

# What is the Meaning of Life?

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*On September 13, 2011, I gave a speech called “What is the Meaning of Life?” at the Plektrum Festival for Electronic Culture in Tallinn, Estonia.*

[Plektrum Festival 2011](http://www.plektrumfestival.ee/)

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*There were about 150 people in the audience. I spoke for almost two hours, mostly extemporaneously. Afterwards, there was a long question-and-answer session. There were some truly brilliant questions. I was especially impressed by one young man, who wondered if my critique of “binary oppositions” did not run the risk of itself instituting a binary opposition between my critique and the dualisms that I criticize. I said that he was right. We need an extremely subtle and sensitive epistemology to deal with such realities, with the real transformation that we seek. It is not easy to change the world.*

*Below are my lecture notes for the Tallinn performance. I intersperse some headlines from my PowerPoint presentation.*

## **Douglas Adams, “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy”**

**A group of hyper-intelligent beings ask the supercomputer “Deep Thought” for the Ultimate Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything**

**It takes Deep Thought 7-1/2 million years to compute and check the answer**

**The answer is: 42**

**(my thanks to Wikipedia)**

After the 1960s, European and North American intellectuals tended to shift away from thinking basic questions about the meaning of life, a project which came to be considered – especially by academics – too laden with pathos; too – how shall I say it? – emotional.

Everyone pays lip service nowadays to the so-called importance of going beyond the mind-body dualism of René Descartes and the Western Mindset, but our academic culture is still very intellect-centered, excluding the emotions, which are, of course, part of the body. Leftist social critics, in my view, are by and large a bunch of abstract intellectuals thinking and talking in an abstract intellectual jargon that is a form of self-protection, a massive psychological defense mechanism against confronting themselves existentially.

## **Two Kinds of Intellectuals**

**First Kind of Intellectual: Criticising the dominant society and culture while taking refuge in pure intellectual abstraction and the identity of “the critic”**

**Intellect-centered, academic specialisation, writing style comprehensible only to insiders**

**Second Kind of Intellectual: Confront oneself existentially and psychologically**

**Get in contact with body, feelings, emotions, heart**

**Writing style beyond dualism of high and popular culture**

Perhaps this attitude at the university – discouraging us from thinking about the meaning of life – is a component of the nihilism of our times which the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche had earlier diagnosed at the end of the nineteenth century? Now that we are faced with hugely complex problems in economics, ecology, government, education, religion, biology, media, technology, etc., I believe that it is time to return to examination of the ideas of the great mid-twentieth century existentialists. Two writers who thought very deeply about the meaning of life were Albert Camus, who was French-Algerian, and Paul Goodman, who was American and a Jewish New Yorker. What kind of social and individual life, according to Camus and Goodman, would be worth living for? What did Camus mean by *The First Man* – the title of the book that he was writing at the time of his death by car crash on January 4, 1960? How could the ethics of Albert Camus and Paul Goodman help us today to face the challenges of violence, simulation of democracy, alienation in work and social institutions, and increasing science-fictionalization of everyday life experience? And given that Camus and Goodman were both very much concerned with the figures of “the artist” and “the rebel,” how can artists, musicians, and social-political activists act to bring about a better life in the contemporary context?

## **After Postmodernism and Deconstruction, a Return to mid-20th century Existentialism**

**Albert Camus, French-Algerian**

**Paul Goodman, American, Jewish New Yorker**

**Others like Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, R.D. Laing, Fritz and Laura Perls, Ernest Hemingway**

I have been asked to speak about the subject of the meaning of life for 60 minutes. I am very honoured to have been invited by the Plektrum festival here in Talinn to speak about this topic. I have a lot of respect for philosophy and I love philosophy, but I am also interested in writers like Albert Camus and Paul Goodman who were deep thinkers but not philosophers. Philosophy, in my view, is a very special kind of discourse, and much of it has become, unfortunately, almost a technical discourse. It is not understandable to non-specialists. I think that we need to look outside of philosophy for some very basic important ideas to help us out in dealing with our present-day existential and social problems. Another favorite thinker of mine, Claude Lefort, who was a great political philosopher, said that political philosophy is a field of knowledge and thinking that is quite distinct from philosophy. Following Lefort, I think that we need many additional autonomous fields of knowledge and thinking arenas which will have a similar ennobled status to that which Lefort claimed for political philosophy.

**Albert Camus and Paul Goodman Were Deep Thinkers About Life But Were Not Philosophers**

**Alain Badiou's project of a renaissance of philosophy is really an inter-disciplinary project**

**Philosophy is too much of a technical discourse to lead the inter-disciplinary project of knowledge**

**We need a thinking connected with life and existence, an engaged thinking**

I will divide my talk into three parts. In the first part, I will explain what I think Albert Camus said about the meaning of life. In the second part, I will explain what I think Paul

Goodman said about the meaning of life. In the third part of my talk, I will answer the question of what the relevance of the ideas of Camus and Goodman the existentialists regarding the meaning of life can be in the contemporary context of the very challenging set of social problems that we have today.

