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Between nihilism and transcendence : Albert Camus' dialogue with Nietzsche and Dostoevsky

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BETWEEN NIHILISM AND TRANSCENDENCE: ALBERT CAMUS'
DIALOGUE WITH NIETZSCHE AND DOSTOEVSKY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Political Science

by

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expanded my interest in the problem of violence and helped to crystallize many of the ideas in this dissertation. It was in Dustin's seminar, in fact, that I was first introduced to Camus, and his insights then and later were central to my subsequent research. So thank you Dustin, for your time, for your kindness, and for your example.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the impact of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Friedrich Nietzsche on the development of Albert Camus' political philosophy. The innovation of the present study is in the attempt to offer a substantive examination of Camus' dialogue with Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. To the extent that connections between these writers have been discussed, it has been in the general context of modern thought or it has focused on overlapping literary themes. This project emphasizes the political dimensions of these connections. In addition to re-interpreting Camus' political thought, the aim is to clarify Camus' struggle with transcendence and to bring renewed attention to his unique understanding of the relationship between nihilism, ideology, and political violence in the twentieth century. I focus on Camus' dialogue with Nietzsche and Dostoevsky for three reasons. First, these are the thinkers with whom Camus is most engaged. Indeed the problems and themes of Camus' work are largely defined by Dostoevsky and Nietzsche; a full account of this dialogue will therefore enhance our understanding of Camus while also reinforcing the enduring importance of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. Second, it allows me to recast Camus' political philosophy as both a synthesis of and a response to Nietzsche and Dostoevsky's projects. Finally, I believe this approach allows for a re-assessment of Camus' broader political significance, which I contend has been undervalued in the literature. Ultimately, I argue that Camus remains among the most important moral and political voices of the twentieth century. Although limited, his philosophy of revolt offers a humane portrait of justice and articulates a meaningful alternative to the extremes of ideological politics.

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

“In the spectacle of death, in the endurance of intolerable pain, and in the irrevocableness of a vanished past, there is a sacredness, an overpowering awe, a feeling of the vastness, the depth, the inexhaustible mystery of existence, in which, as by some strange marriage of pain, the sufferer is bound to the world by bonds of sorrow. In these moments of insight, we lost all eagerness of temporary desire, all struggling and striving for petty ends, all care for the little trivial things that, to a superficial view, make up the common life of day by day; we see, surrounding the narrow raft illumined by the flickering light of human comradeship, the dark ocean on whose rolling waves we toss for a brief hour; from the great night without, a chill blast breaks in upon our refuge; all the loneliness of humanity amid hostile forces is concentrated upon the individual soul, which must struggle alone, with what of courage it can command, against the whole weight of a universe that cares nothing for its hopes and fears.” – Bertrand Russell

More than fifty years after his death, Camus remains a critical voice for political justice and human rights. Writing in the midst of World War II, Camus engaged the problem of nihilism with urgency and moral clarity. As an artist, Camus felt obliged to confront injustice and to tell the truth about its origins. Through his journalism, fiction, and philosophical essays, he sought ways to confront a world without meaning while avoiding the ideological extremes of the twentieth century. Given his task and historical moment, it is not surprising that Camus continues to receive attention from scholars and the public.

Camus' early notoriety was largely the result of his journalism. Unable to join the military because of his tuberculosis, he moved to Paris in 1940 to write for the French newspaper the *Paris-Soir*. With the help of his long-time friend Pascal Pia, Camus was introduced to Gaston Gallimard, whose family operated publishing houses in France at the time. This connection would lead to the publication of Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger*. Although he hoped to publish these works in conjunction with *Caligula*, the Nazi occupation of Paris forced him to return to his native Algeria. Having

fled France, Camus sent his manuscripts to Pia, who forwarded them to Andre Malraux. Although he had reservations about *Caligula* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Malraux was impressed by *The Stranger*. Malraux sent the manuscript to Gallimard and recommended immediate publication. In June of 1942, Gallimard published *The Stranger*. After a few months and several revisions, *The Myth of Sisyphus* was also published. Although Camus' first works did not initially garner widespread acclaim, among the French elites they were embraced with unusual enthusiasm.¹ In 1942, then, Camus' literary life was permanently altered.

