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**PEERING INTO THE ABYSS:  
ENVIRONMENT, RESEARCH AND ABSURDITY IN THE  
'AGE OF STUPID'**

**Raymond L. Bryant**

Department of Geography, King's College London

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## Introduction

In a world of runaway climate change, apocalyptic capitalism, and endemic political hand wringing, scholars need new concepts to make sense of the contemporary human predicament. In doing so, they must endeavour to grasp the sheer oddity of that predicament. How even to begin to comprehend, for example, the logical yet illogical thinking behind such things as green munitions (bombs that harm people not the environment), celebrity conservationism (the rich and famous ‘save’ nature from a global political economy that they helped to create), the public bailout of banking bosses in the latest global recession (taxpayers reward failed bankers for catastrophic failure) or food neo-colonialism (wealthy oil rich countries safeguard food supplies by depriving poor farmers of productive land in the South)? Or what of the relationship between the ever more strident scientific and environmentalist calls for immediate action to avert climate catastrophe on the one hand, and the more or less business as usual approach to the issue shown by most politicians and publics alike?

This chapter argues that an approach based on a theory of absurdity might just do the trick here. That theory situates the current human predicament in a wider perspective, seeing it not so much as the absence and/or presence of ‘rational’ thought per se, but rather as the manifestation of a more fundamental (and hence less ‘fixable’) lack of coherence and reasonableness in human thought and its ability to grasp an elusively alien world. In this view, the human fate is one indelibly shaped by illogical, ludicrous and grotesque behaviour. Absurdity emerges in the dawning consciousness of humanity that successive crises and predicaments can never be resolved via ‘knowledge fixes’ let alone baseless mantras of hope.

The following discussion aims to introduce the reader to an approach based on absurdity theory providing at least an initial sense of what this might mean for research in what has been dubbed by filmmaker Franny Armstrong the ‘Age of Stupid’. It first briefly sets out a theory of absurdity drawn from the work of Franz Kafka, Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett. Next, it adapts that theory to better address the ‘slow collective suicide’ of humanity under fast capitalism providing a short case study of the role of Christmas in that act of violence. The oddity of contemporary academic life and the need for ‘reflexive absurdity’ as a basis for research is canvassed. The conclusion summarises the core argument.

### **We have never been logical**

We have certainly been forewarned. Efforts to dramatise worsening human-environment relations become ever more intensive as scientists and artists beg, plead, scold, cajole, shame, condemn, harangue, and reason with politicians and public alike in an attempt to effect a paradigm shift in social practice. Warnings of climate catastrophe appear on a daily basis even as apocalyptic activism seems to have less and less social traction.

Take the recent case of the well-publicised docudrama *The Age of Stupid* made on a shoestring budget by Franny Armstrong, best known for working on the classic documentary *McLibel*. The new film is explicitly designed to shock the human species out of its ‘suicidal’ state of being, notably through a stinging post-apocalypse lament by an elderly survivor (played by Pete Postlethwaite) who wonders why humanity had not acted when it still had had the chance to avert climate catastrophe.

The film was showcased through a “people’s premiere” with its London showing beamed to 65 cinemas around the world. Armstrong hopes the film will be seen by at least 250 million people in the lead up to the crucial UN climate meeting in Copenhagen in December 2009 – as part of the campaign to force the world’s leaders into adopting a radical new course of urgent action (Vidal 2009). While there is much that is commendably refreshing about the film and its’ making, it is most unlikely to achieve its highly ambitious aim: to effect urgent and dramatic change. After all, what grounds are there for success when the film’s illustrious predecessor – Davis Guggenheim’s award-winning film *An Inconvenient Truth* featuring the former US Vice-President Al Gore (and the associated best-selling book, Gore 2006) – caused barely a ripple in the way in which politics and economics has happened around the world over the past few years? Meanwhile, a parallel gathering of the world’s leading climate scientists in March 2009 in Copenhagen (designed to update the science before the December 2009 UN meeting) served only to highlight how climate catastrophe is now all but unavoidable given the existing build-up in emissions – raising the spectre of a self-fulfilling prophecy (Monbiot 2009).

