



LIFE AND ABSURDITY

Seminar Leader: **John Stathis**

House Leader: **Moe Takata**

Course Description

During our lives, many people try to show us how to live. We are often told to follow a certain path. However, does life really have such a clear meaning that we can look for? If it does, how do we find that meaning? If there is no meaning, how do we live without it? Later, we will be referring to our talks about the meaning of life to look at the meaning present (or absent) in language and how critical it is to understand communication so that we can truly connect with other people. We will try to answer these questions together by looking at the works of French author/philosopher Albert Camus and fictional works based off of his philosophy.

Schedule

Day 1: *Why live? Choice and Destiny*

The first day will begin with a discussion about the narratives (story-lines) that society, friends and family impose on us in our daily lives, as well as how our free will interacts with these narratives. We will discuss the contrast between how we would like to act and how we are expected to act. We will talk about to what extent we think we can reconcile these differences between our desires and our actions. The theme for today will be analyzing free will and our ability to control our destinies.

Day 2: *Happiness in a World without Order*

On this day, we will discuss how living a happy life is possible in a world seemingly without structure or purpose. While a lack of meaning in life can seem depressing to some, we will discuss positive ways to look at world that doesn't care about the lives of individuals. In order to perform this analysis, we will use the life of Sisyphus as told by Camus (*The Myth of Sisyphus*).

Day 3: *Extending Theory into Fiction: What Does It Mean to Communicate with Someone?*

After having studied the idea of meaning in life, we will apply these discussions in order to talk about meaning in language. Because we are all struggling to build our own paths, communicating with other people who are also forming their own path is essential. However, this can often be quite difficult. Thus, the theme of the third day is to examine how communication operates in a world with the degree of freedom that Camus suggests. While we all speak and try to communicate every day, the effectiveness of this communication is not always as it seems. By looking at a comical, fictional breakdown of communication, we will see shortcomings in our attempts to express ourselves and brainstorm how we might remedy these problems.

Day 4: *Presentations: Theatre of the Absurd*



The final day is an opportunity to demonstrate what you have learned in the course. By presenting and analyzing your fictional work of choice (see next section for options), you will have the opportunity to both show their understanding and opinions on Camus's theories and take an active role in answering the concerns of others about the themes discussed in this course.

Final Exercise

On the fourth day, all students will present and lead a discussion on one of the works listed below. This presentation should include a comparison of the themes of the work and those of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as well as clear applications of Camus's philosophy with regards to the work. If you would like to choose another work, get it approved with John and Moe.

- Eugene Ionesco, *The Bald Soprano: The Bald Soprano* focuses on a dinner party between two families and a conversation that becomes increasingly senseless as time goes on. This work breaks down language to its smallest sensible unit and describes how we use these units together to make sense. The play inverts that sense and shows what would happen if those logical units were used independently. A cyclical play, the story echoes the plight of Sisyphus' unending journey.
- Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*: Another story about a dinner party similar to *The Bald Soprano*. This work, however, focuses more on how differences in personal language and resultant miscommunication can lead to relationships being damaged and offence being taken due to misunderstandings. This work also focuses on what the difference between reality and illusion really is and acts as a critique of 1950s American culture.
- Harold Pinter, *The Dumbwaiter*: The story of two assassins waiting for their next assignment, it is clear that the play was adapted from *Waiting for Godot*. Updating the story, the Dumbwaiter also critiques the perceived universality of modern moral traditions and shows how such morality can be the downfall of society and order when taken out of context.
- Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*: Taking two minor comic relief characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Stoppard shows the thoughts and antics of these characters while they await their eventual demise. A view of absurdity through the destruction of laws of probability and an irrational sense of belonging to a fate of destruction, Stoppard shows both the problems and realism of defining two characters as comic relief figures and assigning these agents of comedy to a tragic death.
- Franz Kafka, *The Trial*: Kafka's *The Trial* is a story about a man being accused of a crime he did not know he committed in a criminal justice system he did not know existed. Unfinished at the time of his death, *The Trial* shows the lengths to which a man will fight for his life and freedom within an unjust system and the absurdity in pushing against a structure that does not respond rationally.



Pre-Seminar Assignments and Readings

- Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (chapters 1 and 4); fill out corresponding worksheet
- Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*; fill out worksheet
- Read a play from the list above and prepare a presentation

Message from the House Leader

Hello, my name is Moe Takata. I am a junior at Kanazawa university. I am studying international studies in my faculty. I have studied in Ghent university in Belgium for six months as an exchange student and just came back here a few months ago. In Belgium I was studying business administration and computer science. Currently I am so interested in philosophy because it has many important messages for our lives. This is why I am so excited to give our seminar to you! I do love sports, especially soft-tennis. I also like reading and watching movies. If you have any questions about our seminar, feel free to talk to me!

Message from the Seminar Leader

Hello, my name is John Stathis. I am going to be a junior at Duke University in the Fall and am currently studying Biomedical Engineering. I have long been interesting in Philosophy, especially that of Camus, who has always been my favorite philosopher. Camus influenced much of my later high school years and shaped how I approached college both in allowing me to feel more relaxed and comfortable with myself and to be more productive in my studies. Apart from school, I am very active with my Fraternity, study a variety of topics for fun for Quizbowl, listen to hard rock, and spend a lot of time playing Super Smash Bros Melee with my friends. I am very excited to have lots of engaging discussions and if you have any questions about the course, feel free to message me.