Later that year, as Allied forces landed on the North African coast, Camus became separated from his wife Francine, who arrived in Oran shortly before the occupation. In Paris and unable to return to Oran, Camus began working with Gallimard as a literary reviewer. He quickly emerged as a key figure in the French Resistance movement. Around this time he helped to establish the underground newspaper *Combat*, which was arguably the most significant publication during the Nazi occupation. As an editor and writer, Camus captured the public's attention, eventually becoming one of the leading voices of the movement.

Camus' experiences at *Combat* were critical to his development as an artist and political thinker. Having risked his life as a member of the resistance, giving shelter to colleagues and working with various underground groups, Camus became increasingly aware of his responsibilities as an artist. Nihilism was no longer an abstraction; it was a political reality that demanded action. As his influence increased in post-war France, Camus' resistance activities also expanded. His struggles against Nazism in particular

¹ Herbert Lottman, *Albert Camus: A Biography* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1979), p. 255.

sharpened his understanding of the threat of violence and ideological terror. Henceforth his writing assumed an increasingly moral hue. Even in the aftermath of the Allied victory, Camus continued to defend human dignity, both in France and abroad. The spirit of revolution persisted in Europe after the defeat of Nazism, and Camus perceived a lingering nihilism at the root of it. Against this nihilism Camus and his colleagues at *Combat* advocated a new kind of political morality. Herbert Lottman described this attitude in the following terms:

The moral bias of Camus's *Combat*, or more accurately the *Combat* of Camus, Pia, Altschuler, Paute-Gimone, Ollivier, and their colleagues, was the newspaper's single distinguishing feature, making concrete the vague and often unexpressed hopes of the younger generation. . . . It guaranteed that there would not be a moral vacuum during the scramble for power that was taking place the first few months of liberated Paris. Camus and *Combat* were a new morality or they were nothing.²

Lottman's observation here is important because it reflects Camus' post-war view of his role as a thinker and a political actor. The moral urgency of Camus' subsequent writings, therefore, is unsurprising.

Camus' next major work, *The Plague*, was published in 1946. The book was a tremendous success. Exploring exile and rebellion in an explicitly absurd context, *The Plague* was a uniquely relevant work in Europe's post-war climate. It was also the first work of fiction in which Camus tried to articulate his philosophy of revolt. For that reason, it helped to cement Camus' reputation as one of the most important moral thinkers of his generation. Following *The Plague*, Camus emerged as an international figure, giving talks throughout Europe and the United States.

In the post-war years, however, the ideological rift between the United States and Russia defined international politics. The Allied victory gave rise to a new world order,

² Ibid, p 335.

with capitalism and communism dominating political life. An opponent of both ideologies, Camus' moderation became a source of increasing tension. On the one hand, Camus rejected the economic injustices of capitalism, which he believed perpetuated a system of force and domination. On the other hand, Camus was unable to accept the totalizing claims of communism, which justified violence on pseudo-historical grounds. In the leftist climate of post-war France, however, Camus' moderate stance was vehemently condemned. This culminated when Camus released his most significant political work *The Rebel*. Published in 1951, *The Rebel* articulated Camus' theory of revolt as well as his critique of ideology, particularly socialism and Marxism. Following its release, leading intellectuals like Andre Breton and Jean-Paul Sartre publicly criticized the work, dismissing it as vague and incoherent. Breton, for instance, called Camus' moderate notion of revolt a meaningless "artifice . . . a case of keeping the word and eliminating the thing itself."³ Although Camus was wounded by the backlash, he continued to denounce ideologues on both the left and right. But his refusal to choose sides damaged his reputation among French intellectuals and the public. Furthermore, Camus' nuanced position concerning France's occupation of Algeria (to which I return later) only reinforced the view that Camus' moralism was politically naïve.