## **Criticisms of Postmodernism and Deconstruction from the Perspective of Science**

### **Edward Slingerland, “What Science Offers the Humanities”**

#### **Postmodernism’s focus on language and culture leads to relativism and disembodiment**

#### **Alain Badiou: criticizes the “anti-Platonism” of postmodernism**

#### **The remedy is existentialism, or the search for an existentialist science**

In his book *The Myth of Sisyphus*, published in 1942 during the Second World War, Albert Camus wrote the following sentences at the very beginning of the book: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest – whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories – comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer.”<sup>1</sup> I think that this famous opening passage of the book has always been misread and misinterpreted. *The Myth of Sisyphus* is not a book of philosophy, Camus is not a philosopher, and he does not speak anywhere in his entire oeuvre in any sustained way from within the perspective of philosophy. What is actually taking place in this passage at the start of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and in the pages that follow, is that Camus is making a very brief foray into philosophy, in order to find out, through experiential and rational experimentation, what his position on one extremely important single question is, the question of the meaning of life. And Camus undertakes this experiment, not in order to return again and again to the question, like someone who is stuck on some endless Wheel of Samsara as Buddhism calls it, like someone stuck in a repetition compulsion as psychoanalysis calls it, like someone teaching the same seminar over and over again every Fall as most professors in our university system do, but in order to answer the question, in order to then leave philosophy, in order to move on. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus will ask and answer the question, draw the conclusions, and then live the consequences of his reflection.

Camus answered the question about suicide, the question about the meaning of life, about the value of life. ASKED AND ANSWERED, as the trial lawyers say (at least the ones on TV in great American TV shows like *LA Law*, *Boston Legal*, *The Wire*, and *The Practice*). I shall argue that Camus' argument is watertight. There are no logical flaws in his argument. Unlike Bertrand Russell's effort at arguing logically for atheism, *Why I Am Not a Christian*, a book which has several logical flaws. Russell criticizes various well-known philosophical-theological arguments for the existence of God from a stance which shares the same shaky non-recursive dualistic epistemological ground with what he is criticizing. And, by the way, in religious terms, Camus' position is neither that of a believer nor an atheist nor an agnostic. He is beyond all of those reductionist labels.

Do you want to live? Camus answered in the affirmative. YES. The answer is that life indeed is worth living. The sense of the absurd that gave rise to the question, to the doubt, is not a static condition. The absurd is a dynamic, a relationship, a gap, a cleft — between my aspirations for a good life and the frustrations of the existing social-existential order of things. And this dynamic is the groundswell of the most important human quality of all: creativity.

Nietzsche also wrote about this sacred Yes, this saying yes to life, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The philosopher Caroline Heinrich, one of my true friends, wrote about this Nietzschean moment of recognition in her essay "In Search of the Child's Innocence," which I have translated from German into English. Nietzsche writes in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "The child is innocence and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a sport, a self-propelling wheel, a first motion, a sacred Yes." Caroline Heinrich writes: "For the invention of radically new values to occur, it is first absolutely necessary to achieve the void of values. I want to investigate the question of why the creation of values – based as it is on the fundamental rule of saying yes to life – is to be found more than anywhere else on the playing field of the child."<sup>2</sup> Creativity means to go beyond the separation of play and work. There is a kind of creative work that is separate from other work. There is also a possible transformation of lots of kinds of alienated work into creativity. There are certain kinds of drudge work which can never be transformed. All three of these categories exist.

**Separation of Creation and Origin: An Example of How the "God Question" is More Complex**

**Stephen Hawking (in "The Grand Design") say that the universe may be self-creating, and he thinks that he has thereby disproved the existence of God**

**But the origin of the universe, and the creation of Earth and Life on Earth, are two completely separate questions**

**Earth and Life on Earth are perhaps a bio-computer program, perhaps written by advanced-civilisation aliens**

“There is but one truly serious philosophical problem,” writes Camus, “and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.” By writing this, Camus is, in a way, making fun of philosophy. He is having a good Renaissance Rabelaisian belly-laugh, as the Marxist literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin would say (see his book *Rabelais and His World*). The entire programme of philosophy can be boiled down to one serious problem, one fundamental question. If you can answer that, you are done with philosophy. The rest is relatively uninteresting. And you wanna know why? Because it’s so darned abstract, that’s why. Make it concrete, relate it – in every breath it takes – to the real world, and then it will become truly interesting for the very first time. But that might be the start of a new “Plato-style” renaissance that is not philosophy anymore.