A big part of the problem with this sort of campaigning seems to be an underlying expectation of ‘rational’ behaviour whereby appeals put reason onto a supreme pedestal and hence might be construed by some, as ‘disingenuous attempts to keep something like God alive in the midst of a secular culture’ (Rorty 1999: xxix). If only people are confronted at every turn with the ‘facts’ of climate science, if only people can be shaken from their stupor via hard-hitting ‘infotainment’, if only people can be brought to personal and collective reflection on the links between their behaviour and climate catastrophe, then things will improve as positive change occurs. Yet such great expectations collide with the seemingly perverse illogic of human-environmental interaction that defies easy explanation let alone remedy. The monstrosity of it all is ultimately overwhelming.

This is where a theory of absurdity comes in. In origin, it is a theory of alienation steeped in European philosophy going back to Descartes if not before combining three key elements: (1) an enquiry into the meaning of existence; (2) an ontology based on a subject-object dualism; and (3) a rejection of belief in ultimate certainties notably those based on an affirmation of God. Following a nineteenth century in which philosophical reflection (Nietzsche), economic transformation (Marx) and scientific advance (Darwin) chipped away at faith-based certainties underpinning social life, the stage was set for a twentieth century florescence of theorising about the absurd (Sagi 2002). Two World Wars featuring mass murder on an unprecedented scale provided more immediate inspiration; these wars revealed the rotten fruit of modernism – ‘rational’ principles of management and production led both to the Model-T Ford and the Nazi concentration camps.

Such grotesquery prompted a group of European thinkers, writers and playwrights to investigate and, in some cases, to embrace the absurd. For some, philosophical inquiry dissected the problematic bases of understanding ‘being’ in a purportedly rational and modern world (Husserl, Heidegger) even while shying away, ultimately, from the ‘abyss’ of the absurd. In contrast, the writing of Franz Kafka revelled in that abyss, describing an unknowable world in which isolated individuals experience existential anguish, confusion, and despair before succumbing to their inevitable and meaningless death (Preece 2002). For example, in *The Trial*, the main character,

Joseph K, is arrested, tried and convicted for a crime of which he has no knowledge, and which the authorities never explain to him. Hope, incomprehension, then consciousness and tragedy all come together in the final terrifying passage of the book:

With a flicker as of a light going up, the casements of a window there suddenly flew open; a human figure, faint and insubstantial at that distance and that height, leaned abruptly far forward and stretched both arms still farther ... Was help at hand? Were there arguments in his favor that had been overlooked? Of course there must be. Logic is doubtless unshakable, but it cannot withstand a man who wants to go on living. Where was the Judge whom he had never seen? Where was the High Court, to which he had never penetrated? He raised his hands and spread out all his fingers.

But the hands of one of the partners were already at K.s' throat, while the other thrust the knife deep into his heart and turned it there twice. With failing eyes K. could still see the two of them immediately before him, cheek leaning against cheek, watching the final act. "Like a dog!" he said; it was as if the shame of it must outlive him (Kafka 1969: 286).

The characteristic strangeness and enigmatic qualities of such writing is captured in the expression that became posthumously associated with his name: Kafkaesque (Preece 2002). To describe some situation as Kafkaesque is to evoke a world that is unknowable despite the best efforts of the individual to do so, a world without reason in which causality can never be known, and a world where uncertainty and futility go hand in hand unto a person's inevitable death.

Yet for Albert Camus, the French novelist and essayist, Kafka's brilliant dissection of the absurdity of life was nonetheless flawed in as much as it retained a will to live based on hope – neatly illustrated in the above quote from *The Trial*. Hope was an unwelcome guest in the world of the absurd, as Camus sought to demonstrate in his theory of absurdity set out in a landmark essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" first published in French in 1942 and in English in 1955 (Camus 1955). In that essay, Camus paints a bleak picture of a futile human quest for reason in an unintelligible world devoid of eternal truth with absurdity arising precisely from the incompatibility of the two (Hanna 1958). It follows from this that there can be no hope of a better future in this world: he is indeed a 'witness of decline' (Braun 1974). Nor can there be any meaningful ethics. It is an isolated and lonely vision of humanity based on the individual as 'the sole ontological and epistemic foundation of existence' (Sagi 2002: 1). Making a comparison between the plight of Sisyphus and the common working man of his day, Camus sees the pointless toil of the former – condemned by the gods to roll a rock to the top of a mountain only to see it tumble down the slope again so that Sisyphus must repeat his labour for eternity – as an apt metaphor for the futility of everyday modern life. Interestingly, being conscious of this cruel fate is not a recipe for suicide. Instead, the essential contradiction of life must be lived, without hope, with a recompense of sorts coming in the form of freedom, passion and perhaps even joy. As Sisyphus trudges down the mountain, behind his falling rock, he is supremely conscious of his situation via a lucidity that is simultaneously 'his torture' as well as 'his victory' – a descent thus performed often 'in sorrow' but also

sometimes 'in joy' because whatever the torment, he knows that 'his fate belongs to him'. It is indeed *his* rock (Camus 1955; Sagi 2002).

