

It's All Just a Sick Joke: Joker, Batman, and the Absurd

Erich Christiansen

What if it was all just one big joke? What if, one day, you somehow found out that nothing meant anything? What would you do? Would you try to make it mean something, by doing things you believed in and thought were right? Or would you double down on meaninglessness, and embrace chaos?

This question is one way to look at the choices and actions of Batman and the Joker. Each character embodies a different response to absurdity, one of the key ideas associated with the philosophical tradition of existentialism. Batman and the Joker give us two starkly different examples of how human beings can live—and existentialism can help us see some of what is at stake here. This philosophy includes the assertion that the world has no inherent meaning. There is no pre-given reason for any of us or anything to be here.

That becomes a problem when we confront pain and injustice. We ask: “What’s it all for?” We want justice to be part of the universe, the way that the sun and moon and stars are: what Martin Luther King Jr. referred to as the “moral arc of the universe.” But this becomes difficult, if not impossible to see.

Then what do you do? Do you deny that there can be any meaning at all, and become a nihilist, like the Joker? Or do you try to do things that will create a meaning for yourself and the world, like Batman?

Absurdity, Existentialism, and Nihilism

The best-known form of existentialism was given voice by French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980). In *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1945), Sartre argued that existentialism was the logical conclusion of atheism.¹ If God doesn’t exist, then humans are free.

Joker and Philosophy: Why So Serious?, First Edition. Edited by Massimiliano L. Cappuccio, George A. Dunn, and Jason T. Eberl.

© 2025 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2025 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

If God created the world, then he also created me. Thus he had to have already had in mind the kind of thing that I was. But if God didn't create me—then I'm free. If there's no creator, there are no preconceived notions of what kind of thing I am, what I'm supposed to do, or what my purpose is. I can go my own way in life, with my own goals and my own values.²

And if there is no God to give meaning, then nothing in the universe has any *inherent* meaning. The planets and everything on them and anything between them don't come with a pre-decided meaning—they just exist. Values don't come with nature; they have to be created by humans.

These two ideas—that humans can choose to be whatever they want, and that there is no inherent meaning—terrify many people who assume that no meaning is therefore possible. They see existentialism as nihilism—the belief in nothing. And if you don't believe in anything, what stops you from doing anything you feel like in the moment? What stops you from robbing and killing and torturing? What stops you from being—the Joker?

But Sartre emphasizes that the claim is only that there are no *inherent* meanings or values—not that meanings and values are impossible. It just means that we have to create them. We have to bring value into the world by our actions—or it won't be there. We do this through what Sartre calls our “project”—the thing to which I decide to dedicate my life, which gives meaning to both my life and to the world. And it's the only thing that does.³

Whether we realize it or not, all projects are universal. Sartre says that we have a responsibility because, if the world will have the value and the meaning that we choose it to have, then we are responsible for creating it. If there is no god-created blueprint for what humans are, then what humans are is the total of all of our actions. Every time I act, I am choosing the world that I and everybody else will live in, because my actions are creating the world that I and everybody else will live in. “When we say that man chooses himself, not only do we mean that each of us must choose himself, but also that in choosing himself, he is choosing for all men. In fact, in creating the man each of us wills ourselves to be, there is not a single one of our actions that does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be.... Our responsibility is thus much greater than we might have supposed, because it concerns all mankind.”⁴

Existentialist philosophers see both why this might be freeing and why it might be a problem. In the novel *The Stranger* by French-Algerian novelist and philosopher Albert Camus (1913–1960), the protagonist Meursault speaks of “the benign indifference of the universe” and of feeling “washed clean” by this revelation.⁵ This sounds—and feels—like freedom. But in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus points out

the complexity of living in the kind of universe characterized by what he calls “the Absurd”—which is the state of being without meaning. He sees absurdity as both liberation and as trauma.

When we look at the universe, there is a part of us that badly wants to see meaning already there.⁶ But everywhere we look we see irrationality, instead. “This world in itself is not reasonable.... But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart.”⁷ We want meaning, but we don’t get it. One of the main ways that we realize we’re not getting it is when we see that the universe isn’t fair.

A fundamental frustration is often born out of seeing death, particularly if it is the result of senseless violence. The realization that we’re going to die can make everything else we do seem useless. But how much more so when it’s an unjust death? Mortality is hard to deal with anyway, but it’s that much worse when death is the result of malice—because things didn’t have to be that way.