Camus’s assertion is similar to something that I wrote in a photo-essay called “Whiskey Pete’s Casino at the California/Nevada Border”, that I published at my website in March 2011:

This is what I (Alan Shapiro) most basically think as a philosopher: every question has two sides to it (a very wise man taught this to me on a Tuesday – that wise man’s name, by the way, is the Gestalt therapist Jerry Kogan). Every question has two sides to it, including the question of philosophy’s value. Most people spend their lives making money and engaged in the tweaking of bits and bytes. Philosophy is simultaneously of much greater and of much lesser value than such pursuits. Philosophy is priceless. At the same time it is total bullshit. Which makes it, altogether, half-gold and half-bullshit. Or more precisely: quasi-gold and quasi-bullshit.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus makes a sojourn into philosophy, but with that one book he makes his complete reckoning with philosophy. No need to write 70 volumes like Jacques Derrida did, or 30 volumes like Slavoj Žižek did. Note that Camus says that

suicide is the one truly serious **philosophical problem**, not the one truly serious problem of the thought and action and creation of a thinking man, of a man who takes life seriously.

Suicide is the serious problem of Western philosophy, not of Buddhist or Hinduist philosophy, both of which contain answers to that Kierkegaardian “fear and trembling” already built-in, and go on to other concerns. The subject of “suicide and philosophy” began with Socrates, at the dawn of Western philosophy. Western philosophy ended with Derrida, who told us what is wrong with it, pointed out its limit. Derrida’s word for Western philosophy is metaphysics. I think that the later works of Alain Badiou are great, but the new Plato-like project that he is talking about is really a project that is beyond philosophy. Now it is time to move on to something else, to spread out our wings, to initiate a project within which philosophy will retain an honoured place as a core component.

### **The Transformation of Work into Creativity**

**Karl Marx on “alienated labour”:** “The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844”

**Friedrich Nietzsche, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra”:** a sacred saying yes to life, the creation of values, the playing field of the child

**Creativity means to go beyond the separation of work and play**

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus connects suicide and what he calls the sense of the absurd, or more simply, the absurd. I once heard a rather prominent psychoanalyst say at the New School for Social Research in New York that the essence of Freud’s position is that most of us are sleep-walking our way through life. One could therefore connect Camus and psychoanalysis in an interesting way. How do I become one of the minority of people who are awake to living life fully, but without being driven to despair? “What, then,” writes Camus, “is that incalculable feeling that deprives the mind of the sleep necessary to life?” “In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights,” he continues, “man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.”<sup>3</sup> The alien: political or extraterrestrial. The stranger. Exile. Divorce. An actor out alone on the stage, performing. These are all prevalent themes of our contemporary social reality in the year 2011. In the present.

## **Albert Camus and Psychoanalysis**

**What is my way of making money? (related to Marx)**

**What is my sexuality? (related to Freud)**

**Psychoanalysis: sleep-walking one's way through life**

**Psychology of the unconscious (Freud); psychology of consciousness (Gestalt Therapy)**

**What is the actual success rate of psychoanalysis? Not many ideas about healing**

One could also connect Camus and Marxism in an interesting way. As a thinker, I am myself endlessly ambivalent about Marxism, and I believe in a project that is called “existentialist Marxism.” In Germany, where I live most of the year, there are many Marxist professors of sociology who have written many books about Marxism. I am quite sure that none of them has ever gone to work in a factory or an office, so what are they talking about? Camus, on the contrary, connects his “existentialist Marxism” directly to the difficult daily challenges of the proletarian experience. “It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm – this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the ‘why’ arises and everything beings in that weariness tinged with amazement.”<sup>4</sup> (“dans cette lassitude teintée d'étonnement”) This is the beginning of consciousness or awareness. **Bewusstsein. Aufmerksamkeit.** The continuator of and successor to psychoanalysis known as Gestalt Therapy is primarily a therapy of consciousness and awareness. Gestalt Therapy is psychoanalysis taken to the level of the unity of theory and practice. Classical Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalysis is more or less stuck on the moment of “recognition” – **Erkenntnis** – getting the analysand to remember his traumas and life history. There are not many ideas about healing in classical psychoanalysis. Paul Goodman, by the way, was one of the founders of Gestalt Therapy. Another school of “unorthodox Marxism” which I think is very important is the Hungarian school of so-called “Western Marxism,” which was started by the literary theorist György Lukács, who wrote a great book called *History and Class Consciousness*. How to raise class consciousness is the most important question of Marxism. It is permanently astonishing to me that so many critical leftist intellectuals in Europe love the theory of the unconscious, and they believe, in what amounts to a massive colossal mistake,

that Gestalt Therapy is some sort of American integration conspiracy to get unhappy people to go along with the world as it is. The truth about the radical potential of Gestalt Therapy is exactly the opposite of that.