The theory of the absurd received its most famous airing in the context of the Theatre of the Absurd, an avant-garde arts movement that burst onto the international stage in the 1950s led by the likes of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco (Esslin 1973). As with Kafka and Camus before them, these dramatists painted a strange world of purposeless existence, grotesque, irrational and even funny behaviour, as well as deep pessimism borne of an inability to ultimately ever understand the human predicament (Demastes 1998). Plays such as *Rhinoceros* and *The Bald Soprano* by Ionesco, and *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* by Beckett baffled and (initially) alienated audiences with their lack of a plot and anything resembling 'substance'.

Having generated much media and scholarly attention in the 1950s and 1960s, the theory of the absurd fell from grace thereafter (Braun 1974), albeit the 'absurd hero' continued to flourish in some literary sectors (Galloway 1981; Cornwell 2006). For some, the rejection of ethics and hope in favour of a tryst with death and despair posed an insurmountable problem to purposive action designed to change the world (Hochberg 1965; Trundle and Puligandla 1986). Indeed, the rise of social movements and NGOs in the West from the early 1960s – notably addressing environmental, racial and feminist issues – can be thought of as one sustained institutional rejection of the apparent message of gloom associated with the Absurdist school of thought (Wapner 1996; Bryant 2009). Seemingly, this struggle would not have been mounted in the absence of hope wed to believe in change for the better: civil rights, gender equality, or environmental improvement. If these activists could speak to Beckett et al., they would probably say in the now legendary phrase of Barack Obama: 'yes, we can!' The rejection of pessimism was unevenly paralleled in the arts, as dramatists such as Tom Stoppard through plays such as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* were seen to articulate a 'post-absurdity' philosophy (Freeman 1996).

Of late, though, optimism and hope seem to have largely once more run dry. The institutionalisation of hope via social movements and NGOs appears to be crumbling, as activist warnings of impending catastrophe go unheeded: 'the continued marginalisation of environmental considerations by policy elites fuels the rumblings of discontent and disappointment within the movement' (Carter 2007: 169). Which activist today could fail to see the parallels between their endless campaigning for fundamental social change and poor old Sisyphus trudging up and down the mountain for eternity? Who can fail to spot the parallels between the ashen-faced men and women who congregate ineffectually at international summits (notably at Stockholm in 1972, Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and Johannesburg in 2002: for contrasting analyses, see Middleton and O'Keefe 2003; Kjellen 2008) and Beckett's two characters milling aimlessly around the stage in *Waiting for Godot*? If ever there was a time for the re-emergence of a theory of absurdity in order to 'make sense' of what was happening in the world, then arguably that time is now.

### **Revisiting Camus: slow collective suicide under fast capitalism**

Building on Nietzsche, Camus described a human fate that was indelibly shaped by illogical, ludicrous and grotesque behaviour in the absence of a world shaped by a unified religious or metaphysical meaning. At the same time, Camus suggests that absurdity arises precisely from the disjuncture between a human being and the outside

world, and his/her recognition of an ultimate inability to know that world with any certainty – and hence, not so much because that outside world is itself absurd. Absurdity is thus based in the very subject-object dualism that is said to reside at the heart of the human condition (Camus 1955; Trundle and Puligandla 1986).

Yet this theory of absurdity, which is borne of the human-engineered cataclysm of the mid-twentieth century, is in some respects dated (partly acknowledged in late Camus, see Sagi 2002). It is not so much that the will to engineer things and people (based on a quest to know and control) has gone out of humankind. To the contrary, it has advanced to such an extent that today it is busy re-engineering the very bases of life – from the tiniest molecules to entire life-support systems on Earth (Haraway 1991). In the process, new uncertainties have joined the old – as a whole host of threats and dangers work their way through the hybrid ‘socio-natures’ and ‘actor networks’ of the contemporary era (Braun and Castree 1998; Hinchliffe 2007). At the same time, there is increased popular awareness of the unseen dangers posed by the ‘risk society’ in an era of ‘reflexive modernity’ (Beck 1992).