For Sartre, death is what gets in the way of your project. Thus it’s what makes life absurd.⁸ “We have, in fact, every chance of dying before we have accomplished our task, or, on the other hand, of outliving it ... this perpetual appearance of chance at the heart of my project” is “the nihilation of all my possibilities ...”⁹ We have a life goal we’re out to achieve, and suddenly, dumb luck intervenes, and we’re gone, and it was all for nothing.

A common expression for this absurdity is to say “It’s all a big joke.” Bruce Wayne and, in some versions, the Joker are both shaken out of the illusion of a stable, meaningful world by the force of violence. Considering the path that each one took in response to this can help us answer a big question: How do you live with the absurd?

Death and Injustice on the Streets of Gotham

Both Batman and (according to *The Killing Joke*) the Joker were born out of the pain of the absurd. As a result, it is what keeps both of them busy: the Joker by trying to cause unjust deaths, and Batman by trying to stop them. Their respective origin stories can help us see how they both came face to face with absurdity, and the life path each one took to deal with that reality.

Eight-year-old Bruce Wayne’s parents were robbed and killed in Crime Alley by a mugger named Joe Chill. Bruce swore revenge against criminals for the horror he had witnessed, and dedicated his life to fighting crime—eventually becoming the Batman. In *The Killing Joke*, an engineer at a chemical plant quit his job to pursue his dream of doing standup comedy. He failed at it. To support his pregnant wife, he took an offer to guide a gang through the plant so they could rob the

playing card company next door. He came home to be told that his wife and unborn child had died in a household accident. Dejected, he tried to get out of participating in the robbery, as his reason for doing it no longer existed. However, the thieves forced him to go through with it—and during the robbery, Batman intervened. Fleeing, the engineer jumped into the plant's chemical wastewater, which carried him outside. The chemicals bleached his face a deathly chalk white, burned his lips bright red, and colored his hair into a clownish green. Physically disfigured and robbed of his family he goes out of his mind. And thus, he became the Joker.

When these life-changing tragedies struck, both characters were living in the midst of what society deems as meaning-giving activities/institutions: family and money. The Waynes were an intact family and had money. The comedian was at the beginning of having a family and was trying to get money. Bruce's parents were killed for their wallets and a necklace—what must have seemed (especially to Bruce) nearly nothing. The engineer/comedian had to go through with something risky and wrong—after there was no longer any reason for him to do it.

Bruce was from a wealthy, respectable family, and probably had no doubts that he would continue in a similar way into adulthood. He had no reason to question his future or his place in society, let alone his place in the universe. In fact, on one of the parallel earths, he was on the verge of becoming a spoiled-rotten brat.¹⁰ Then watching his parents be murdered in front of him, Bruce was exposed to a world of violence—and meaninglessness.

Loss of Meaning: When the Bottom Falls Out

But how can we say that things are “meaningless”? Aren't we born into a world of meanings? We're taught all kinds of beliefs that tell us what life means, from a very early age, before we even understand them. But when a tragedy or crisis happens, it can feel like the rug has been pulled out from under what we thought our life was about. Sartre uses the term “abandonment”¹¹ to describe this, one of the “full consequences” of atheism. It's the awareness that the world was not made by or for you, and yet, you somehow have to live in it and make decisions. Again, this means that there is no eternally existing set of values, nor is there a guarantee of a good world, because “there would be no infinite and perfect consciousness to conceive of it. Nowhere is it written that good exists, that we must be honest and must not lie, since we are on a plane shared only by” other humans. And so we humans are “consequently abandoned” because we “cannot find anything to rely on ...”¹²

“Abandonment” is exactly what Bruce experienced: not just by God or eternal values or an intrinsically good universe, but by everything he had ever known. With his parents’ bodies at his feet, he found himself all alone in the world. Luckily for him, Leslie Tompkins happened by.¹³ She was a community activist (later portrayed as a doctor), who comforted Bruce when he seemed to be ignored by the police investigation—and probably helped prevent the trauma from destroying Bruce even more than it did. The man who would become the Joker didn’t even have that. All he had was the gang’s coercion, against his conscience, even after the reason for the robbery was gone. He, too, found himself abandoned, alone in the world.

But it doesn’t take enduring such horrors to feel abandoned in the universe. Any kind of life crisis can show us this. There dawns a fundamental insecurity when you have this realization that what you thought was just natural, what you thought was a world built on eternal values, is just a system that was thought up one day by people a lot like you. Systems of power don’t like this realization; they like you to keep thinking that the ways things are under their system is just the natural way that things are.

