing the experience of life as seeming utterly devoid of meaning or point, along with the attempts to find a way out of that. Many of the people he considers are, strictly speaking, literary figures, as well as others being philosophers in the usual sense—that the former are present is no surprise because he sees the malaise of nihilism as pervading deeply ideas about the human condition. This sense of utter meaninglessness became personified in the ‘outsider’ figure—a person, who having seen the meaningless absurdity of life, is utterly unable to take part in any of it. He is unable to take any of it seriously. He stands outside life. Colin Wilson’s first, and still most famous book, published in 1956, is titled *The Outsider*. The book starts with an inscription by Bernard Shaw, from a play, *John Bull’s Other Island*, and the last part involves an exchange between two characters: “‘You feel at home in the world then?’” “Of course. Don’t you?” (from the very depths of his nature): “No.” This book, *The Outsider*, was the beginning

of a series of ‘outsider’ books, which looked further, and, most importantly, beyond the original book—to seek a solution to the outsider problem—and culminated in a work summing them up, *Introduction to the New Existentialism*, published in 1966. Ten years of hard and meticulous toil. All done outside the supporting props of university academia, where it is doubtful that Colin Wilson would have flourished, and would indeed have been intolerably stifled. In this work, he was not just interested in reading philosophical speculations on whether life was meaningful or absurd and what one should then do. He was also interested in reading about how people who had an inkling of the problem lived their lives, if it was written about in an illuminating way. This is most important. The subject was not one confined to the university seminar room, a matter of philosophical theory, cured like David Hume’s ‘philosophical melancholy and delirium’ by leaving it behind and mixing in normal life. If one really understood the outsider problem, had it as a lived part of one’s way of going on, something that permeated everything one might think and do, and think of doing, one then carried the problem into every aspect of one’s life whatever that life might consist of. Nevertheless, the problem and its solution is essentially a philosophical one; the failure to solve it is a result of a philosophical mistake.

So what was the philosophical mistake of the existentialists? One can start by looking at how they were right. They were certainly right about the question of whether life has meaning being a proper one for philosophy. Indeed they were right about it being a proper question for anyone with a modicum of curiosity and reflective inclination. Some people seem disinclined to ever get started on such destabilising, disturbing thinking. This is Sartre’s *salaud* (roughly translated as ‘bastard’), who lives inauthentically, in ‘bad faith’, refusing to face up to the complete freedom of choice that comes with seeing the unjustifiable and meaningless nature of existence. These *salauds* do their jobs, and act as if they have no choice—the comfort of imposed restriction closing off the need and responsibility to think and choose. Generally speaking among the existentialists God is out of the picture—although some existentialists battled to keep him in quite possibly under the guiding thought that religion at least thought the meaningfulness or

otherwise of existence a legitimate question—but for most, and certainly Sartre, who may stand as the most well thought out and systematic existentialist of the sort Colin Wilson wishes to upturn, God was, as Nietzsche had most crushingly put it, dead. So, if God is dead, everything is permitted, some claimed. Raskolnikov in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* puts this into practice by putting an axe through an old pawnbroker's head. It is done rather as an experiment. If one can choose anything, why not choose this?—something seemingly so forbidden—and see what happens—see if one can live with that kind of free choice that should be no more momentous than any other. In fact Raskolnikov finds that psychologically he cannot—but that's another story. In the case of the inauthentic, 'bad faith', *salauds*, the dissonance in their lives simply fails to register with them. They live, perhaps even with an intellectually and emotionally insulting shrug of their shoulders, at best with the dishonesty of knowing one thing but acting as if it were false, and with the added dishonesty that really they have no choice doing this. People, one might say, gifted with shallow minds, able to live with and by falsity. But the authentic existentialist has to choose. But what to choose? Of all the ways one might choose to live? This is where existentialism runs into an insoluble problem. If life is fundamentally and irredeemably meaningless and absurd, then no choice would seem to have any more weight or justification, any more value, than any other. Hence the exemplification in many existentialist inclined writers of precisely this, acts that seem utterly without reason. In Camus' (the existentialist, incidentally, that Colin Wilson knew best personally) story *L'Étranger* (The Stranger) the protagonist Meursault, shoots dead a virtual stranger after a sequence of contingent events, inexplicable and absurd, that appear to the protagonist as insignificant as those in a dream—it is treated as an event of no point, no value, and moreover little significance. This is the absurd life. Random, pointless, meaningless. This is against the background of Camus' exact portrayal of how life is encapsulated in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (The Myth of Sisyphus), a man destined to massively exert himself by pushing a huge boulder up a hill, only to see, when he gets to the top, it roll back down again, and to then go on to repeat the episode forever. It is worth noting that Sartre

