

The Meaning of Meaninglessness

The authors of *The Terror of Existence: From Ecclesiastes to Theater of the Absurd* clearly feel an urgent existential imperative to grapple with the question of how we should live. It is, as they point out, a question even the nihilist must eventually answer.

by Scott Beauchamp



There really isn't such a thing as true secularism in modern society. As the philosopher John Gray [writes](#), "if [secularism] means a type of society in which religion is absent, secularism is a kind of contradiction, for it is defined by what it excludes."

Even those who call themselves atheists still experience reality predominantly through a religious worldview, and even the horrors of existence so colorfully articulated by self-labeled nihilists depend in large part on a vague sense of transcendent order. These fundamental truths provide the basis for *New English Review's* latest release, [*The Terror of Existence: From Ecclesiastes to Theater of the Absurd*](#), co-written by Theodore Dalrymple and Kenneth Francis.

Billing itself as “part literary criticism, part philosophical exploration,” this book is a slim collection of essays that explore art and artists who are fascinated by the concept of meaninglessness. Moving in roughly chronological order, though not quite perfectly, its historical scope is staggering. The variety of examples is generous as well. We’re not only given the usual suspects like Sartre and Camus, but figures often overlooked (at least by American conservatives) such as Ionesco and Phillip Larkin.

As Dalrymple writes in the introduction: “But we cannot live in anarchy; and we always need urgently an answer to the question of how to live.” This book is an exploration of (mostly) literary figures struggling to imagine just what it would mean to live in a world bereft of transcendent and immanent order. From the “all is vanity” howling of the book of Ecclesiastes to Samuel Beckett’s forced nihilistic grin, Dalrymple and Francis explore various ways people have tried to imagine the meaning of meaninglessness. Mostly, the book is a success.

Dalrymple isn’t a believer (though he understands the wisdom of belief), while Francis is. Each chapter is written by one of the authors individually. This approach emphasizes both authors’ strengths and weaknesses. Dalrymple is typically dry and self-possessed, and he shines when his critical distance comes to bear on targets of attack, such as Camus. Francis is ebullient and affable but the weaker writer. He is better suited to laudatory prose, such as his chapter on Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart.” While their analyses lack the sort of sophistication we might expect to find from academic critics, they more than make up for it with a spiritual earnestness. These authors are seeking wisdom, and they assume we want the same.

All this being said, *The Terror of Existence* is quite a rewarding read. A few of the chapters fall flat, and the attacks on J.D. Salinger and Sartre both seem to be lacking

something. Still, the format is interesting, and the authors obviously feel an existential imperative to grapple with the question of how we should live. It is, as they point out, a question even the nihilist must eventually answer.

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