From such insights emerging notably from post-structural thinking since the 1980s, two observations can be made in relation to a theory of absurdity. First, and to modify Camus, absurdity is also embedded today in the ‘outside world’ insofar as old dualisms crumble or whose borders become blurred in both thought and practice (Latour 1993). However, such a rapprochement leads to more, not less, incomprehensibility, as the grotesque and illogical becomes pervasive. In a sense, and as a result of the cumulative effects of human actions, the whole world is ‘on trial’ alongside Joseph K. Absurdity thus needs to be re-cast as being *simultaneously* a matter about the limits of human knowledge in a world shorn of metaphysical truth and the outcome of human actions that transform the very basis of life on this planet but in unpredictable ways: ‘attempts to order will provide conditions for disorder’ (Hinchliffe 2007: 122).

Second, the question of suicide explored by Camus needs to be reconsidered in light of the previous point about the ‘escape’ of absurdity from the confines of Cartesian dualism (‘I’ versus ‘the world’) and outwards to ‘the world’. In “The Myth of Sisyphus”, Camus rejects the option of suicide in the face of a hope-less and frustratingly unknowable world (at least concerning the ‘big’ questions that shape human existence and life in general) insisting that the individual, like Sisyphus, must continue to live his or her life within the narrow confines of what little can be known and accept the inevitability of limits on the human desire to know (Camus 1955). Reconcile yourself to life as it is and you may find peace, even happiness. And yet, the breakdown of the dualism noted above as a result of human action and thought – with ever more dire consequences for life on Earth – alerts us to an unintended set of consequences that suggests, in turn, that humanity as a *collective* enterprise is ignoring the admonition of Camus that we should all ‘live life’. Indeed, and based on mounting evidence all around us (climate change being the most vivid example nowadays), it becomes possible to describe the present human trajectory as one characterised by ‘slow collective suicide’. Further, this trajectory is perfectly visible to most people today thanks to saturated media coverage of the world’s growing ‘environmental crisis’ – everyday life now takes place against the backdrop of Arctic/Antarctic ice sheets crashing into the ocean as glacier retreat becomes a proxy ‘measure’ for impending doom (Orlove et al. 2008). This condition of slow collective

suicide, which is the flipside of ‘fast capitalism’ (Agger 2004) and ‘turbo consumerism’ (Honore 2004), sets up a paradox: people individually continue to live their lives in a ‘normal’ manner despite the anxiety and uncertainty that surrounds and threatens to engulf them (thereby accepting Camus’ enjoinder to the individual to reject suicide), but in doing so, and via the ‘unseen hand of the market’ they embark inexorably and perhaps inevitably on the path to collective suicide (an unforeseen situation that ultimately seems to undermine the very foundations of Camus’ position on suicide; see also Lovelock 2009).

Let me now provide a short example to illustrate these arguments and thereby put some empirical flesh on the bone. At the same time, this is an opportunity to demonstrate how analysis based on a theory of absurdity can proceed, and with what effects. That example is the problem of Christmas and its curious role as the world’s greatest annual environmental disaster.

At the heart of fast capitalism is a phenomenon called ‘Christmas’ – an annual event that profoundly shapes the rhythm of both production and consumption around the world. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the staging of Christmas has become an ever more elaborate affair, thereby creating a powerful combination of public faith-based assertiveness and carefully honed commercial enterprise (Miller 1993; Horsley and Tracy 2001). On the one hand, the elevation of Christmas to a status as *the* major Western religious event can be seen as one way in which the church sought to see off the multifaceted threat to its authority arising from philosophy (Nietzsche), economic transformation (Marx) and natural science (Darwin) noted above, even as it went on the offensive harvesting new souls for God’s purpose under the rubric of an advancing colonialism. Emerging doubts about the traditional place of humanity in the world and the ultimate meaning of life were to be quashed via a strategy in which Christianity would hitch its fate to the growing power of economic capitalism, albeit with contradictory results (Comaroff and Comaroff 1986). The consumption of religion and the consumption of objects in everyday life would thus be entwined (Miller 1993).