promised to follow up *Being and Nothingness*, his metaphysical *magnum opus*, with a complementary work on ethics, but he never did. Not surprisingly. The problem of what to choose, when freedom to choose is absolute, could not be solved. As Colin Wilson might characterise it, if value in the world is just a matter of at best giving it value as a matter of random subjective free choice, then all is lost as far as the world having any real value is concerned. Whatever we might choose, we would always know that the value that appears then to be in the world is really only a subjective projection, and the world itself is intrinsically meaningless and absurd—we would still be living our lives inauthentically.

Colin Wilson's solution is to look again at the phenomenology of our experience of the world, at the structure of that experience—in particular the relation of our consciousness to the world. His starting point for this is Edmund Husserl, who thought that conscious experience could be studied separately from any metaphysical commitment as to how the world is—a matter that could be 'bracketed off'—and that this could be done because consciousness is always 'intentional'. It has an object whether the object exists or not, so one may examine our consciousness of experience itself. One might be looking for a mouse in a room even though there is no mouse, and there will be something it is like to experience doing that. If Colin Wilson's philosophy might be said to start with Husserl, it should be noted that it culminates in Nietzsche, the only philosopher in Colin Wilson's view who managed to find a way of overcoming total nihilism and thus could affirmatively be 'yea saying' to life.

This consideration of the phenomenology of experience brings a solution to the outsider problem by revealing a false assumption made by the old existentialism. The fundamental mistake of the old existentialism is to take a projected particular subjective view of life as meaningless and absurd as a true view as to how the world really is. But there is no reason to do this. Sometimes, as Colin Wilson states, it is a merely a personal, even pathological, view that is projected and then taken for reality. However, life often does not seem absurd and meaningless. On the contrary it often seems clearly full of meaning, pleasure, point and joy. As it seems when

we wake refreshed on a spring morning; after sex; walking in beautiful countryside; listening to fine music. There is no reason to privilege as true or truer the meaningless, pointless, absurd view over the view where the world appears meaningful, full of point, and not absurd. This positive sense of the world culminates in what Colin Wilson calls 'peak experiences', when the world seems incorrigibly suffused with joy. One feels, as W. B. Yeats put it: 'That I was blessed and could bless'. There is no reason to think this is an illusion, or if held to be true of the world, a delusion. The world experienced as absurd might just as readily be called a deluded view. If one takes it as that, the question it raises of how to live in such an absurd world need not be answered—which is just as well as it turns out it never could be. One cannot pump life into a corpse of a world. Most of the time, Colin Wilson says, we live in a state of 'robot' automatic consciousness, that makes the world seem at best drab, and at worst stripped of all joy and point. We feel bored, restless, dissatisfied, irritable. But this is just laziness. We can discipline our consciousness not to exist in this dire flat state. We can raise our consciousness to see the world as full of joy and meaning.

Colin Wilson in fact sees this sort of awareness of the world not as a subjective projection of a positive mind set, but as objectivity. Here things get a bit more complicated in the argument. One can grant as Colin Wilson's major breakthrough exposing the presumption that the grey, meaningless, absurd view of the world need necessarily be taken as the true view, how the world really is. There is no reason to privilege this particular view over a way of experiencing the world as permeated by an easily discernible sense of meaning and fulfilment. But this still just looks on the face of it a matter of mere choice—albeit now a more reflective choice—but one still arbitrary and without justification. The lack of necessity in being true that applies to the subjective view where the world has no meaning and is absurd surely also applies to the subjective view that it is meaningful and not absurd.