This is one of the Joker’s roles: to remind us of the chaos and meaninglessness that lurks beneath the surface of our everyday lives. A joker in a deck is the wild card—the randomizer. It throws off what you thought would happen, what you calculated would happen. For the Joker, this could be in the sense of interrupting your day with a goofy, themed robbery—or it could be in the sense of killing you for a reason known only to him.

A particularly profound example of this kind of disruption of the security of the everyday world is in *Detective Comics* #60, “Case of the Costume-Clad Killers.”¹⁴ The Joker cuts a deal with the owner of a costume shop, and outfits his men with various kinds of uniforms. With these, they’re able to gain people’s trust, and get access to places to rob. They pose as soldiers to rob the armory, as police officers to rob a bank, and so on. This takes advantage of the trust that people have in the institutions that bring order into their lives. The people everybody relies on for protection and service now might be the enemy.

But doesn’t this reveal a certain truth? The civil rights movement and anti-war movements of the 1960s launched a deep questioning of America’s values and institutions—a challenge that culminated in seeming to be proven right in the Watergate scandal. Of course, this happened decades later than the original Batman and Joker stories, and would barely be dreamed of by most patriotic Americans a year into World War II. And yet, now it seems like a premonition: What if those institutions and uniforms that you trust are really exactly who you need to be protected from? What if there really are criminals in those uniforms?

Possible Responses to the Absurd

A couple of possible ways to respond to the Absurd are found in Camus' novel *The Plague*.¹⁵ Different characters represent different responses to death and absurdity, ways of trying to make living under a death sentence meaningful. As we'll see, these ways also apply to the Joker, the Batman—and others.

In Camus' story, Dr. Rieux is a physician who devotes all of his energies to doing what he can to treat plague victims during an outbreak in Oran, Algeria. The government places the city under quarantine—nobody can leave. Published two years after World War II, it was clear to most of Camus' contemporaries that this novel was an allegory for the war and the occupation of France—where people were trapped by an oppressive presence and death was a possibility at any time.¹⁶ But this was also a metaphor for the fact that we are all, always, under a sentence of death, whether we realize it or want to deal with it or not. So how *will* we deal with this universal death sentence?

Rieux says plainly: "Oh, I know it's an absurd situation, but we're all involved in it, and we've got to accept it as it is."¹⁷ Despite his best efforts, most of his patients will still die—at least until an antidote can be manufactured. This parallels his work as a doctor—any healing he does is only temporary, because eventually, all of his patients will die, one way or another. "But your victories will never be lasting, that's all.... Yes. A never ending defeat."¹⁸ Nevertheless, Rieux dedicates himself to serving his fellow humans. Notably, even before the plague, he didn't charge poor people.¹⁹

Rieux is an atheist, and presumably doesn't believe in inherent values in the world. Yet, through his actions, he is bringing value into a world that could otherwise be seen as meaningless. His devotion to this ideal parallels with religion. Another character asks: Can you be a saint without God? Rieux's actions try to answer this.

By contrast, another character named Cottard had attempted suicide but was saved. He is wanted for some crime. He wants the plague to continue, because it allows him to avoid the authorities who now have more important things to do, and because, unlike when he was in suicidal despair over his own life, he is now comforted by the fact that everybody else is more or less in the same condition as he is—even to the point where he refuses a chance to leave. He actually takes advantage of the situation, by making money dealing on the black market. When the plague ends, he gets depressed again, fearing arrest, and suffers from dramatic mood swings. He eventually opens fire on random people passing by, injuring a few before he is arrested.

Rieux and Batman dedicate their lives to ending human suffering, even though the task seems futile, and maybe ultimately is, and furthermore will very likely prove fatal to them—but they do all they can in the

meantime. They have staked their lives on bringing certain values into the world, which are based on solidarity with human suffering. The Joker and Cottard have chosen nihilism. They don't think any values can be brought into the world. They work for their own advantage, which ends up involving criminal activity, which exploits the suffering of those around them. It even comforts them to know that others are suffering, because that means that they are not alone in it. This is a perverse "solidarity" that drags others down rather than lifting them up.

In *The Killing Joke*, the absurdity of the failed comedian's situation leads the Joker to believe in the absurdity of the universe. Like Batman, he has taken a stand for making his principle universal—as Sartre describes, he creates an image of humanity through his actions. He wants to demonstrate that absurdity, including the meaninglessness of madness, is a potentially universal experience. He maintains that all it takes is "one bad day"—suffering the way he suffered—to push somebody over the edge, into nihilism. To do this, he targets "the sanest man I know"—Commissioner Gordon.

