Though existentialism has roots in nineteenth-century philosophy, it became an influential philosophical movement only after World War II. Different values have been associated with this rubric, but one theme common to them all is that human beings come to existence and then make up a purpose for themselves. In Jean-Paul Sartre's words, “man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards.” Of all of the thinkers involved with this movement, French existentialist Albert Camus stands out for having written specifically on suicide in a way that reached average people rather than just philosophers.

Camus opens “An Absurd Reasoning,” the first essay in his collection *The Myth of Sisyphus*, with these words:

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.6

He makes the seriousness of the question clear by essentially threatening to think through the problem, come to an answer, and then carry out that answer, even if it means to die. With a fierce wit he judges that his subject is urgent compared with other questions of philosophy, writing, “I have never seen anyone die for the ontological argument.”

Nodding toward Durkheim, Camus tells us that suicide has been dealt with only as a social phenomenon and that he is instead concerned with the connection between individual thought and suicide. The problem he lays out is the overall
meaninglessness of existence and how absurd that makes our lives of sound and fury. But the absurd is tolerable. Camus writes that it is no more than wordplay to conclude that because life has no ultimate meaning it is not worth living. The lack of overall purpose or goal does not imply that there is no value to living. For Camus, killing oneself is an unwarranted “insult to existence,” even though life is painful. He acknowledges that he is keenly aware of the sorrow and struggles of human life; he knows that it can be exhausting, repetitive, anxious, and depressing, but he concludes that once we fully recognize the absurdity of it all, a kind of love and joy arise. His philosophy sympathizes with anguish but cajoles the fellow sufferer to embrace life, all the more so because it makes no sense. We should, Camus writes, accept that our desires do not match up with the world as we know it, and yet love the unanswerable strangeness of it all.

Toward the end of the essay, Camus makes some compelling remarks about staying alive. He says that the absurd teaches us not to make the mistake of valuing certain kinds of lives and their experiences over other kinds of lives. “For the mistake is thinking that the quantity of experiences depends on the circumstances of our life when it depends solely on us. Here we have to be over-simple. To two men living the same number of years, the world always provides the same sum of experiences. It is up to us to be conscious of them.” There is nothing more than being aware of one’s life, whatever form it might take. For Camus, “one’s revolt, one’s freedom,” is this awareness, and it is the essence of living “to the maximum.” There is no life that is higher.

This is an unusual stance in philosophy. Philosophers are much more often found encouraging people not to worry
about an early death, saying that we all die in the end and that it is of no importance how long our span of life is. Camus specifically argues with the ancient philosophers for teaching that a short, brilliant life is as good or better than a long, ordinary one. To his mind, the experience of being alive and feeling life is more important than anything in particular that life may offer. Such advice is aimed at those who have a painful fear of death and who cling so tightly to life that they forget to enjoy it as it passes. Camus, however, is aiming his advice at those who are, to some degree, disappointed by life and entranced by the idea of death. That is why Camus gives more weight to the quantity of life than to the quality. He believes that the great gift that life offers is the same for all of us and builds up over the years, so no matter how difficult one’s life seems, it would be a terrible mistake to cut it short. That leaves premature death as a real problem to be feared, and Camus acknowledges this. It is often a matter of luck whether we have a long or short life, and Camus says that this is the one real trouble we must face.

These ideas turn philosophy on its head. Instead of wisdom consoling the mass of common people who are frightened of death, Camus sees a somewhat more hidden distress of humanity, which is being fed up with life. Instead of saying that death does not matter, Camus addresses the part of us that already believes that death might be preferable to life, and he says that once we have understood the absurdity of life and accepted it, we will see that more life is always better: “One just has to be able to consent to this. There will never be any substitute for twenty years of life and experience.” People feeling depressed and disheartened by life might feel that they are just marking time, getting through one day after another without
much reason. Camus insists that there is a reason for getting through the days even when one does not feel joyous. He is certain that when we see the absurdity of the human condition, just living adds up to a rich experience that is, in its own way, joyful. In this sense Camus adds his voice to those who have said that we must not kill ourselves because of what we owe to our future selves.