## **Albert Camus and Marxism**

### **The project of existentialist Marxism as an alternative to orthodox Marxism**

#### **Individual consciousness and working-class consciousness**

#### **Information technology workers: the new working class (Andre Gorz and Serge Mallet in the 1960s)**

#### **Antonio Gramsci, organic intellectuals**

#### **Jean-Paul Sartre, “Search for a Method” (the basis of existentialist Marxism)**

Certainly Camus was a critic of capitalism, and especially of the way that it forces us to live: “A man wants to earn money in order to be happy,” he writes in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. “His whole effort and the best of a life are devoted to the earning of that money. Happiness is forgotten; the means are taken for the end.”<sup>5</sup>

Albert Camus concludes logically that suicide is not a solution to the absurd. The absurd does not dictate death. The absurd emerges from the confrontation between the human striving for reasonableness and the unreasonable silence of the world. This reminds me so much of some of the best television episodes of *Star Trek: The Original Series* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* – for example, the conversations between Captain Jean-Luc Picard and the alien character Q, played by John De Lancie, who seeks to put humanity on trial. Humanity is not qualified to advance to a higher stage, a better way of life, a more utopian society – metaphorically in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* to journey out into the galaxy – until it has passed a whole series of very difficult tests. In Algiers, Algeria, Camus had a dog whom he named Kirk.<sup>6</sup> Captain James Tiberius Kirk of *Star Trek: The Original Series* often engages in defiant dialogue with absent gods who have left us to an unreasonable fate. “This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said,” writes Camus. “But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the moment it is all that links them together.”<sup>7</sup> From the moment that absurdity is recognized, it becomes a

passion. The absurd is born of the desert. Absurdity arises from a comparison or tension. Absurdity is a water source, an oasis in the middle of the desert. It appears at first to be a negative, but it is really a double-positive of consciousness and rebellion. Consciousness and rebellion, these are Camus's basic principles. "The feeling of absurdity does not spring from the mere scrutiny of a fact or an impression. It bursts from the comparison between a bare fact and a certain reality, between an action and the world. The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared: it is born of their confrontation."<sup>8</sup> How to live in the state of the absurd? "How to stay alive?" as the android replicant Roy Batty asks Harrison Ford at the end of the seminal science fiction film *Blade Runner*.

Just as Sigmund Freud remains resolutely scientific while investigating all the so-called irrationalities of dreams and neuroses in the human mind, Albert Camus takes a logical, scientific attitude while examining absurdity. "My reasoning wants to be faithful to the evidence that aroused it. That evidence is the absurd. It is that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints."<sup>9</sup> Sounding very much like Plato's teacher Socrates, Camus writes: "I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. **But I know that I do not know** that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms."<sup>10</sup>

On page 40 of the Vintage Books English translation of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and on page 78 of the Gallimard French edition, Camus arrives at his conclusion. The absurd is a dialectical tension between opposites: a tension between the good, the beautiful, and the true life which I long for, and those social and existential conditions which stand in its way. Neither term of the opposition can be negated without crossing the line into escapism and fakery. The sense of the absurd develops into the historical situation of man in revolt – *L'homme révolté* – like Spartacus who led the rebellion of the slaves in ancient Rome, one of Camus's primary examples, a story engraved into in our minds in images from Stanley Kubrick's magisterial 1960 film *Spartacus*, starring Kirk Douglas, Laurence Olivier, Jean Simmons, Charles Laughton, and Peter Ustinov. Revolt or rebellion is the subject of Camus's next major work, *The Rebel*, a great book of political philosophy which has been neglected because Camus criticized the orthodox Marxism which was very popular among French leftist intellectuals at the height of the Cold War in 1951.

Going from absurdity to revolt is essentially about being cool, and in an authentic and not a commodified-consumerist way, as people try to do today through their presence in online social network platforms like Facebook. As Jeff Bridges says at the very end of the film *The Big Lebowski*, “the dude abides.” According to Camus, one must abide in the authentic and challenging existential and historical situation of the rebel, without giving in to the nihilistic temptations of either suicide or murder, which are the amoral equivalents of each other. Orthodox Marxist revolutionaries are always willing to commit murder, based on their assumption that “the ends justify the means.” “Abolir la révolte consciente, c’est éluder le problème,” writes Camus. “To abolish conscious revolt is to evade the problem.” Revolution ended in bureaucracy and state terror, because, in a nutshell, consciousness and rebellion were betrayed. Consciousness and rebellion are Camus’s two basic principles. We must stay faithful to those two, or maybe three, axioms. Camus also speaks at times of some form of non-violent revolution. “The theme of permanent revolution,” writes Camus, “is thus carried into individual experience.”<sup>11</sup> Permanent revolution, of course, was the famous thesis of the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky, who opposed Stalin and was forced into exile from the Soviet Union for the last 11 years of his life, beginning in 1929. Knowing exactly where to draw the line between orthodox and unorthodox Marxism will prove to be a tricky yet ultimately manageable business. Today I feel empowered here in Tallinn, by being physically close to the city of Kronstadt, where, in 1921, sailors and soldiers rebelled against the oppressive-centralized Bolshevik government, demanding their rights to free speech and to the formation of their own self-managing workers’ councils. Trotsky, then the Minister of War in the Soviet government, sent the Red Army to Kronstadt, brutally crushing the autonomous left-wing uprising. Why does being close to or at an important historical site empower me? In the post-psychoanalytic and Gestalt Therapy way of life, I do two things: I breathe, and I take up physical space in the world. The space gets larger. I am in many places at home.

