

On Camus
Robert S. Griffin
www.robertsgriffin.com

I was taken by a comment on the Nobel Prize-winning French writer Albert Camus (1913-1960) I read in *The American Scholar* magazine online in December of 2013 (<http://theamericanscholar.org>). It was in an article by Jerry Delaney called “Happy Birthday Stranger: Celebrating Albert Camus on His Centennial.” The article caught my eye because I had just finished reading an excellent joint biography of Camus and his contemporary, the French scientist Jacques Monod, and I had Camus on my mind. The biography: Sean Carroll, *Brave Genius: A Scientist, a Philosopher, and Their Daring Adventures from the French Resistance to the Nobel Prize* (Random House, 2013).

The Delaney quote was in reference to Camus’ book-length essay, written in his twenties, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. I read that book some years ago, or sort of; at least my eyes ran over the lines of type, I really didn't understand it. I need to take another look at it. I notice it is available free in PDF form on the Internet, as is Camus' book *The Rebel*, which he considered a follow-up to it. A hard read of those two books is my next personal project.

The Delaney quote:

The opening lines [of *The Myth of Sisyphus*] begin with what Camus called the first and most urgent of questions: if the world has no meaning, why live. If life is pointless, why not end it? Logic would favor suicide. Or so it would seem. But Camus quickly points out that absence of meaning is not why people commit suicide. People commit suicide because they have no dignity, no self-respect, no pleasure, no honor, no value. They are checkmated in humiliation, without the minimal elements of a satisfactory existence.

This quote gives me direction in my examination of the two books. Camus is setting out a to-do list of sorts to guide the creation of a personally satisfying life: our actions and situations should result in our experience of 1) dignity; 2) self-respect; 3) pleasure; 4) honor; and 5) a sense of our own value, or worth. And our lives should not be characterized by humiliation. I'll see what Camus has to offer in

the two books about how to move in these directions over the span of one's life.

At the same time I do that, I'll take stock of my own life from this perspective. How am I doing in terms of dignity, self-respect, pleasure, honor, and value? How am I doing with humiliation? What do I think and do that increases or decreases those things? What people and circumstances in my life contribute to those things and detract from them? Does it matter now in my life, near the end, that I have more of those things? If it does matter, what actions could I take to move myself in these directions? Am I willing to take them even if at this point in my life and given my circumstance in the world it may well be beyond my capability to achieve these goals, at least to any significant extent? And even if, in all likelihood, it is a hopeless endeavor, what better could I do with my remaining time on this earth than try to enrich my life in these ways? And wouldn't giving my all to this project, call it that, be the best way for my existence to benefit others? And without realizing it, haven't I always—certainly since my mid-twenties anyway--been trying to reach these ends? Yes, that is what I have been doing. I've tried, I really have. While I have much more to learn about Camus, I sense that he would applaud my persistent, diligent effort all this time; and he would point out that, like Sisyphus who pushed the rock up the mountain only to have it fall back on him, deep within me I'm happy, that indeed the struggle has filled my heart.