There are various things one can say to this. One is to wonder why one would choose the miserably joyless view now that it has been shown that it is not inauthentic to reject it. Why not choose a world that is far more satisfying and fulfilling to live in? That's a

start. Colin Wilson has one further argument to fall back on. He holds that conscious experience of the world as meaningful and joyful is more objective. This is not quite the same as saying that it is objective in the sense that it is a view of the world as the world is in itself. Rather it is to say, as Colin Wilson does, that the positive experience of the world is more comprehensive of the range of our experiences of the world, including perhaps an awareness that we might fall back into it viewed where it is meaningless and absurd; it is to make a claim for the positive view being more objective on the grounds of its being more disinterested, less locked into our narrow idiosyncratic subjective prejudices, so to speak. Just as no judge in a court or journalist writing a report may ever be said to be totally objective—or have a totally objective view—this does not mean that both may not become more objective by setting aside their personal subjective view to the greatest extent that they can. Some have certainly claimed that because we cannot be absolutely objective, or we cannot but be to some extent subjective, that there is no point in trying to be more objective. But this is a *non sequitur*. The ‘peak experience’ view is more encompassing of the ways we experience the world—the world experienced as meaningless and absurd is narrower and less encompassing—in that sense we may say the view that sees the world as meaningful, and not absurd, is more objective and truer.

Colin Wilson goes on to make further claims that the new existentialism is an evolutionary step for humankind. However that may be, only the future can be a judge. But his basic idea, the solution to the outsider problem, is most certainly a view worth taking seriously, and studying, and thinking about, and we should all at least do that.

**

The pieces gathered here, written by Colin Wilson, range from the deep and substantial, to the slight and entertaining. But always interesting. It is not surprising that Colin Wilson found more that interested him in some philosophers than others, as only some were interested in the outsider problem, and some were not remotely

interested in it at all. But each essay gives us an insight into each philosopher, and by reflection into Colin Wilson's ideas.

**

I would like to complete this introduction on a personal note, which I hope also adds to the understanding of his ideas. I met Colin Wilson three times, but each time was relatively extended, and an occasion that involved substantial discussion of his ideas. I also corresponded with him extensively over a couple of concentrated periods. Like many others, I was partly inspired to study philosophy at university by having read his books, in particular *The Outsider*—not that when one turned up at university the manner in which philosophy was done was anything like that found in the book. In fact, gratifyingly, fashion has swung somewhat in the direction of Colin Wilson's way of approaching philosophy. The subject today is far more eclectic in the sources it considers suitable for philosophical study and illumination, as well as the subjects considered proper for philosophy, in particular, alongside the usual central subjects, there is more interest in highly applied philosophy. Nevertheless, Colin Wilson has found virtually no place in university academic philosophy. And there is what one may only describe as a snobbishness about his work. This is a pity. But it must also be said that the university is not, and perhaps was never intended to be, the place for it. Colin Wilson wanted to address the world; anyone who would listen because he felt he had something important to say, something that would not just be registered and forgotten by perhaps apathetic students, but something that would change how people lived.

He was a remarkable man to meet. Charming and startlingly direct by turns. He seemed to like nothing better than to hold forth on his ideas, and reflect on those of others, in a manner that was forthright and almost overpowering. You had to be prepared to stand up for yourself in the conversation. But I never felt he minded if you did. He had many thousands of books at his house, and his erudition was such that one could quite believe he had read all of them.