On the other hand, embedding Christmas at the heart of capitalism was a key profit-boosting means by which capitalists sought to stabilise conditions of production in what seemed to be an inherently unstable economic system (what Joseph Schumpeter later described as ‘creative destruction’). While not eliminating in the least the booms and busts that have continued to plague capitalism to the present day, the strategy did serve to make that economic system increasingly dependent on the Christmas season. Good economic times became closely associated (albeit not synonymous) with a successful Christmas season comprised of three main parts: the long build-up stretching through the autumn and early winter, the immediate Christmas holiday, and the post-Christmas sales (Basker 2005). The consumption of objects in everyday life thus came to revolve around rituals of purchase, gift giving and consumption notably concentrated in a late December hyper-festival that was cloaked in religious garb (Connelly 1999; Horsley and Tracy 2001; Whiteley 2008).

Here, then, we have a hitherto rather modest seasonal festival turned into a critical worldwide event at the interface of capitalism and Christianity. In its own way, Christmas, too, reflects an institutionalisation of hope – albeit, a multifaceted hope reflecting a wide array of individual circumstances (including love, desire, guilt, self-

esteem), economic imperatives (notably to make a profit or to keep one's job), and faith (as well as non-faith) based aspirations. Its success can thus be 'measured' variously in terms of the 'quiet' humming of machines producing millions of items for Christmas purchase, the not-so-quiet unwrapping of gifts and associated 'Christmas cheer', and extra-ordinary levels of attendance at Christmas mass.

And yet, if hope springs eternal from the midst of Christmas, it has but a hollow and ephemeral ring to it. Manufactured good cheer is, in the end, manufactured after all. Disappointment soon follows: gifts are put to one side or thrown away, fast follows feast in the business world, and many churches resume their (usually lower) normal attendance levels. Indeed, and following Camus, the entire Christmas experience does not seem to fill the terrifying void of a world in which old certainties are gone. Just as consumption is a weak political tool in battles against global injustice (Bryant and Goodman 2004), so too it is not up to the even larger task of mending the rupture in traditional metaphysical certainties that notably followed the publication in 1883 of Nietzsche's radical thesis that 'God is dead'. To the contrary, the orgy of consumption that is Christmas further undermines the quest for certainty by the 'truth-seeking' individual by socially validating and prioritising mindless and trivial action instead of deeper and more sustained reflective thought (Pollay 1987). Sermons at Christmas mass scarcely succeed in this latter endeavour either and, in any event, are a mere blip on the scale of time compared with that devoted to preparing for, enacting and clearing up after consumption (Horsley and Tracy 2001).

Worse still, Christmas is at the centre of human efforts that have radically and irrevocably transformed the 'outside world'. When viewed from the vast expanse of time, the event we call Christmas is best understood as the world's greatest annual environmental disaster (Bryant 2008). If fast capitalism has been the key driving force behind the increasingly severe environmental catastrophes that scientists and activists alike warn that we face on Earth, than Christmas is the focal point – a benchmark event that is ultimately productive of the grotesque, illogical and monstrous ingredients that make up our contemporary absurd world. On the one hand, it is the lodestar of conspicuous consumption – an annual invitation to excess (Pollay 1987; Horsley and Tracy 2001) and distinction making (Bourdieu 1984). On the other hand, it is a powerful stimulus package for year round environmentally damaging inconspicuous consumption in the form of enhanced everyday use of energy, water and other ecological services (Shove and Warde 2002) as well as heightened waste disposal (Redclift 1996; Dauvergne 2008). At the same time, Christmas is also at the heart of the paradox mentioned earlier: it is simultaneously a global celebration of the individual will to live and a global enactment of the slow collective suicide that is killing the human species along with many other species on Earth too.

### **Scholarship and reflexive absurdity**

The scholar faces a difficult task in a world thus understood. As with Camus' Sisyphus, he or she must navigate life without religious or metaphysical certainty, without hope, and (perhaps most cruelly) with clear but unknown limits to his or her ability to know. Yet the work of the scholar is no less important for its loss of the romanticisms of the academy – such as the currently hegemonic idea that all research must be readily identifiable as 'useful', and typically only then in an applied policy sense.

Instead, the scholar needs to become engaged in what might be termed ‘reflexive absurdity’ – a situation whereby a researcher is conscious of the absurdity of the human predicament, seeks to carefully analyse the conditions of such absurdity, and reflects on his or her part in living under while contributing to conditions of absurdity.