Camus’s ideas are sorrowful but cheerful. No matter how much he believes in the fact of depression, he embraces life. In his words, “the point is to live.”11 He understands despair—“polar night, vigil of the mind”—but says, “I draw from the absurd three consequences. Which are my revolt, my freedom, and my passion. By the mere activity of consciousness I transform into a rule of life what was an invitation to death—and I refuse suicide. I know, to be sure, the dull resonance that vibrates throughout these days. Yet I have but a word to say that it is necessary.”12

Camus counsels a kind of revolt, which means for him that we must have knowledge of the certainty of our ultimate fate—death—but refuse to be resigned to it. It is a paradoxical revolt in the face of acceptance—a very tricky idea but one which Camus feels sure we can manage. This is why suicide is anathema to his philosophy of the absurd experience. He says that people consider suicide the ultimate revolt, but the contrary is true. Life in the face of its pain, he writes, is the ultimate revolt. Suicide “is acceptance in the extreme.”13 Our challenge is to be aware of death and at the same time reject it. The tension between being keenly aware of death yet not being resigned to it is what creates the absurd, and keeping the absurd alive keeps the person alive.

Camus writes that it is essential that we do not die of our own free will because our embracing the absurd leads us to
take all of life and give what we have. “Suicide,” he writes, “is a repudiation. The absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself. The absurd is his extreme tension, which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows that in that consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance.”

In the title essay of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus famously describes our human lives as similar to the torture of Sisyphus, who was condemned to roll the same stone up the same hill, just to have it roll down again, over and over until the end of time. Sisyphus was being punished in part because he had escaped the underworld once and lived some years enjoying life on earth. Now he is back in the underworld at his quintessentially meaningless task. Camus finds this absurd and he finds coping with the absurd heroic. Sisyphus perseveres and resists the lure of suicide. Camus holds that suicide tempts us with the illusory promise of freedom, but the only real freedom is to embrace the absurdity:

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.

Camus asks us to fully imagine the huge effort Sisyphus must make, straining his body to push the huge stone, a hundred times over. We must see his face screwed up with the effort of it, his cheek pressed hard against the stone, his shoulder fully braced against its dirty surface, his foot wedging it to
keep it from falling backward. At the end of his tremendous effort, “measured by skyless space and time without depth,” he is successful. Then he watches the boulder fall back down the hill in a matter of moments. Down he goes again to restart his toil. It is during that return, that pause in concerted effort, that Sisyphus most interests Camus. That time is when Sisyphus is most conscious. He is not distracted by the work but is fully facing the absurdity of his situation. At those moments, Camus writes, Sisyphus “is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock.”

We are stronger than our rock. Sisyphus and the rock can be a man and his tedious, repetitive work, but the rock is also life itself, even if there is no task to perform that is as onerous as the labor of Sisyphus. Every day must be borne, and the reward for bearing it is another day. Still, Camus sees reason to rejoice as well as weep. He says that it is in the descent of our rolled-up rock that we are most aware of our predicament. “If the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy. This word is not too much.” The chief sorrow, he tells us, was in the beginning. Now when images of better times, like Sisyphus’s recollection of earth, become dominant in one’s mind, and when the desire for happiness becomes too much to resist, “melancholy rises in a person’s heart and grief is too heavy to bear.” Even this grief has an antidote: “Crushing truths perish from being acknowledged.”

Even Oedipus, Camus tells us, was in the end resigned to what fate had unfolded for him and concluded that all was well. Sisyphus is exhausted but continues. He even continues well. “His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing.” The person who understands the absurdity of the human condition is strengthened by it. He or she still has to work unceasingly to bear up under the weight of being, but it is worth it.
There is no higher destiny, Camus declares. The absurd man is the master of his days. When he gazes backward over his life, he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him, and like Sisyphus and his rock, the whole seemingly unreasonable effort turns out to have meaning, just because it constituted his life. Thus, even while we are convinced that all human meaning comes from human beings, and not from outside them, we are still able to be impressed by its meaning if we allow ourselves to be. Camus says that each of us, like Sisyphus, is like a blind man who wants to see and yet knows the night has no end, but who is still “on the go.” Meaning and joy are inherent in our simple, yet heroically effortful, persistence. “The rock is still rolling.”

We endure.

He ends the essay with a famous passage that combines all his strange pessimism and optimism.

