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Goalkeeping and Existential Identity: Albert Camus: Football and Mental Health

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Review Article

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Abstract

This article explores goalkeeping as a metaphor for existence. Drawing on the life of novelist and philosopher Albert Camus, and his struggles with tuberculosis, the discussion reflects on how football and serious illness shaped Camus' views of an uncertain world. It also considers how the watchful, yet isolated, goalkeeper's role embodies uncertainty, vulnerability, endurance and resilience. Camus offers a psychological and philosophical lens on forming identity and developing individual strength in the face of adversity. The concepts are considered fitting to mental health work. Caution is nonetheless necessary - striving for authenticity and challenges to moral ambiguity can be liberating for some. However, existentialism may also unsettle those seeking certainty or a more grounded approach to living. Naturally supportive formal structures can be questioned, challenged or stripped away. The discussion concludes by cautioning that the approach should not replace professional clinical interventions when they are necessary.

Keywords:

Albert Camus, existential psychology, identity, mental health, football

INTRODUCTION

'What little I know about morality; I learned it on football pitches and theatre stages. Those were my true universities.'

(Albert Camus, 1913–1960)

Philosophy is an intellectual approach to understanding the complexities of human existence. It addresses fundamental questions about knowledge, life, and the morality of human nature.

Existential Philosophy

Existentialism is a branch of philosophy that explores freedom, choice, purpose, meaning, integrity, and responsibility. All are considered to be critical to healthy living. It is a philosophy that also addresses the stripping away of imposed social and cultural structures, allowing a more authentic existence. Implying that our perceptions are obscured by expectation, existentialism proposes that tensions can arise between what we expect and what actually is in

reality. This is typically referred to as absurdity.

This discussion draws on football, philosophy, social ethics, and integrity. In tangential ways, it also touches upon mental health and wellbeing, applying humanism and sports to daily living. Wherever people come together, regardless of objectives, existential challenges will emerge.

Philosophy on the Pitch: Curated Identity Collapse

Linking football with philosophy may seem obscure. Yet, there are connections, and various authors have examined football through a deconstructive or philosophical lens. To illustrate, Kaelin (2007), applied a philosophical approach to understanding the seemingly irrational behaviour of Zinedine Zidane during the 2006 World Cup final.

Zidane inexplicably physically struck out at an Italian opponent. His behaviour made no sense to many. Yet, Kaelin suggested that it was an assertion of Zidane's authentic identity, rebelling against an imposed role of football icon. Zidane's

behaviour, perhaps outside his awareness, was a return to his real or authentic self. His public image ruptured, invoking his emotional and personal real self to emerge. From an existential viewpoint, Kaelin suggested that Zidane's behaviour represented a collapse of an imposed and idealised identity permitting a more immediate or authentic self to emerge. While there are possibilities for different clinical interpretations, Kaelin's deconstruction of events does not suggest that Zidane's behaviour was justified. Authenticity does not remove moral or ethical responsibility or support aggression. Applications of the philosophy should also not replace clinical interventions when they are necessary.

Albert Camus the Goalkeeper

Albert Camus (1913–1960) was an French-Algerian philosopher, and novelist. He was also a Nobel Laureate. Like his contemporary, Jean-Paul Sartre, Camus' work reflected a philosophy of personal alienation and disenchantment. Yet, human dignity and social connection also featured as an important part of his beliefs. For Camus, life should be lived honestly, ethically and with integrity.

Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Football

At the age of sixteen, Camus was a goalkeeper for the university football team, Racing Universitaire d'Alger. Courageous and respected, he viewed football as a metaphor for existence and identity formation. Tuberculosis, an illness that carried little in the way of cure, prevented him from pursuing sports further. Nonetheless, his experiences of isolation, responsibility and feeling apart, would shape his later views concerning morality.

Goalkeeping taught Camus about siege, vigilance, the unexpected, personal resourcefulness, responsibility, and standing alone. Illness may have deepened his sense of isolation, while increasing his awareness of frailty and mortality. These were concerns, arguably, reflected in his comments regarding the nature of reality and existence:

'I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the

orld'

(Albert Camus, 1962)

Camus believed that we seek order and certainty, and that we should face life's uncertainties with courage and conviction. Manchester United footballer, Eric Cantona made football and philosophy popular. In the mid-1990s, Cantona spoke of Manchester United's team philosophy, believing it to be an ethical one of collective respect and protection. Even earlier, Camus viewed football through a philosophical lens - as a metaphor for personal integrity. He recognized virtues in football, concerned with working together constructively towards a common intent.

Morality observed from the Goal Line

Albert Camus described a moral framework that he learned from the pitch: looking out for others, acting with personal integrity, fairness and treating everyone even-handedly. Practical and experiential knowledge, therefore, informed his theoretical, and philosophical suppositions and foundations for healthy living. Camus viewed football as a form of functional morality. As philosophy applied, he considered it more grounded and accessible than political ideology or abstract theory.