My view is that Colin Wilson's fierce claim to have beaten nihilism, to have expelled vastation from his outlook, from his very psyche, was not totally convincing. This is not a bad thing—it meant that he still felt the keenness of the fight he had on his hands not to fall into existential despair. The proclamation that he had solved the problem not only for others, but personally for himself, could come across as protesting too much—a kind of whistling in the dark—keep up the noise, keep saying it, and demons of negative thoughts would not come back while that was going on—the very act of declaring in a certain way that the demons were banished would itself mean that they were. But my impression was that part of him knew they were still there waiting to pounce on the weak. He was no cheerful fool. His vociferous dislike of Samuel Beckett's work, of *Waiting for Godot* in particular, as the ultimate example of what he most opposed, could not stop you thinking that a side of Colin Wilson still admired Beckett, if only surely because he laid out the problem to be defeated so acutely. It's not as though he stopped writing about Beckett. One only has to hear the relish with which Colin Wilson reads aloud, as he does superbly on the recording *The Age of Defeat*, the bitter and grim poem 'The Harlot's House' by Oscar Wilde, including such lines as, 'Sometimes a horrible marionette/Came out, and smoked its cigarette/Upon the steps like a live thing', to understand how empathically and passionately he can tap into its sentiments. One only has to hear him read this to know there is more than meets the eye about him. As I say, I do not think this is in any way a criticism of his ideas or his proclaimed position, or of the success of the solution to nihilistic despair—rather it gives it deeper authenticity. The opposite brings to mind Bertrand Russell's remark that, 'Most people would rather die than think and many of them do!' This is to live without any understanding of the problem, so of course there is no dark problem to solve. For Colin Wilson existential nihilism is a philosophical and personal problem, and inseparably so. He could see the problem, and one got the impression he knew perfectly well what it was like to experience it—but remarkably he had perhaps conquered it to as great an extent as any who understand what is being opposed can. In some manner a great man.

A. J. AYER



[Extracted from: 'The Thinkers': a *Daily Telegraph Magazine* article, dated November 1, 1968 (no. 213), p. 62-75. (C93)]

A. J. Ayer, 58, is the leader of the English school of logical positivism. *Language, Truth and Logic*, published when he was 26, caused something of a revolution in English philosophy by dismissing most of the philosophy of the past as "nonsense". He is Wykeham professor of logic at Oxford, and has published half-a-dozen other books, including *The Problem of Knowledge* (1956) and *The Concept of a Person* (1963).

When I first met Ayer, many years ago, I half expected him to have scaly wings and a long tail. Logical positivism struck me as a kind of deliberate murder of everything important in philosophy. But in fact, Ayer is a witty and highly sociable man, who talks and thinks with great rapidity. (One philosopher observed wryly: "He can talk faster than I can think—even in French.") The secret of Ayer is not only the dazzling rapid intelligence, but an almost puritanical distaste for strong emotion.

When Ayer left Oxford in 1932, he went to Vienna and came under the influence of the original circle of logical positivists—a group of philosophers and scientists influenced by Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, and led by Moritz Schlick. His *Language, Truth and Logic* is basically a statement of the views of the Vienna Circle. These views might be summarised like this: "There are only two kinds of meaningful statement. If I say 'It is snowing outside', this is meaningful because you can go outside and see if I am telling the truth. If I say: 'One and one makes two', that is meaningful because you can verify it by showing that its denial entails a logical contradiction. Any statement that cannot be verified in one of these two ways—by experiment or logic—is nonsense." This is called the "verification principle", and it did away with 99 per cent of what

had always been called philosophy, and left the house looking beautifully clean.

One of the chief arguments against philosophy is that although philosophers have been arguing for nearly 3000 years there is still no agreement whatever about the basic questions—there is still not even an agreement about what philosophy is supposed to be. Logical positivism made it look as if, after 3000 years of bungling and squabbling, philosophy had at last got away to a fair start.

This hope has gradually faded, for a simple reason. If we accept the verification principle in its strongest form, then nearly all statements about history become “meaningless”, because you cannot walk backwards into yesterday and “prove” them. The same goes for the laws of science; I can prove that if I drop this little apple, it will fall to the ground, but this doesn’t prove that gravity is a *law*. In other words, history and science both become nonsense if I accept the most extreme form of the verification principle. Ayer faced this problem, and tried to modify the principle, so that it would still leave science standing, but would destroy all forms of metaphysics and speculative philosophy about God and the universe.

The enterprise has been unsuccessful, for the obvious reason. If you weaken the verification principle enough to admit science, you also allow metaphysics to squeeze in through the door. Ayer has not shirked this issue. He has remained a “sceptic” in the strictest sense of the word, and he has tried to preserve his original principles intact. His books are always full of the dazzling glitter of his logical mind, but the beautifully clean house has gone forever. The problem is obviously far more complicated than it looked in 1936.

