

Existentialism: where the absurd and the sacred meet

Simon Wein

12 December 2016

Camus: we know only two things

- **‘This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. This world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction.’**



Camus on Absurdity

**‘The absurd is born of this confrontation
between the human need and the
unreasonable silence of the world.’**

Absurd experience (1)

- **A dissonance**
 - **disconnection between need for explanation and observations of reality'**
- **It can strike any time**
 - **walking to the house of prayer**
 - **standing in the chemotherapy day-ward**
- **One becomes aware of oneself doing, thinking or loving, but it not making sense**



Absurd experience (2)

- **is not necessarily unpleasant**
 - can be a vivid awareness
 - a ‘fractured consciousness’
 - profound questions and paradoxically a greater appreciation of the moment, and of life itself
- **It can terrify with angst, and drive people to drink, or worse**
- **absurdity *in extremis* may become a psychosis**





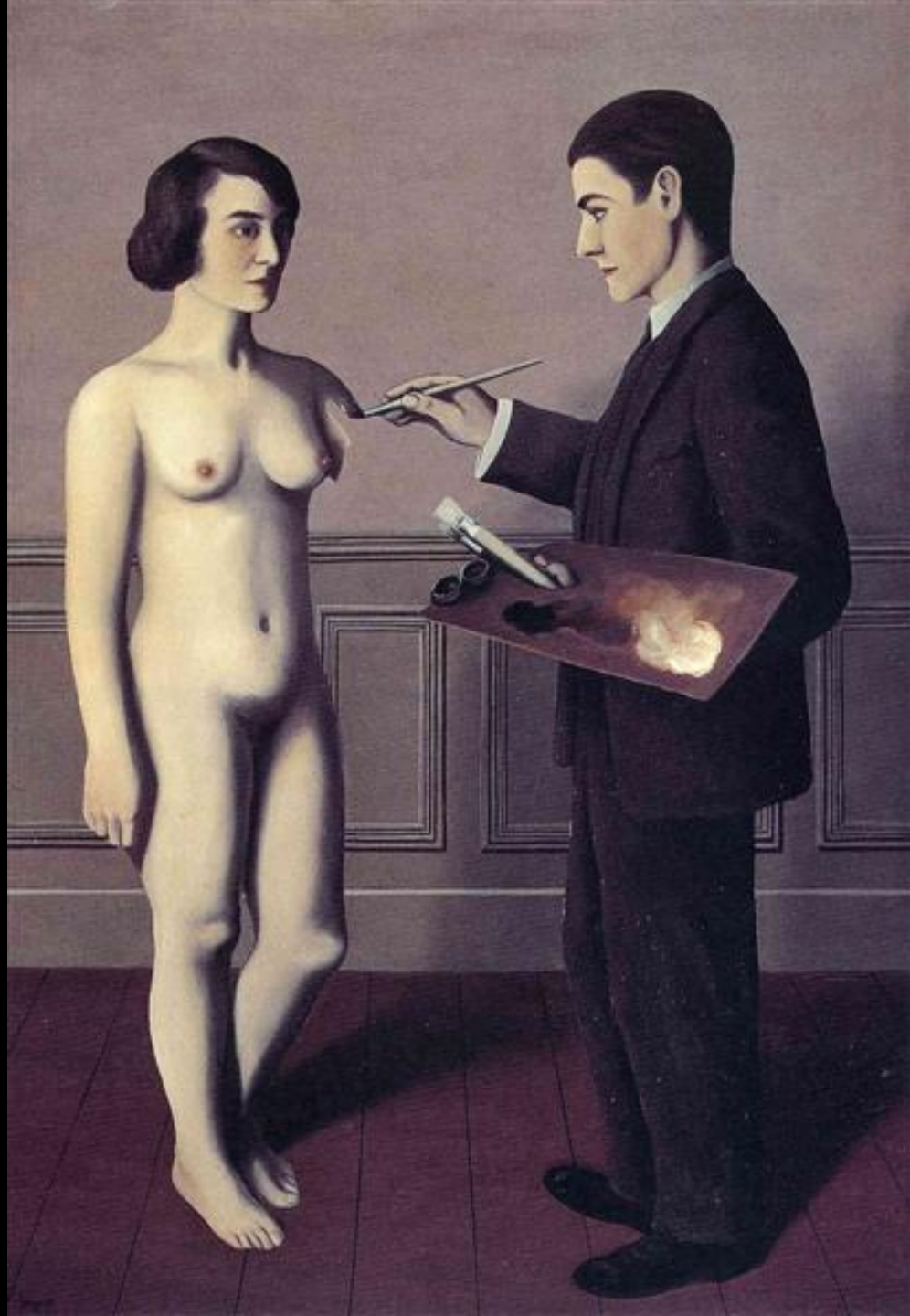
Daniel Velasco

Absurdity (3)

**Absurd experience is the seed of the
existential 'crisis'**

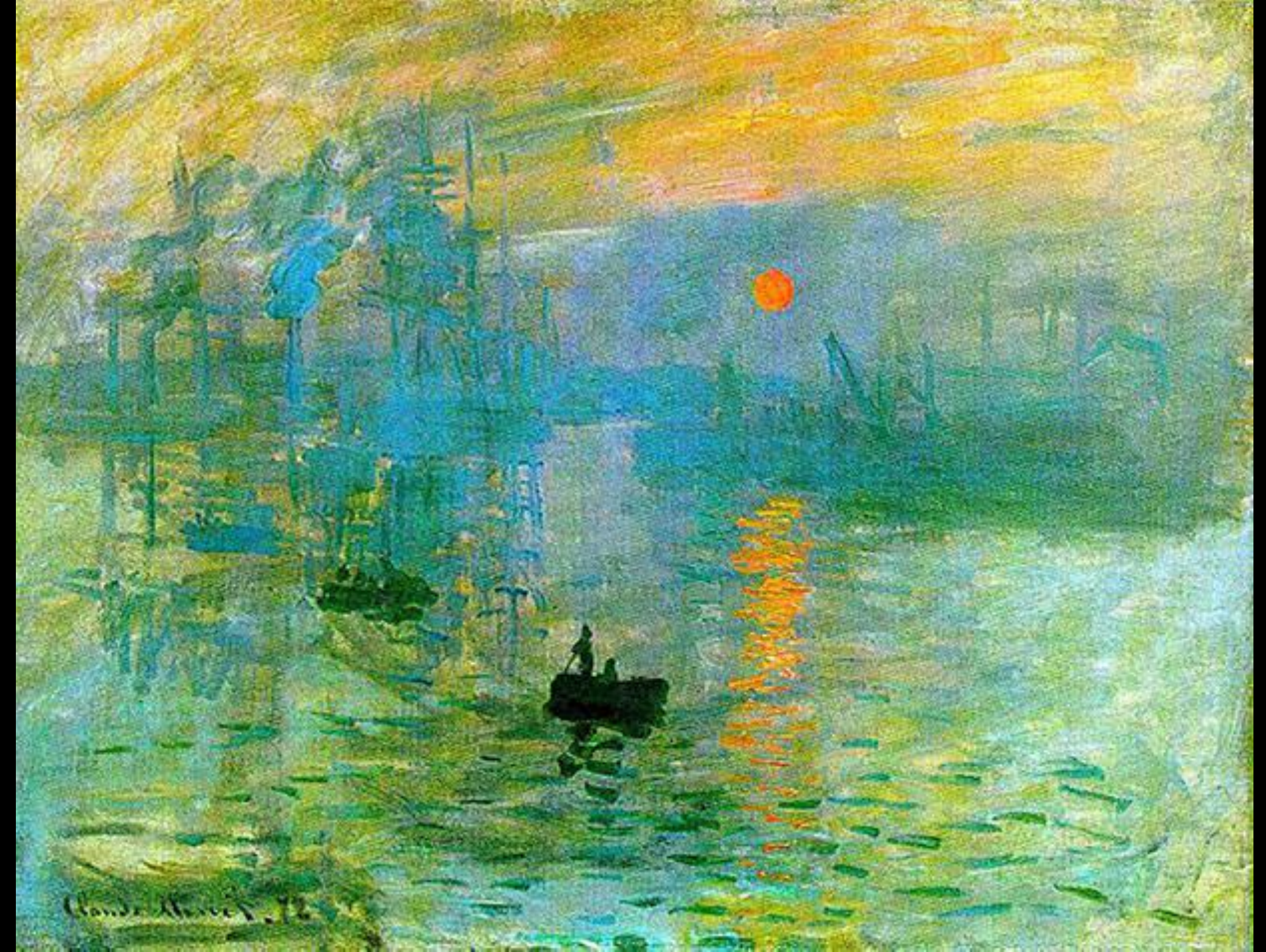
There is NO intrinsic meaning to existence

What is the purpose of my life?