The harrowing process by which he attacks the foundations of Gordon's universe is infamous. He shows up at the home of Barbara Gordon—the Commissioner's daughter and secretly Batgirl. The Joker shoots her through the spine, paralyzing her for life. In her vulnerable state, he removes her clothes and takes photographs. He then takes over an abandoned amusement park, captures Gordon, and puts him on a rollercoaster that goes past giant versions of the pictures he took of Barbara's pain and humiliation.

When Batman arrives, the Joker tells him that the world is "a black, awful joke" and is therefore not worth fighting for. He sees society's institutions and individuals' mental health as fragile and precarious. He claims that even the sanest person, even somebody like Commissioner Gordon, could be made to crack after "one bad day"—like the one that created the Joker. He speculates that maybe Batman had "one bad day" one time.

Luckily, Gordon is not destroyed by the experience, retaining both his sanity and his ethics. In fact, he tells Batman to bring the Joker in "by the book," in order to show him that "our way works."

In these atrocities, the Joker takes a kind of responsibility, in a perverse parallel to the kind that Batman took. This is his response to the absurd: madness and the universalization of madness. By choosing sadism and murder, he has chosen them for all humans, as the condition of humanity.

Now let's consider Bruce Wayne and Leslie Thompkins.²⁰ In the wake of tragedy, Bruce didn't succumb to pessimism and nihilism. He saw horror, but instead of accepting that as the truth of the universe, he fought to bring justice into the world. Instead of spreading the tragedy around, he wanted to prevent it from happening again. He devoted his

life and fortune to defending people from irrational violence, and risked his life to do it. Batman's acute awareness of his own mortality, and the mortality of those he loves, is what fuels his mission.

Actually, in the Batman Family, Leslie Thompkins is an even closer parallel to Dr. Rieux. She was introduced in a story in which she's puzzled by the fact that Batman comes back to Crime Alley on the same day every year. Unbeknownst to her, both of their life vocations—both of their projects—had the same origin on that fateful night, when "... nobody noticed the boy wracked with endless sobs ... nobody except a woman, who knelt by him.... And in all the world there was nothing ... nothing except the warmth of her arms and the comfort of her soothing words ..."²¹

When Batman asks her why she continues to live in Crime Alley, she responds, "I once saw a hideous thing—a child whose parents were murdered in front of his eyes. I've never forgotten the lad. I've devoted my life to doing what I can to prevent such tragedy."²² If we only had Batman's necessary task of defending people through force, then his struggle might, indeed, seem futile. But we also have Thompkins. Her proactive project of social betterment, of fighting the poverty and desperation that often leads people to crime, allows her to tell Batman, "Forgive me ... but I live for the time when you and your kind will be unnecessary." Batman, too, realizes the meaning that her activity has, and so is able to reply: "You ... and those like you ... you're the hope of Crime Alley—maybe the only hope our tormented civilization has left."²³

How do we respond to a meaningless world? There are ways of caving in and embracing despair—some of them lethal for others. There are also many ways to provide hope, which are entwined with the many ways of making meaning. Some of them involve the necessary, but sometimes brutal, use of force to protect the innocent from malicious and malevolent uses of force. That's a job for somebody like Batman. But some of them involve gentleness and patience, working to relieve the suffering of both those who are hurt and those who do the hurting. This is the path of somebody like Leslie Thompkins. Both make the world meaningful by service to others, decreasing the total amount of suffering in the world.

Notes

- 1 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1945/2007).
- 2 Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, 20–21.
- 3 Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, 23.
- 4 Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, 24.

- 5 Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942/1946), 154.
- 6 Camus, *The Stranger*, 13.
- 7 Camus, *The Stranger*, 16.
- 8 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), 683.
- 9 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 687.
- 10 Alan Brennert and Dick Giordano, "To Kill a Legend," *Detective Comics* #500 (March 1981).
- 11 Originally from Martin Heidegger.
- 12 Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, 28–29.
- 13 First introduced in Denny O'Neil and Dick Giordano, "There Is No Hope in Crime Alley," *Detective Comics* #457 (March 1976).
- 14 December 1942.
- 15 Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1947/1972).
- 16 In fact, there is a direct comparison between the plague and war; Camus, *The Plague*, 35–36. In both cases, people assume that this state of things is "too stupid" to go on long—and yet, it manages to go on long.
- 17 Camus, *The Plague*, 81.
- 18 Camus, *The Plague*, 121.
- 19 Camus, *The Plague*, 17.
- 20 My reading here will mainly be from her first appearance, in "There Is No Hope in Crime Alley."
- 21 "There Is No Hope in Crime Alley."
- 22 "There Is No Hope in Crime Alley."
- 23 "There Is No Hope in Crime Alley."