I asked him about the influences on his philosophy, and he mentioned Moore and Russell—particularly the latter’s *Sceptical Essays*. I asked him about his politics: “Left wing, like most of us, I imagine.” I asked if there was any connection between his philosophical views and his politics: “None whatever.” And his attitude towards religion: “I’m inclined to believe that any good contemporary philosopher is bound to be an atheist.” “Are you an atheist?” “Yes.” “How about the question of life after death?”: “I don’t expect to survive my death in any sense at all.”

Bertrand Russell once defined philosophy as an attempt to understand the universe; I asked Ayer if he would agree with this definition. After a moment's hesitation: "No, I think that's too broad." How would *he* define philosophy? "Trying to think clearly about philosophical topics."

Ayer is certainly a long way from the layman's idea of a philosopher—the man with the Karl Marx beard who wears odd socks. He has a wide circle of acquaintances in Oxford and London (where he keeps a flat), and admits to enjoying parties and appearing on television. To my own slightly prejudiced eye, it often seems that he is at his best as a critic of other people's ideas rather than as an originator. But the speed at which his mind works is always awe-inspiring, and British philosophy owes him a great deal.

C. D. BROAD



[Extracted from: 'The Thinkers': a *Daily Telegraph Magazine* article, dated November 1, 1968 (no. 213), p. 62-75. (C93)]

Professor C. D. Broad, 80, is one of the father-figures of the present generation of philosophers. He lives at Trinity College, Cambridge in rooms once occupied by Sir Isaac Newton. His most important works are *Scientific Thought* (1923) and *The Mind and Its Place in Nature* (1925), although my own favourite among his books is his three-volume *Examination of McTaggart's Philosophy*. The interesting point about this book is that McTaggart was a disciple of Hegel, the last of the great "universal" philosophers—whom the new generation regards with contemptuous disgust. And yet Broad's book on McTaggart, while destructive, is scrupulously fair and balanced.

This is somehow typical of him. His mind is obsessively tidy and orderly. When he discusses a philosophical question, he begins by neatly dividing and subdividing it into every possible heading. One might therefore be tempted to dismiss him as the dullest kind of academic philosopher. Nothing could be further from the truth. For Broad is a strange paradox as a philosopher. A delightful and amiable man, his charm overflows into his books, which have a flavour reminiscent of Charles Lamb or Hazlitt. (He would wince at the comparison.) His autobiography contained in the volume *The Philosophy of C. D. Broad* (Tudor Publishing Co., 1959) is a minor classic that brims over with the author's delightful personality.

Broad differs from his younger contemporaries in another important respect: he is deeply interested in psychical research, and accepts that there is probably a life after death. Oddly enough, he says he doesn't like the idea. "I've been terribly lucky in this life; everything has gone very well, I've achieved all the success I could probably want—probably far more than I deserve—so I don't much

like the idea of taking a chance in another world. I'd rather just come to an end." His *Lectures on Psychical Research* is a strange volume to come from a philosopher with such a passion for science; but he fails to see this point of view.

"If these facts of psychical research are true, then clearly they are of immense importance—they literally alter *everything*. So how can a man call himself a philosopher and leave them out of account? Surely they at least deserve disinterested investigation? And yet most philosophers treat them as totally irrelevant."

I asked him his views on politics: "I'm afraid I'm well over to the right." And on religion: "No, I wouldn't describe myself as religious. I don't feel that the reality of psychical phenomena necessarily entails religious consequences." I also asked his views on philosophy, which turned out to be surprisingly gloomy: "I'm inclined to doubt whether there can *be* any more philosophy in Plato's sense of the word. Philosophy may have come to an end."

Broad distinguishes two types of philosophy: "speculative" and "critical". Speculative philosophy is the kind with which all the great philosophers, from Plato to Bergson, have been concerned. Broad has little patience with it, because he feels it is too much influenced by human hopes and fears. He feels that philosophy ought to be the critical, scientific examination of such simple concepts as "cause", "quality", "individual".