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one’s burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. . . . The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

It is not a simple kind of happiness, but Camus asks us to perceive that it is happiness all the same. For those who find life hard to bear—or perhaps for all of us when we find life hard to bear—Camus is an odd but wonderful companion, entirely empathizing with our despair, yet cheering us on to live and even see a happiness in our struggle.
Jean-Paul Sartre, like Camus associated with existentialism, wrote an illuminating analysis of Camus’s 1942 novel *The Stranger*. Sartre describes the novel’s protagonist, Meursault, as beyond suicide: “The absurd man,” Sartre writes, “will not commit suicide; he wants to live, without relinquishing any of his certainty, without a future, without hope, without illusions . . . and without resignation either. He stares at death with passionate attention and this fascination liberates him. He experiences the ‘divine irresponsibility’ of the condemned man.” Sartre also wrote about the possibility of suicide as an assertion of authentic human will in the face of absurdity. Sartre was fascinated with suicide as both a practical and a symbolic way of reacting to a godless world. Still, the real act of suicide was for Sartre the abandonment of all liberty.

It is worth noting here that even though Camus and Sartre reject suicide, they do consider it each person’s right, precisely because for them there is no God and no outside meaning, no framing significance that comes from outside the self. Neither has much faith in other people, and neither suggests that the community provides sufficient “outside meaning” to militate against suicide. Instead, for them the embrace of absurdity is a way of conceptualizing one’s commitment to living. In this sense, Camus champions the importance of the future self, without focusing on what that future self deserves.

Despite Camus’s stance against suicide, he is sometimes most remembered for the importance he gave the question. Because of his insistence that the thinking person must make a decision about whether life is worth living, he is often considered a supporter of the option to take one’s own life, and he is grouped with the secular thinkers who have actively accepted suicide.

As false as that association may be, secular philosophy has been an undeniable force in the trend toward neutral or
even positive attitudes toward suicide. The nonreligious view of the world is often thought of as a brave look into the abyss. Here is how one of the happier secular philosophers, Diderot, described existence: “To be born in imbecility, in the midst of pain and crisis: to be the plaything of ignorance, error, need, sickness, wickedness, and passions . . . never to know where you come from, why you come and where you are going! That is what is called the most important gift of our parents and nature. Life.”21 But just as with the suicide question itself, the question of the abyss is keenly shaped by religion. Because religion addresses particular kinds of ideas, like an afterlife or the efficacy of prayer, the absence of those ideas is felt as a deficit. The world without them seems a world of despair. But as many can attest, especially people raised without religion, at some distance from these religious ideas, God and the afterlife are not always missed.

Without the worldviews of various religions, the universe has often been imagined as a dark, boundless place. Belief that life is meaningless has become widespread. In much secular literature, people worry that their actions don’t matter in a world without significance. Characters express sadness over losing the specific comforts of modern Western religion. Atheist philosophers Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche elaborately embroidered this mood, as did such novelists as Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Virginia Woolf and other authors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Here is Schopenhauer on life:

Many millions, united into nations, strive for the common good, each individual on account of his own; but many thousands fall as a sacrifice for it. Now senseless delusion, now intriguing politics, excite them to wars with each other; then the sweat
and the blood of the great multitude must flow, to carry out the ideas of individuals, or to expiate their faults. In peace, industry and trade are active, inventions work miracles, delicacies are called from all ends of the world, the waves engulf thousands. All strive, some planning, some acting; the tumult is indescribable. But the ultimate aim of it all—what is it? To sustain ephemeral and tormented individuals through a short span of life, in the most fortunate case with endurable want and comparative freedom from pain, which, however, is at once attended with ennui; then the reproduction of this race and its striving.²²

It seems reasonable to reply that such dark visions underreport love, trust, hope, and community. The good is worth saving. The bearable can become sweet, and sometimes there is joy in love, and art, and the absurd.

For an individual, when life seems too hard even to endure, the idea of saving the world may not be on the table. Nevertheless, as Camus might say, the choice to get through the day, made over and over, is the heroic action that the world requires from you. The argument against suicide put forward by Durkheim also points to how to live: be engaged. To be connected to the rest of us, at least conceptually; to cultivate within ourselves an ability to feel the sustaining force of the human culture in which we live. If we take Durkheim and Camus together, it seems the job is to try to feel your connection to the world, and to try to stay curious about what is happening and about what might happen—to experience life despite its capacity to seem as brutal and pointless as the hard labor of Sisyphus, for some people, some of the time.