Existentialism (1)

- **Something felt (absurdity), then thought**
- **To find the meaning of my life through free choice and taking decisions**
- **'Authenticity'**
- **without religion, ethnic rules, or political doctrine**



Existentialism (2)

- **there is no meaning in the world beyond the meaning we give it**
- **This meaninglessness also encompasses the amorality or "unfairness" of the world**



Existentialism (3)

- each individual—not society or religion - **is solely responsible** for giving meaning to his/her life
- strongly influenced the West: philosophy, theology, drama, art, literature, and psychology
- existentialism and dying – a challenge

A case last week

- 44 male hi-tech m + 4 metastatic colon cancer
- No past psychiatric history
 - Insomnia
 - Frightened
 - Sad
 - **Why me? Why now? I don't want to die**
- Psychopharmacology
- **Existential framework and psychotherapy**

Solutions to this problem of existence

- **psycho-spiritual-social tools**
- **All (almost) solutions are acceptable -
for the other way is madness or suicide**

A

**‘Heroism is a reflex
of the fear of death’**

Ernest Becker, The Denial of Death

A hero

- **Stands out from the crowd**
- **An exception to the rule**
(of death, or worse, insignificance)

Needs hero-worshipper

medals

ticker-tape parades

Sisyphus: The Absurd Hero

- **"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."**

Camus



How to create meaning without an Absolute?

- 'I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! ...The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy'

B

The idea of death, the fear of it haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is the mainspring of human activity - activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death.

Ernest Becker,
The Denial of Death

Terror Management Theory

- **culture and people defend their worldviews when 'threatened' by death**
- **worldview defense can either involve**
 - a) criticizing others**
 - b) praising others**

TMT: empirical study

- 2 groups of judges: death reminder or nil
- Judges read a court case and then gave bail to the alleged prostitute
- Results:
 - Control condition: \$50
 - After death awareness: \$455

Rosenblatt et al., 1989

C

Courage or Cowardice

- **Courage is that quality which, in spite of fear, enables one to achieve the goal**
- **The fear of death, shame and humiliation**

D

Symbolic immortality: a concept

- 1. Biological**
- 2. Theological**
- 3. Creativity**
- 4. External nature**
- 5. Experiential transcendence**

Robert J Lifton, Am J Psychoanal, 1973
The sense of immortality: on death and the continuity of life

E

Other ways of resolving angst

- **death by suicide**
- **diminished consciousness or reduced awareness**

Viktor Frankl on Meaning

- Life has meaning under all circumstances, even the most miserable ones
- Our motivation for living is our **will to meaning**
- Existential crisis is because of lack of meaning

Logotherapy by Viktor Frankl

- "everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances"**

- "The more one forgets himself--by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love--the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself."**

G

The Denial of Death, Ernest Becker, 1980

‘The most that any one of us can seem to do is **to fashion something – an object or ourselves – and drop it into the confusion, make an offering of it, so to speak, to the life force.’**

H

Ecclesiastes: absurdity

'Futility of futilities, all is futile. What profit does man have for all his labor which he toils under the sun?'

1:3

Ecclesiastes, 12:13

'The sum of the matter

When all has been considered

Fear God and keep his commandments

For God will judge every deed

- even everything hidden –

Whether good or evil.'

