

not be privileged just because it dealt with public issues. Just like bus drivers and judges, reporters should be held to the standard of their craft—and suffer the consequences when they fall short. But White’s

views remained distinctly in the minority. When he disavowed the *Sullivan* principle altogether in a 1984 case, only Chief Justice Warren Burger seemed ready to line up behind him.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

*Camus’ Dynamite*

“Sisyphus and the Meaning of Life” by Russell Blackford, in *Quadrant* (Oct. 2003),  
437 Darling St., Balmain NSW 2041, Australia.

Why go on? It’s perhaps the essential philosophical question, and one that has drawn philosophers like a magnet to the Greek myth of Sisyphus, whom the gods condemned to spend eternity rolling a boulder up a hill, only to have it tumble back down each time. Most famously, the myth drew the attention of the French novelist Albert Camus, who wrote about it in a classic existentialist essay, “The Myth of Sisyphus” (1942).

Camus saw in Sisyphus “a metaphor for our absurd condition in a universe that does not care for us and cannot guide us,” writes Blackford, a lawyer and writer in Melbourne, Australia. Camus wrote of humanity’s “incalculable feeling” of “divorce” from the universe and the painful sense that there is “no profound reason for living.” He did not rule out the possibility that a rational person would commit suicide.

Two later thinkers who grappled with Sisyphus and Camus’ poetically opaque reading of him took different paths. In his 1971 essay, “The Absurd,” philosopher Thomas Nagel inquired into the sources of the modern sense of absurdity. It’s not our awareness of the inevitability of death or the vastness of the universe that leads us to absurdity, Nagel writes. Such arguments are really only ways of expressing the deeper anxiety bred by “the collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives”—our activities, projects, and beliefs—and our deep sense that it’s impossible to find any ultimate foundation for the “values and commitments” we cite to justify them.

Camus probably would have disagreed. The source of absurdity is the “psychological disturbance” that occurs when we dis-

cover that the universe is not intelligible, in Blackford’s interpretation. Any “lucid consideration” of the human condition would inevitably yield the conclusion that it is “bleak and frightening.”

In *Good and Evil* (1970), philosopher Richard Taylor found in Sisyphus a “paradigm of meaninglessness” akin to human life, “essentially a cycle of reproduction from which nothing more ever comes.” Still, Taylor thought it possible that Sisyphus somehow enjoyed what he was doing, that all of us, just by “doing,” may create meaning for ourselves. The process may not be rational, Taylor said, but it can work.

Camus would have had none of that, says Blackford. Sisyphus could not have found any purpose or enjoyment in his pointless labor, only alienation and anger at his punishment. Yet it is that very alienation, in Camus’ view, that provides the liberating mechanism for humanity. “An impersonal universe sets no limits on our values, and Camus describes this as ‘the reason for my inner freedom.’” Without guidance—without a divine presence in the universe—we are left “free to live in accordance with our own values and create a life that has personal meaning,” Blackford writes, and he says Camus portrays this inner revolt in heroic terms: “Being aware of one’s life, one’s revolt, one’s freedom to the maximum, is living to the maximum.”

There’s something attractive about Camus’ vision, Blackford concedes, but perhaps more for the intellectual engaged in creative work than for, say, a tax attorney or a farmer or even a postman on his perpetual rounds. Indeed, whether or not one ac-

cepts the existential view may define one of the great divides in contemporary society. The existentialism of Camus and Jean Paul Sartre is often dismissed as “old hat,” says

Blackford, but it’s still “philosophical dynamite.” Those who uphold more traditional views of humanity’s place in the universe have yet to find a response that defuses it.

EXCERPT

## *Revolution in Rome*

*Liberal Catholics in the U.S. and Europe fault John Paul II for being out of touch with his Church; but they’re the ones, alas, who are out of touch. Their Church’s future, whether they like it or not, is in the hands of their Third World coreligionists, who share the current Pope’s lack of affection for democracy, pluralism, and church-state separation. And the Pope knows this—as do the like-minded cronies with whom he’s packed the College of Cardinals, and who will choose his successor. “In the traditionalist view,” explains Philip Jenkins, in *The Next Christendom* (2002), “adapting to become relevant or sensitive to the needs of Western elites would be suicidal for the long-term prospects of the Church. It is the so-called traditionalists, rather than the liberals, who are playing the political game of the new century.” . . .*

*Yet the changes ahead may not all be to the traditionalists’ liking. While Catholic clergy in Africa, for example, love the idea of an all-male hierarchy, celibacy holds little appeal for them. . . . Furthermore, Third World Christians (whether Protestant or Catholic) tend to be syncretists, mixing Christian beliefs and practices with elements derived from ancient native religions—ancestor worship, animal sacrifices, spiritual healing, polygamy. “The newer churches,” observes Jenkins, “can read the Bible in a way that makes [Third World] Christianity look like a wholly different religion from the faith of prosperous advanced societies of Europe or North America.” So wildly unorthodox is their theological thinking, indeed, that they may inadvertently end up succeeding in the task that liberal American and European Catholics have failed at: namely, breaking the back of the Church’s dogmatic rigidity. A century from now, then, Catholicism may be a more formidable force than ever—but it may also differ from today’s religion in ways no one can now imagine or predict.*

—Bruce Bawer, author of *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity*,  
in *The Hudson Review* (Fall 2003)

## SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

### *The End Is Here!*

“We’re All Gonna Die!” by Gregg Easterbrook, in *Wired* (July 2003), P.O. Box 37706, Boone, Iowa 50037-0706.

Nowadays, just reading the daily newspaper can give you the willies. The bad news: We’re all going to die. The worse news: There’s no limit to the things that can kill us. Where we go wrong, writes Easterbrook, a senior editor with *The New Republic*, is in separating the real, imminent threats from perils that are just too remote to worry about.

Consider the smallpox scare, for instance. “Weaponized smallpox escaped from a Soviet laboratory in Aralsk, Kazakhstan, in 1971,” reports the author. “Three people died, no epidemic followed.” A similar incident killed 68 people outside Sverdlovsk (now Ekaterinaberg) in 1979. Again, no epidemic. Although it’s possible