Jean-Paul Sartre

The philosopher and novelist Jean-Paul Sartre, also a football follower, disagreed. He believed that everything was complicated by an opposing team, and so activities and motives are, in part, shaped by others (Qvortrup, 2003). Sartre, referring to intersubjectivity, wrote that 'hell is other people'. He may well have had a point, although was unable to convince Camus, who maintained that football taught tolerance, responsibility, and the acceptance of vulnerabilities - qualities he believed to be mirrored in life. In the 1950s, While Sartre saw potential conflict in intersubjectivity, Camus held faith in morality. Asked to comment about his experiences as a footballer. Camus' reply was that much of what he knew about morality, he learned from goalkeeping.

Facing the Unexpected

Camus recognised from football and his experiences in goal that the game seldom unfolds entirely as you might expect it to. Moreover, he learned that the ball rarely arrives as anticipated. This, for him, symbolised the unpredictability of life - we should not allow winning or losing to influence us too deeply. Both should be regarded with equal detachment - a theme he explored in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Camus, 1942/2007).

Camus advocated for developing inner resilience, compassion and protective inner resources, writing:

'In the depth of winter, I finally learned that there as in me an invincible summer.'
(Albert Camus, 1962)

Football, particularly goalkeeping, represented a lived philosophy rather than an intellectual study. It required vigilance, courage, and self-awareness as tools for navigating life's uncertainties. For Camus, football was aligned with the unpredictability of existence. Exposure, feeling alone and vulnerable are unavoidable parts of goalkeeping. They are also inescapable throughout life, yet, moral clarity and authenticity offer protection in times of adversity.

Camus, Football and Mental Health Recovery

Camus' concepts have direct relevance to mental illness, health and recovery. Developing a clear and grounded identity, separate from commodified or imposed roles, supports psychological strength. His thoughts provide critical elements for many mental illness treatment, and recovery programs (for example see, Benkwitz & Healy, 2019). Existential anxiety, hypervigilance, isolation, depression, loss of hope, agency, imposed identities and shame are all documented as contributing to mental ill-health. Revolt, radical acceptance, and balanced expectations are all necessary for healthy living. Camus' views concerning measured rebellion are also helpful. This entail reclaiming personal agency, resisting imposed identities or challenging established social structures while maintaining moral accountability. They are

concerns of daily living, yet, without counterbalances too much exposure to any can contribute to imbalances in health.

Individual and group approaches to psychotherapy have used football as methodologies with successful outcomes (Jones, 2009, Graham, 2025). Reducing stigma and shame, encouraging cooperation, understanding symbolism, developing appropriate trust, clearer communication, identity construction, and belonging are all aligned with Camus' philosophical views.

Therapists and Camus' Philosophy: Navigating Through 'Why Me'

Therapists might also benefit from Camus' approach to philosophy. Remaining open to the unexpected, ethically aware, and accepting of limitations in themselves and others are necessary for effective clinical work. Mental health professionals typically work without certainty of improvements or cure and few immediate resolutions. Camus' approach to philosophy offers potential to remain ethically grounded while tolerating ambiguity, limited progress and repeated exposure to an unsettled life in others. Allowing others to discover their own directions, while accepting limits, is fundamental to mental health work. Camus' views concerning an indifferent world (no one is exempt from adversity), are also helpful to addressing tendencies to blame oneself or others in times of difficulty and crisis.

However, critiques of Camus' existential philosophy include dangers of social isolation and resignation to one's fate. 'Quiet or measured rebellion' may be misunderstood or misapplied, along with their interpersonal and wider social consequences. The freedom to choose is accompanied by a responsibility to process and manage heightened emotional states. Previously suppressed impulses can appear as dysregulated and perplexing patterns of behaviours. A grandiose and angry version of a previous fawning self may emerge, replacing a once seemingly agreeable interpersonal style (Sun, 2026).

Discriminating between reflective solitude and isolation is also required. The former voluntary

and thoughtful while the latter often a defensive retreat into self-isolation (Adams, et al, 2025; Gerhardtsson, et al, 2025). Furthermore, acceptance may be viewed by onlookers as resignation, authenticity as rejection of received structures and rebellion as narcissistic entitlement. In such circumstances, unhelpful tensions are possible. In therapeutic work, agreed treatment plans may become misaligned. It is perhaps also important to keep in mind that existential approaches require ethical awareness. Existential freedom without morality could be viewed as moral nihilism, forceful or coercive. These ideas should not be used to justify aggression, disregard for oneself or others and are not substitutes for clinical intervention when it is required.

CONCLUSION

Returning to Zidane: Defining Oneself

Goalkeepers and outfield players (of any profession) take note; Camus was an outsider - that is on the margins of social and professional groups. His position as a goalkeeper mirrored his philosophical stance and likely his personality. Remaining vigilant, reflective, and slightly removed allowed him to develop his philosophy, and specifically the nature of existence. Camus teaches the importance of nurturing a stable, inner identity to shield from external influences while remaining morally grounded.

Finally, by shedding the burden of commodification, Zidane was perhaps reclaiming his authentic self. Camus may have understood his behaviour as on a boundary of a, 'measured rebellion.' His views were not synonymous with impulsivity or aggression. Although emerging initially destructively, and arguably unregulated, Zidane's behaviour was perhaps, signaling a readiness for whatever lay ahead.

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