“Living is keeping the absurd alive,” continues Camus. “The absurd dies only when we turn away from it. One of the only coherent philosophical positions is thus revolt. It challenges the world anew every second. This is where it is seen to what a degree absurd experience is remote from suicide. It may be thought that suicide follows revolt – but wrongly. For it does not represent the logical outcome of revolt.” “Revolt,” concludes Camus, “gives life its value. Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty to that life.”<sup>12</sup> Consciousness and revolt, awareness and rebellion: that is, for Albert Camus, the meaning of life. These are the two things which give to human life its meaning.

“The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.”

“Opinions differ as to the reasons why Sisyphus became the futile laborer of the underworld. To begin with, he is accused of a certain levity in regard to the gods. He stole their secrets.”

“You have already grasped that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth.”

“One sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it and push it up a slope a hundred times over; one sees the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass, the foot wedging it, the fresh start with arms outstretched, the wholly human security of two earth-clotted hands. At the very end of his long effort measured by skyless space and time without depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward that lower world whence he will have to push it up again toward the summit. He goes back down to the plain.”

“It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of these moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock.”

“The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd. Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory.”<sup>13</sup>

The exemplary figure of Sisyphus, as described by Camus, represents neither acceptance of the proletarian condition as it is nor simplistic radical rejection of it. One must abide in the proletarian condition, as in the human condition, with awareness, in order to transform this condition into something better, into creativity and, later on, into a better

society overall. The overall theory must emerge slowly and immanently from the experience, from deep familiarity with the condition, in a phenomenological and existentialist way.

Camus is contemporary in the current era of globalization not only because he is linked to Marx and Freud and Nietzsche, but also because there is a link between Camus's thought and Buddhism. The project of developing a future-oriented global *Star Trek*-like philosophy that respects the best that all historical religious, atheistic, and philosophical worldviews have to offer must include a serious consideration of Buddhism. The fundamental question of Buddhism is: how do we get out of suffering and come into happiness? "Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth," writes Camus at the very end of *The Myth of Sisyphus*. "They are inseparable."<sup>14</sup>

And here are the final two sentences of the most beautiful book that I have ever read in my life: "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."<sup>15</sup>

## **Paul Goodman**

### **One of the founders of Gestalt Therapy**

### **Influential in the American New Left of the 1960s**

### **"Growing Up Absurd": critique of the American school system**

### **An anarchist thinker, but what about rules and regulations?**

In 1964 in the United States of America, the Free Speech Movement at the University of California at Berkeley began a rebellion that, over the course of the next few years, spread to university campuses across the country, igniting a political movement against the Vietnam War. Paul Goodman became one of the intellectual heroes of the young generation. His 1960 book *Growing Up Absurd*, a critique of the state education system based on his own autobiographical experiences, made him into one of the most recognized and respected writers of the American New Left. Since as early as 1945, Goodman had been publishing manifestoes like "The May Pamphlet," writing about self-organization in the workplace and in other social institutions. His position was decidedly anarchist. Both Marxists and liberals believe illusorily in "getting into power" – dreaming of some imaginary state-or-society-wide event which is never ever going to happen. The now-defunct totalitarian Soviet Empire has been a prime

example of the Marxist self-delusion. The ridiculous impotence of President Bill Clinton and President Barack Obama in the USA – as far as implementing any real progressive social change – has been a prime example of the liberal self-delusion. The President of the United States is a puppet figure who has no real power. The power, as President Dwight D. Eisenhower so brilliantly remarked on that day in late January 1961 when his 8 years as President came to an end, belongs to the military-industrial complex, the armaments industry, the secret paramilitary agencies, the scientific war-corporations. In contradistinction to Marxism and liberalism, Paul Goodman's anarchist-existentialist-Gestalt Therapy focus was on asking the question what can we change for the better here and now, today, in the concrete circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Goodman believed that a real human community where people engage with each other and communicate with loving kindness and mutual respect is possible and within our reach. I find it interesting that Goodman often uses the word "natural" in his social theory writings. My generation of intellectuals in the cultural studies field grew up reading Jacques Derrida who, in his book *Of Grammatology*, wrote a famous critique of the discourse of "naturalness" and "the natural" in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 18<sup>th</sup> century liberal social contract theory writings. Rousseau's idea of the "state of nature" where "man is born free" as a utopian counterpoint to modern society where "man is everywhere in chains" was held by Derrida to be a myth. Derrida's position has some validity, but I believe that it is very one-sided. Goodman's discourse of "naturalness" is legitimate. "Free action," he writes in "The May Pamphlet," "is to live in present society as though it were a natural society." "A man does not look forward to a future state of things which he tries to bring about by suspect means; but he draws now, so far as he can, on the natural force in him that is no different in kind from what it will be in a free society, except that there it will have more scope and be persistently reinforced by mutual aid and fraternal conflict. Merely by continuing to exist and act in nature and freedom, a free man wins the victory, establishes the society; it is not necessary for him to be the victor over any one. When he creates, he wins; when he corrects his prejudices and habits, he wins; when he resists and suffers, he wins."<sup>16</sup> Only at the moment when a man is wounded – when he receives his biographical wound – does he truly become a man.