Broad has a great deal in common with his younger contemporaries at Oxford. Yet his view of them is unenthusiastic. He remarks that if the "common language" philosophers should tease him with the accusation that his McTaggart book consists of "difficult trifles", he would heartily agree, and retort that the writings of their school consist largely of easy trifles. "I shall watch with a fatherly eye," he once wrote, "the philosophical gambols of my younger friends as they dance to the syncopated pipings of Herr Wittgenstein's flute."

Broad is startlingly modest about his own position. He remarked about a trip to America: "It was fun to be treated as a great philosopher. I do not think it did me any harm, for my knowledge of the works of the great philosophers...enables me to form a pretty

shrewd estimate of my own place in the hierarchy.” He frankly admits that he “shot his bolt” as a philosopher in the mid-Thirties, and lost interest in philosophy from then on. He says that he retired at 65 with “positive pleasure”, delighted not to have to occupy “the ambiguous position of an un-believing pope”.

At 80, Broad is as lively and as charming as ever. He looks absurdly young, and walks and talks like a man in his fifties. He has just been made Kitchen Steward, slightly to his disgust. The great love of his life is Scandinavia—and he intends to spend more time there when his present term of office is over. Whether or not he is still interested in philosophy, his outlook—with its emphasis on scientific detachment and his dislike of deep feeling—has been a major influence on the present generation of English philosophers.

ALBERT CAMUS



[First published as “‘Lucky’ Camus’, an extended review of Herbert Lottman’s *Albert Camus: a biography* in *Books and Bookmen*, (August 1979), p. 42-49 (**E168**); then reprinted in *Anti-Sartre, with an essay on Camus*, by Colin Wilson. San Bernardino: Borgo Press, 1981 (**A60**) and *Below the Iceberg, Anti-Sartre and Other Essays*, by Colin Wilson. Borgo Press, 1998 (**A151**)]

On the evening of Sunday, January 3, 1960, I was about to set out to meet my wife from the station—she had been away for the weekend—when the phone rang. A voice with a very heavy French accent said “Meestair Veelsong?” I said it was. “Thees ees Agence Nationale de...something-or-other. Did you know that Albert Camus was killed today?” I said: “I’m delighted to hear it.” Now this was not callousness. It was just that my friend Bill Hopkins was always ringing me up and pretending to be a Chinese Laundry, or the head of a chain of German brothels inviting me to do a publicity tour; and the accent sounded very like Bill’s idea of a music hall Frenchman. Naturally, I assumed this was Bill, trying to convince me that another literary rival was no longer in the running.

Eventually, the voice at the other end of the line convinced me that this was not a joke—he obviously knew too much about the accident, mentioning—what Bill would certainly not know—that Camus was returning to Paris with Michel Gallimard when the car skidded off the road. If Camus had been wearing a seat belt he would have survived; as it was, he was catapulted head first through the rear window. He died instantly.

I made my inane comments, and drove off to the station. I had not known Camus well, but we had met in Paris, and corresponded amicably for a few years. He was supposed to be writing an introduction to the French edition of my second book *Religion and the Rebel*, and I wondered if he’d had time to do it before he was

killed. (He hadn't.) Then I caught myself thinking these purely selfish thoughts, and thought: "This is stupid. I don't know whether his death is a major loss to literature—I doubt it—but he was one of the few genuinely original writers of our time. His death seems *stupid*. Why did a man like that have to die?" And it struck me that this was, in itself, a Camus situation. His death was "absurd." And here was I, trying to respond to it, and yet feeling nothing deep down....

Does the question itself seem absurd—why did Camus die?—sounding like one of those Victorian moralists who asks indignantly how God can permit the death of innocent people? I suppose it does. And of course, we are all nowadays logical enough to see that such an approach is irrational. And Camus especially, who did not believe in God, would have been quick to point out its absurdity. Yet I am not so sure. Camus' work was basically about *that* kind of question, the problem of the "justice" of such matters. And I admit that I have a feeling that, in some obscure way, life usually does make sense....

