


The Ethnobiology of Absurdities

Ulysses Paulino Albuquerque¹ 

¹ Laboratório de Ecologia e Evolução de Sistemas Socioecológicos, Centro de Biotecnologias, Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Recife, Brazil..

* Corresponding author ✉. E-mail address: UPA (upa677@hotmail.com)

We are often overwhelmed by a sense of frustration when we observe that certain social issues, rather than progressing, seem to stagnate or even worsen—rise in violence against women, racism, misogyny, and transphobia. These problems, far from disappearing, raise the question of whether we truly advance toward a higher state of civility or are trapped in an endless cycle of setbacks. The feeling that progress is illusory and fleeting leads us to reflect deeply on the state of science, particularly ethnobiology.

For instance, in ethnobiology, researchers have continuously exercised self-criticism over the decades. We endlessly reiterate ideas and commitments that, in theory, should drive the field forward: improving research quality, regardless of the theoretical or epistemological approach adopted; moving beyond merely incremental research; striving for bold and creative innovations; intensifying our political engagement; and recognizing our role as potential mediators between scientific knowledge and traditional ecological knowledge. However, despite constant promises and vows for change, very little has been transformed. We renew these commitments year after year, but the practice lags behind discourse.

This experience reminds us of the Myth of Sisyphus, described by Albert Camus in his existentialist work. Sisyphus, condemned by the gods to roll a stone uphill for eternity, only to watch it roll back to the starting point, powerfully illustrates the human condition of facing repetitive and seemingly futile efforts. One optimistic interpretation is that, even in the face of an unrelenting situation that afflicts us, there is room for creation, turning sacrifice into an opportunity to build something worthy of effort, even if that something is continually undone (Póvoa 2023). Like Sisyphus, in ethnobiology, it seems that we are pushing a symbolic rock uphill, only to see that it descends repeatedly and with greater force. Every time we renew our promises to improve the theoretical, epistemological, and practical quality of research, we are met with a new wave of setbacks such as the growth of approaches contrary to what we deem essential.

However, from a Jean-Paul Sartre perspective, we

recognize that we are all condemned to freedom. No predetermined fate or essence guides us in ethnobiology; only our conscious choices and consequences follow. This means that as ethnobiologists, we bear the full responsibility for defining the course of our discipline, and our frustration is a reflection of our struggle to exercise that freedom. If theoretical or epistemological progress does not occur, collective action fails to achieve what we aspire to. Therefore, this responsibility falls on us as ethnobiologists of our scientific destiny.

This is also reflected in our experience as an editor. This year, we published an editorial in *Ethnobiology and Conservation* that clearly outlined the types of work we expect to publish and the approaches that do not align with our editorial proposal (Albuquerque and Alves 2024). Interestingly, after this editorial, we received many submissions that directly contradicted our defined scope. Could these authors, inspired by the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, act in bad faith and refuse to accept responsibility for their own intellectual choices?

According to Sartre, bad faith is an attempt to escape freedom and responsibility—an effort to see oneself as a victim of external circumstances—in other words, to lie to oneself (see Póvoas 2007). Instead of taking responsibility for their choices and improving their approaches, these authors blame the editors for denying their freedom to act and correct their mistakes. This behavior is particularly harmful in fields such as ethnobiology, which strives for self-affirmation. This refusal to face constructive criticism weakens discipline at the crossroads, seeking to establish itself as a rigorous and innovative field. This prevents the new generations of researchers from maturing intellectually.

The submission guidelines are explicit about what we expect to publish in. However, we frequently received articles that deviated completely from the guidelines, submitted by senior and junior researchers. These articles were often rejected, with a standard response from the journal. On several occasions, this has led to aggressive responses from authors accusing editors of incompetence. In more severe cases, some

authors have initiated defamatory campaigns against the journal and editors. While this is not unique to ethnobiology, in a discipline still struggling with self-affirmation, these behaviors are particularly harmful, especially for the scientific education of new researchers.

However, as Sartre suggests, there is no alternative, but to continue exercising our freedom with responsibility. Like any other discipline, ethnobiology is not destined for failure or success; it is subject to the choices of researchers. As Sisyphus continues to roll his stone, as ethnobiologists, we must fight for a stronger, more rigorous, and more engaged field. Would it bring more comfort and less mental suffering to think that our effort, like that of Sisyphus, is not in guaranteed success, but in the act itself—in the continuous exercise of our freedom to shape the field, as we believe it should be?

We are not particularly aligned with Paul Feyerabend's ideas, but we must concede that our impressions are solace in his work. Feyerabend advocates methodological anarchism, in which scientific progress is not necessarily guided by a single methodology or rationality criteria, such as the idea of a monolithic science that progresses through a method universally adopted by scientists (see Couto 1999).

While epistemological plurality and interdisciplinarity enrich ethnobiology's characteristics, the progress we hope for may still need to materialize. For instance, can this interdisciplinarity lead to difficulties in establishing a consensus on what constitutes progress in the field? Feyerabend's anarchic epistemology, which values this diversity, can serve as a reflection. However, allowing the coexistence of approaches without creating a clear path for advancing the field may be problematic. However, would it be possible to create internal rules that point toward such a path?

If progress exists, it is certainly not linear, as theoretical and social setbacks or distortions accompany the apparent scientific advances. The lingering question is: will we ever overcome this existential condition of repetition without tangible results? Alternatively, condemned by the gods, are we destined for an endless journey without visible progress, yet driven by the persistence that characterizes our scientific or social endeavors?

REFERENCES

Albuquerque UP, Alves RRN (2024) **Enhancing Editorial Standards and Introducing the New Checklist Section of the Ethnobiology and Conservation.** *Ethnobiology and Conservation* 13. doi: [10.15451/ec2024-03-13.12-1-3](https://doi.org/10.15451/ec2024-03-13.12-1-3).

Couto LF (1999) **Feyerabend e a máxima do**

"Tudo Vale": A necessidade de se adotar múltiplas possibilidades de metodologia na construção de teorias científicas. *Psicologia: Reflexão e Crítica* 12(3). doi: [10.1590/S0102-79721999000300004](https://doi.org/10.1590/S0102-79721999000300004).

Póvoas JF (2007) **A ma-fe analítica existencial Sartreana.** *Reflexao* 32(92): 81-98.

Póvoa AG (2023) **A filosofia do absurdo em Albert Camus e Clarice Lispector.** *Poesis* 27(2): 1-17. doi: [10.46551/2448-30952023v27n212](https://doi.org/10.46551/2448-30952023v27n212).

Received: 23 September 2024

Accepted: 23 September 2024

Published: 25 September 2024

Editor: Rômulo Alves