Goodman was in some ways close in his ideas to the psychologist Wilhelm Reich, who developed the theory of orgone energy. I believe that there is a life force within the human being which, if we go beyond repression in all of its aspects, can be released and can contribute to our vitality and longevity. We come into contact with this life-energy through

dance, performance, and other Tantric-embodied practices which, in Western culture, have been fetishized and directed in a reductionist way into what we call sexuality. Sex, as we understand it, is vastly overrated. We invest much libidinal capital into sex, much spontaneous energy that we have sucked out of other areas of social life that we have abandoned to the forces of over-rationalization and bureaucratization.

### **What Does Anarchism Really Mean?**

**Self-organisation, acting in the here and now to improve things, in the concrete circumstances in which we find ourselves**

**Not the same as anarchy, basically against violence**

**The idea of “Marxist revolution”: dreaming of some society-wide event, some imaginary future change, that will never happen**

**Liberalism also cannot really change things (Clinton, Obama): powerless in the face of the military-industrial complex**

In a crucial 1972 essay called “Freedom and Autonomy,” Paul Goodman writes: “It is a common misconception that anarchists believe that ‘human nature is good’ and so men can be trusted to rule themselves. In fact, we [anarchists] tend to take the [opposite] pessimistic view: people are not to be trusted, so prevent the concentration of power. Men in authority are especially likely to be stupid because they are out of touch with concrete finite experience and instead keep interfering with other people’s initiative and making them stupid and anxious.” “To me,” writes Goodman, “the chief principle of anarchism is not freedom but autonomy.” “Behavior is more graceful, forceful, and discriminating without the intervention of top-down authorities, whether State, collective, democracy, corporate bureaucracy, prison wardens, deans, pre-arranged curricula, or central planning. These may be necessary in certain emergencies, but it is at a cost to vitality.”<sup>17</sup>

## **Paul Goodman: The World is “For Me”**

**I have confidence in the world and what is to come**

**The most important things in life are work, love and learning**

**Goodman’s idea of the “the natural”, as opposed to Jacques Derrida’s critique of “naturalness”**

**Wilhelm Reich: “orgone energy” as a life-force that can contribute to our vitality and longevity**

**Sexuality in Western culture is way over-rated (Michel Foucault)**

“Anarchy requires competence and self-confidence,” write Goodman, “the sentiment that the world is for one.”<sup>18</sup> This is a fundamental Paul Goodman principle of anarchism and Gestalt Therapy: the world is for me. I have confidence in the world and what is to come. The most important things in life, as the actor Harrison Ford said recently on an American TV talk show, are work, love, and learning. In the existing affluent liberal societies of Europe and North America, these three essential things of life are stifled. “Autonomous people, among the middle class, the young, craftsmen, and professionals, cannot help but see that they cannot continue so in the present institutions.” “They cannot do honest and useful work or practice a profession nobly,” writes Paul Goodman, “arts and sciences are corrupted; modest enterprise must be blown out of all proportion to survive; the young cannot find vocations; it is hard to raise children; talent is strangled by credentials; the natural environment is being destroyed; health is imperiled; community life is inane; neighborhoods are ugly and unsafe; public services do not work; taxes are squandered on war, schoolteachers, and politicians.”<sup>19</sup> “A professional really becomes radical when he tries to pursue his profession with integrity and courage; this is what he knows and cares about, and he soon finds that many things must be changed.”<sup>20</sup>

## **The Chief Principle of Anarchism is Autonomy**

**But for autonomy, we need very high competence and skills, honesty and professional standards, arts and sciences, enterprise (anarcho-capitalism)**

**Major democratic events of American history (Bill of Rights, Emancipation Proclamation) were “anarchist”**

## **A second major principle of anarchism is decentralism**

In his 1970 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article on anarchism, Paul Goodman writes that, in anarchist theory, “the word revolution means the process by which the grip of authority is loosed, so that the functions of life can regulate themselves, without top-down direction or external hindrance.”<sup>21</sup> From this perspective, some of the major chapters of the history of American democracy – like the 1789-1791 Bill of Rights authored by James Madison and supported by Thomas Jefferson, and the 1861 Emancipation Proclamation issued by Abraham Lincoln which abolished slavery in the Southern states – can be seen as revolutionary and anarchist. In 1968, rebelling student and workers in Europe – from Paris, France to Prague, Czechoslovakia – identified themselves as anti-authoritarian anarchists. “Revolution” in fact occurred throughout Europe in 1968, since “revolution” in anarchist theory means the moment when the structure of authority is loosened, when areas of freedom are opened up.