I knew, for example—what was something of a closely-guarded secret—that Camus was something of a Don Juan. Simone de Beauvoir had hinted something of the sort in her *roman à clef*, *The Mandarins*, where Camus is "Henri," but she had limited Henri to a few selected "love affairs"; a close woman-friend of Camus' had told me that, in fact, Camus' loves were often purely a matter of physical satisfaction. He was married, she said, but spent much of his time living in hotel rooms, leading an oddly rootless existence. I certainly didn't disapprove of this—all healthy young men would like to make love to every girl in the world—but had experienced enough of it myself to know that it produced an odd sense of futility.

And then there was his philosophy. He spoke about "the absurd"—that is, man's preposterous tendency to believe that the universe somehow cares about him—but it was really an updated version of Thomas Hardy's belief in a malevolent deity who enjoys screwing us up. He was fascinated by a story of a traveller who returns home to his mother and sister after many years, deliberately concealing his identity so he could spring it on them the next morning; but in the night, they murder him for his money.... He

thought so much of this nonsensical anecdote that he used it twice, once in a full-length play.

So although I couldn't *feel* Camus' death as I drove to the station, I began to feel I could understand it.

Now, at last, what looks like the standard biography of Camus has appeared—seven hundred and fifty pages of it—and I feel more strongly than ever that my intuition was basically correct. Camus' death was not a violent and tragic interruption of a purposefully-evolving career. In a certain sense—and I will qualify this later—Camus' career was already at an end when he died at the age of forty-six.

It is a curious and ironic life story that is recounted by Herbert Lottman, an American highbrow journalist. Camus was born just before the First World War, and spent a poverty-stricken childhood in Algiers; his father was killed in the early months of the war. He grew up in the household of a dominant bully of a grandmother, a thin, slight boy, who showed no signs of future genius. He loved football and swimming (and was still a football fan when I knew him). Fortunately, the boy also had a dominant male to model himself on: his uncle Acault, a butcher with literary leanings, who lent him books and engaged him in arguments.

When Camus was sixteen, Uncle Acault lent him Gide's *Nourritures terrestres*, but it failed to make an impact. Then, at seventeen, Camus "woke up." What happened is that he suddenly went down with consumption; it seemed likely that he had not long to live. The prospect of death made Camus look at life with a new interest; it made him appreciate his "sun-drenched" Mediterranean. Convalescence also gave him time to read; he re-read Gide, and this time was deeply impressed by it—as his uncle had expected him to be.

So Camus was turned into a major writer by consumption. And while it would hardly be true to say he never looked back, it is quite clear that the brush with death brought him a new kind of self-awareness. He began to mix with intellectuals, and to spend hours sitting in cafés holding arguments. Under the influence of a teacher, Jean Grenier, he began to write. Grenier was the author of a book of slight Mediterranean sketches; but he also seems to have been a

psychologist of some penetration. One of his remarks, quoted in this book, strikes me as startlingly perceptive:

“People are astonished by the great number of diseases and accidents which strike us. It’s because humanity, tired of its daily work, finds nothing better than this miserable escape into illness to preserve what remains of the soul. Disease for a poor man is the equivalent of a journey, and life in a hospital the life of a palace”.

This is the kind of questioning of human existence that became second nature to Camus.

At nineteen, he made what at first looks like a stupid and rash decision: to marry a pretty drug addict who came from a higher social class. In fact, I suspect that some deep instinct for self-education was operating. His period with the girl brought much interesting experience. He worked as a clerk, did amateur dramatics in his spare time, and began to evolve into the cool, ironic, questioning personality of later years. He rented a flat overlooking the bay, which he shared with two girl students, and began writing an early version of *L’Étranger* called *A Happy Death*. On a holiday in Germany, he discovered that his wife had been sleeping with a doctor to obtain drugs—probably more than one—and the marriage foundered. I suspect that it was this kind of experience that made Camus regard the universe with the same suspicious eye as Thomas Hardy (“What has God done to Mr. Hardy,” Edmund Gosse wanted to know, “that he rises up and shakes his fist in His face?”).

Camus then joined the Communist party, presented his own dramatization of Malraux’s *Day of Wrath*, produced his first small book of essays, got mixed up in Algerian Nationalist politics, and finally broke with the Communists (who denounced him as a Trotskyite, a name communists often apply to anyone who is too idealistic). Then, in the pre-war years, he marked time, working as a journalist, even as an actor. He met the girl who was to become his second wife—a demure young lady of bourgeois background—and laid aside other love affairs to “pay court” in the accepted bourgeois manner. When the war came, Camus moved to Paris, and became a journalist on *Paris Soir*, the French equivalent of a Hearst newspaper. The major phase of his career now began.