I

Existential Psychotherapy, **Irvin Yalom, 1980**

4 clinical themes

- Death**
- Freedom**
- Isolation**
- Meaninglessness**

J

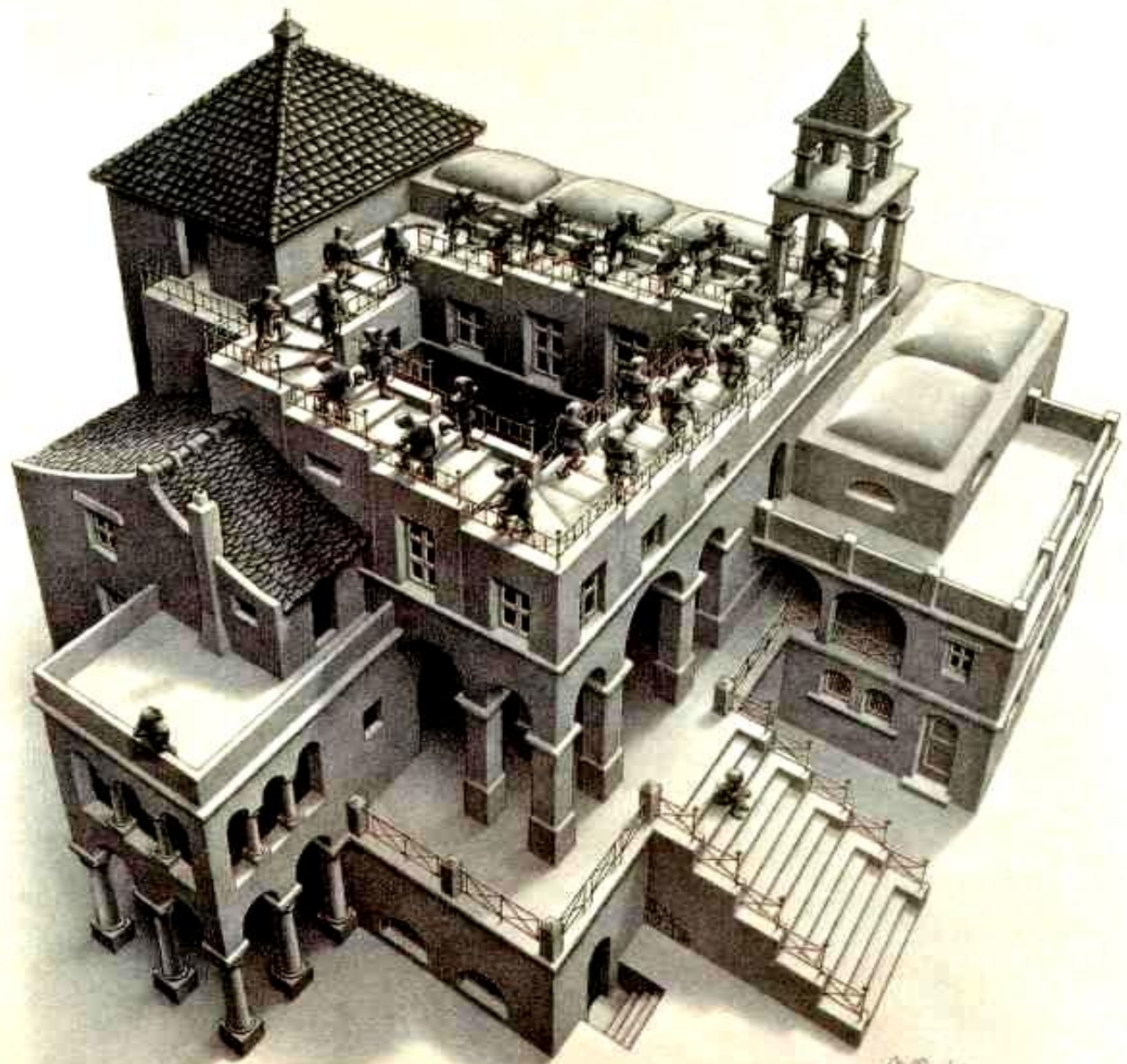
Psycho-oncology

- **Dignity Therapy by Chochinov**
- **Meaning Therapy by Breitbart**
- **CALM (managing cancer and living meaningfully)**

by Rodin

The riddle

- **How does meaning work?**
- **Parents and society need to teach children**
 - **About the fear of death**
 - **how to find meaning**



1887
1887/100