The key organizational principle of anarchism is decentralism. People are engaged in the function that they perform. Authority is delegated away from the top. There are many centers of decision and policy-making. Information is conveyed and discussed in face-to-face contacts. Each person becomes aware of the entire operation.

For Paul Goodman, the meaning of life is a very serious matter. To be a responsible New York Jewish man involves achieving a balance between the humour of Woody Allen and the seriousness of Paul Goodman. I love a good joke, and I make jokes all the time, but I always keep in mind this line from Bob Dylan’s song “All Along the Watchtower”: “There are many here among us who think that life is but a joke.” I often feel that I am surrounded by such people in our nihilistic society. For them, freedom seems to mean their right to think and say: “whatever!” Paul Goodman, on the contrary, identified freedom with responsibility: “I doubt that it is possible to be free,” he wrote, “to have a say, and to live a coherent life, without doing worthwhile work, pursuing the arts and sciences, practicing the professions,

bringing up children, engaging in politics. Play and personal relations are a necessary background; they are not what men live for.”<sup>22</sup>

The anarchist position on politics, and within the academic field of government or political science, is different from what everyone else believes. Political science, of course, is the study of power: the ability to perform or act effectively, or to control the behavior of others, exercising this influence through decision-making and formal institutions. The anarchist position is that politics should be about expanding my power, our power, starting from where I or we are in the here and now. For anarchists, politics is not about “getting into” power, as almost everyone else believes. “This is the assumption, now appallingly unanimous among the ordinary electorate, professional politicians, most radicals, and even political scientists who should know better, that politics is essentially a matter of ‘getting into power,’ and then ‘deciding,’ directing, controlling, and coercing, the activities of society. The model seems to be taken from corporations with top-management, and there is something prestigious about being a ‘decision-maker’.” In our society generally speaking, “people aspire to be top-managers no matter what the goods or services produced. One is a promoter, period; or a celebrity, period.”<sup>23</sup> This is another symptom of the nihilism in modern society that Nietzsche diagnosed and prophesied: there are many people around who are just out to make money, regardless of how. They will sell any good or service if they get the chance, never asking the question of the intrinsic value of what they are selling. Even worse, there are some who, unable to make a living in an honest way, prey on others like vultures.

## **Computer Science 2.0**

**Find a halfway ground between automation and freedom/creativity**

**Half-accepting that rules and regulations are necessary for human society, and half-throwing out rules and regulations in the name of anarchist and anti-authoritarian principles**

**Make hybrid online and offline systems, bring back the human subject and human judgment/human decision-making**

To complete the circle of what I have begun, to conclude my exploration of the question “What is the Meaning of Life?”, I return now to the queries that I posed at the beginning of my speech. Let us now see if what we have learned from Albert Camus’s great work *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and from Paul Goodman’s writings on anarchism, can bring us significantly forward in our investigation into the present-day social and individual predicament. Faced as we are now with hugely complex problems in economics, ecology, government, education, religion, biology, media, technology, etc., will a return to examination of the ideas of the great mid-twentieth century existentialist thinkers like Albert Camus, Paul Goodman – and even Jean-Paul Sartre – help us to deal better with our quandaries and difficult situations? Left-wing political and social analysis has emphasized the twin principles of revolution and the unconscious. With Camus, we see the elaboration of a full-fledged alternative to these two Gods That Have Failed (or yielded only very limited success). Camus emphasizes rebellion and consciousness. Young people today are rebellious, and tomorrow they are likely to be even more rebellious. It is important that the value of their rebellion be respected and honoured, but it is even more important that they also be educated with a sense of limits – as Camus constantly wrote and spoke about – and not be led astray into excess and its harmful consequences. As I write these paragraphs, rioting and looting by an underclass of youth without hope is taking place in London. Desperate circumstances force people into desperate acts. I would criticize the brutality of both the oppressive social circumstances and the violent acts. Obviously there are circumstances in which violence is justified. However, this does not change the fact that violence will at the same time only lead to more disaster.

### **Rebellion, Consciousness, and Acting in the Here and Now**

#### **Albert Camus, “The Rebel”: a sense of limits**

**The difference between an appropriate, measured rebellion and an extremist rebellion that goes too far**

**American existentialism (Henry David Thoreau, William James, Paul Goodman) is more optimistic than French existentialism**

**We must discover an embodied and existentially authentic bridge to hope**

**The greater optimism of American existentialism is not an arbitrary or institutionally religious act of will; it is rooted in a special and singular, existentially-historically grounded, experience of life**

Paul Goodman was a pacifist during World War II, and I do not agree with that stance. My father fought in combat in the infantry in the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium in the winter of 1944-1945. He fought against the Nazis, and I am very glad that he did. Albert Camus also committed acts of great courage during World War II. He was the editor of the most important underground newspapers of the French resistance, called *Combat*. Camus was consistent throughout his life in his attitude of resistance against the dominant society. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus is not saying that we should accept society as it is, or labour as it is presently constituted. He is saying that we should rebel against the existing constellation of things, but that we should also accept the responsibility of the rebel.