To embark on this task is to begin by recognising how absurd the academic life is – typically unreflective, ceaseless, and ultimately meaningless. This condition is particularly acute at the present juncture given the pre-eminence of an audit culture comprising ever higher and arbitrary numerical targets (students taught, publications achieved, income generated, forms completed), individualised performance evaluations, information processing rather than intellectual reflection, and the measurement of everything coupled with the understanding of virtually nothing except perhaps the process of measurement itself (Castree 2006; Shore 2008). Yet, the absurd academic life is not completely reducible to an outcome of the neo-liberalisation of the university sector. There is too, for instance, the deployment of modern technology – above all the personal computer – in academic life that has enabled a rapid leap in the ‘productivity’ of the individual scholar via cut and paste writing and salami slice publishing (Luey 2002). The result is the rapid bloating of CV publication lists thereby providing even more fertile ground for the competitive quest for distinction by *Homo Academicus* (Bourdieu 1990).

There is also a need to recognise how academic life makes its own important contribution to the transformation of the ‘outside world’ and the associated slow collective suicide discussed above. For one thing, the research endeavour often directly contributes to environmental degradation. This impact is not negligible – involving, as it usually does, much travel to and from fieldwork sites scattered around the world, much production of paper, more travel to and from conferences and workshops, and so on (Upham and Jakubowicz 2008). Moves to introduce carbon-offsetting schemes (such as through the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment initiative) are hardly a comprehensive solution either (Buytaert 2007) and are, at best, a ‘last resort’ (Milmo 2008). For another thing, success in academia (like in a number of other professions) is seemingly positively correlated with the size of one’s CO<sub>2</sub> footprint. Famous professors thus criss-cross the world at 39,000 feet like leading celebrities, entrepreneurs and politicians – ever tempted by that new distinguished international speaking invitation or research project – with nary even a thought usually given to alternatives such as video conferencing (Hobson 2007). Systemic pressures thus tend to reward relative environmental failure (the ‘migratory’ academic) even as they usually punish relative environmental ‘sustainability’ (the ‘sedentary’ academic). This situation is fundamentally at odds with the root and branch rethink of both professional and personal lives that many are now saying is essential (Hobson 2008)

It is not that the academic does not reflect, from time to time, on some or even many of these processes, or how they might connect him or her to the very processes sometimes described in their work. Yet, pace Camus’ Sisyphus, academic moments of realisation are as profound as they are usually fleeting, before ‘normal’ mechanical life resumes with its targets, its logistics, and its distinctions.

## Conclusion

This chapter explored an approach to understanding the current human predicament based on a theory of absurdity. It was suggested that such an approach affords important insights into that predicament and the perverse illogic of human-environmental interaction that underpin it. Shorn of the cruel false promise of hope, and misguided discourses of 'positive' thinking, absurdity theory holds out instead the stark promise of discomfiting but nonetheless lucid consciousness about the absurd life that humans live. Like Kafka's Joseph K., being is to be endured in a world without reason until the ultimate and terrifying end.

Yet in such endurance resides the kernel of something else, something precious. As Camus suggests, it is not the residual glimmer of hope that Joseph K. mistakenly believed in. Instead, it is a freedom borne of a mind no longer fettered by hopes for a better future including his or her place in eternity. Indeed, being conscious of the cruel fate awaiting every individual is not a recipe for personal suicide – which, after all, is an act partly reflective of crushed hope. Instead, the essential contradiction of life must be lived, without the comforting myth of hope, with a possible recompense of sorts coming in the form of freedom, passion and perhaps even joy. As Sagi (2002: 2) notes, 'paradoxically, the person who embraces the absurd is the one who attains self-acceptance ... the individual who lives the absurd realizes human existence to the full, and is therefore happy'.

That freedom is precious precisely because it reflects a hard-won and painful realisation of the limits of knowledge and hence of the limits of what humanity can do in an absurd world. Yet there is an ultimate paradox here: armed with a freedom from hope and the associated knowledge fix, the individual can go forth and seek to live his or her life in a manner that can begin to unravel some (but not all) of the damage that the human species has done to the planet as part of a life that firmly rejects suicide, including the path of slow collective suicide that our species has embarked on. It will probably not be enough, but it is better than nothing.

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