By this time, he had written two of the works for which he is best known—*L'Étranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Both, fortunately, were short—an advantage in wartime Paris, where paper was scarce. They appeared in 1942. And their appearance at this time could be regarded as Camus' first stroke of extraordinary good fortune—or, alternatively, as the first blow of a fate that intended to kill him with kindness. France was occupied by the Germans; therefore, the French had temporarily abandoned their customary trivial-mindedness; they were in a Dostoevskian mood, and these grim little meditations on suicide and death, on the apparent futility of human existence, and on its absurd delightfulness, were read with heartfelt appreciation. Since there were so few other new writers around—Sartre being one of the few exceptions—Camus was received with respectful attention, even by critics who felt that *L'Étranger* was too Americanized.

Camus spent the remainder of the war writing his new novel, *The Plague*, and a couple of plays; and working, in a vague and desultory manner, for the Resistance. It is difficult to judge how dangerous this was. The Germans seem to have been, to their credit, extremely liberal towards French intellectuals, and allowed French literary life to proceed much as usual. André Malraux, a noted communist, was allowed to move around freely; Gallimard was allowed to publish communist writers. So although Camus undoubtedly ran a certain risk in the Resistance—mostly writing for the underground newspaper *Combat*—it was not quite the life and death situation it sounds in retrospect.

The end of the war came, and Camus' "lucky period" really began in earnest. *Combat* could now publish openly, and Camus became editor. Naturally, it was read by everyone. Camus' editorials made his name known throughout France. He was in a marvelous position—the young hero of the resistance, a major intellectual, prophet of the new morality—and all at the age of thirty-two (anyone who wants to get an impression of what these years were like should read *The Mandarins* by Simone de Beauvoir). Moreover, Camus was part of the most influential literary movement in Europe: existentialism. His friend and colleague Sartre was receiving enormous acclaim for plays like *Huis Clos* and novels like *The Age of Reason*. The press decided

that existentialism was the credo of a new “lost generation” who spent their nights in wine cellars in Montmartre and the Boul’ Mich; Camus and Sartre—who liked to sit up all night boozing—would often notice journalists scribbling in their notebooks at the next table. When Camus’ novel *The Plague* appeared in 1947, it became an instant bestseller—making him affluent for the first time in his life, and bringing him world renown. Two or three years later, when I was married and living in north London, I recall hearing some lady on the BBC’s *Critics* program saying that *The Plague* was the most important novel to appear since the war. I rushed to the East Finchley Library and borrowed it; then spent the next few days wondering what the hell she was talking about.

What happened to Camus and Sartre was, to a large extent, what happened to myself and John Osborne a decade later in London: the sudden acclaim as Angry Young Men, serious social thinkers, etc. There was one major difference. Osborne and I were totally unknown before our first appearance in print. Camus and Sartre had an impressive body of work behind them, and reputations as Resistance heroes. And France had been rendered serious-minded by the war. So where Camus and Sartre were concerned, it took several years for the counter-reaction to set in—a counter-reaction that was inevitable, because it is a basic quality of human beings to prefer to believe that something is cheaper and sillier than it seems to be. People are always delighted to see pedestals shaking.

Camus’ success was almost too good to be true. Lottman tells a story of a young journalist who jumped up onto the bar of a nightclub to make an impromptu speech about Camus—who was present—declaring that Camus was a walking injustice, because he had everything it takes “to seduce women, to be happy, to be famous,” with, in addition, all of the virtues—“Against this injustice we can do nothing.”

Even Sartre, who was notoriously ugly, felt keenly the injustice of Camus’ success with the female population of the existentialist bars.

Yet this delightful “injustice” was building up tremendous disadvantages for Camus. To begin with, he felt uncomfortable being a walking institution, being constantly treated with such seriousness. Lottman has a nice anecdote about Sartre and Camus