There is one point where the argument of *The Myth of Sisyphus* is weak, and that is Camus's rejection of hope. In this respect, the American existentialism of Henry David Thoreau and/or William James is more optimistic than French existentialism. We must discover an embodied and existentially authentic bridge to hope. This is where Paul Goodman comes in: with his anarchist, autonomist, and Gestalt Therapy concepts that "the world is for us" and that a viable and supportive human community already exists, in the here and now, a social and individual life that is worth living for. The greater optimism of American existentialism, in contrast to French existentialism, is not some arbitrary or institutionally religious act of will. This optimism is rooted in some special and singular experiences of life. Goodman's idea that "the world is for us" is derived from Thoreau's so-called transcendentalism, and from a native American anarchist tradition of self-reliance and poetic praxis. Goodman also made an important interpretation of 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian history, focusing on the suppression of workers' and farmers' autonomy in the aftermath of the 1917 Revolution, at Kronstadt and in the Ukraine.

What did Camus mean by *The First Man* – the title of the book that he was writing at the time of his death by car crash on January 4, 1960? *The First Man* is the novelization of the autobiography of Camus's childhood and youth in Algeria between the two World Wars. It was first published in 1994, 34 years after Camus's death. *The First Man* can be read as part of a coupling, together with Jean-Paul Sartre's autobiography *Words*, published in 1964. Camus's family were French colonial settlers: the Pieds-Noirs. They lived in conditions of

extreme poverty. The philosopher Jacques Derrida also came from a Pied-Noir family, and he was Jewish. Camus's father was killed in combat in World War I when Camus was one year old. The protagonist of the novel whose name is Jacques – a stand-in for Camus himself – is *The First Man* in the sense that he is one of the men whose fathers were killed in the wars and revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and who must be their own fathers. They must raise themselves and invent the world afresh, from scratch. I had a friend who was in this situation, and I felt empathy for him. The phrase *The First Man* also has Nietzschean connotations of self-invention in the moral sense: the revaluation of all values, *die Umwertung aller Werte*.

The ethics of Albert Camus and Paul Goodman can help us today to face the challenges of violence, simulation of democracy, alienation in work and social institutions, and increasing science-fictionalization of everyday life experience. I read their works and I feel like they are my brothers.

How can artists, musicians, and social-political activists act to bring about a better life in the contemporary context? By staying faithful to the original truths that were most alive at the birth of that artistic expression, that rebellion, that desire to make the world a better place.

## NOTES

1 – Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (translated from the French by Justin O'Brien) (originally published in French in 1942) (New York: Vintage Books, 1955); p.3.

2 – Caroline Heinrich, "In Search of the Child's Innocence" (translated from the German by Alan N. Shapiro) in Jeffrey Gormly, *Framemakers: Choreography as an Aesthetics of Change* (Limerick: Daghdha Dance Company, 2008).

3 – *The Myth of Sisyphus*; p.5.

4 – Ibid.; p.10.

5 – Ibid.; p.76.

6 – Roger Grenier, *Albert Camus: soleil et ombre, une biographie intellectuelle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987) ; pp. 98-99. This book is perhaps the best available intellectual biography of Camus. "A Alger, du temps de 'la Maison devant le monde', Camus avait recueilli un chien perdu, pauvre animal qui remplissait la demeure de tiques, et l'avait appelé Kirk, le chien de l'angoisse." However, there is no mention of a cat named Spock, or a hamster named McCoy.

7 – *The Myth of Sisyphus*; p.16.

8 – Ibid.; pp.22-23.

9 – Ibid.; p.37.

10 – Ibid.; p.38.

11 – Ibid.; p.40.

12 – Ibid.; p.40.

13 – Ibid.; pp.88-90.

14 – Ibid.; p.90.

15 – Ibid.; p.91.

16 – Paul Goodman, “The May Pamphlet” in *Drawing the Line Once Again: Paul Goodman’s Anarchist Writings* (edited by Taylor Stoehr) (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010); p.26.

17 – Paul Goodman, “Freedom and Autonomy” in *Drawing the Line Once Again: Paul Goodman’s Anarchist Writings*; pp.57-58.

18 – Ibid.; p.59.

19 – Ibid.

20 – Paul Goodman, “The Black Flag of Anarchism” in *Drawing the Line Once Again: Paul Goodman’s Anarchist Writings*; p.92.

21 – Paul Goodman, “Anarchism and Revolution” in *The Great Ideas of Today* (edited by Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler) (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1970).

22 – Paul Goodman, “The Black Flag of Anarchism” in *Drawing the Line Once Again: Paul Goodman’s Anarchist Writings*; p.97.

23 – Paul Goodman, “Getting Into Power: The Ambiguities of Pacifist Politics” in *Drawing the Line Once Again: Paul Goodman’s Anarchist Writings*; p.119.