Although he remained firm in his convictions, Camus suffered immensely from the criticisms of his work, many of which were deeply personal. There was an extended period, in fact, in which Camus questioned his vocation as a writer.⁴ Unable to create,

³ Andre Breton, "The Second Surrealist Manifesto," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 178.

⁴ Camus' notebooks during this period reflect his frustration. Particularly in the first few years after *The Rebel*, Camus continually references his writer's block, suggesting at one

Camus failed to produce a major work of fiction for roughly five years. In 1956, Camus published his final novel *The Fall*, and in the following year he released a collection of short stories entitled *Exile and the Kingdom*. In 1957, moreover, Camus was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature at the age of forty-three. Tragically, just as Camus seemed ready to begin the next phase of his literary career, he died in a car accident in 1960.

Despite his early death, Camus produced a number of influential works, and his thought continues to stimulate debate in the academic literature. In the political science scholarship, there is considerable doubt as to Camus' importance as a political thinker. Focusing mostly on his essay *The Rebel*, critics like Michael Harrington claim that Camus "could find nothing more than a romantic syndicalism to counterpose against his own corrosive skepticism."⁵ But critiques such as this tend to view Camus' thought through too narrow a prism and, consequently, undervalue his importance as a political thinker. While it is true that Camus was not a systematic theorist, it is a mistake to assume he had nothing significant or concrete to say about political life. Camus analyzed politics not as a social scientist or a philosopher but as an artist and existentialist; and he sought understanding of human reality through psychological analysis and experience. For Camus, this was best done through art and fiction. The difficulties involved in classifying Camus have been addressed well by Germaine Bree:

Philosophical and ethical systems, as such, did not interest him, and he himself on several occasions stated that he was not a philosopher . . . [But] if we think of a writer whose essential effort is directed toward elucidating

point that he may have exhausted his creative potential (*Notebooks 1951-1959*, pp. 111-12).

⁵ Michael Harrington, *The Accidental Century* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1965), p. 169.

his own experiences through an effort of his intelligence as a philosopher, then Camus most certainly is a philosopher.”⁶

It is true that Camus was primarily a fiction writer, but this did not prevent him from exploring serious political problems; on the contrary, it enabled him to examine them on a variety of levels and to articulate them in a multiplicity of ways. John Cruickshank has argued persuasively, in fact, that Camus’ use of fiction should be understood in the larger historical context. In the wake of World War II, Cruickshank notes, “The general move in philosophy was to move away from abstractions and general theories and grapple with concreteness and particulars. Novels are a perfect vehicle for just such a move.”⁷ To account for his thought, therefore, we must give equal attention to all of his writings, particularly the fiction, where his philosophical themes and political ideas are most developed. To this end, I examine the development of Camus’ thought in his political and philosophical writings as well as his novels and plays.

Before continuing, it is essential to explain why Dostoevsky and Nietzsche are of such importance to Camus’ thought. First, these are the thinkers with whom Camus is most engaged. Indeed the problems and themes of Camus’ work are largely defined by Dostoevsky and Nietzsche; an account of this dialogue is therefore critical to a larger understanding of Camus. Second, analyzing Camus’ thought from this perspective helps to elucidate the ways in which Camus responds to Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. Camus regards these thinkers as prophets of modernity; his works seek to clarify this fact. Although Camus engages them in different ways and for different reasons, he is almost always responding to them in one way or another. Finally, I believe this approach allows

⁶ Germaine Bree, *Camus*, Revised Edition, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1964), p. 9.

⁷ John Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 63.

for a re-assessment of Camus' broader political significance, which I argue has been undervalued.

The Appeal of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky

Nietzsche was a figure of enduring interest to Camus. Indeed one of Camus' first published essays is a laudatory analysis of Nietzsche's aesthetic philosophy.⁸ Among the many reasons for Camus' attraction to Nietzsche was Nietzsche's peculiar place in the history of philosophy. Neither an academic philosopher nor a conventional writer, Nietzsche spent the bulk of his productive life in solitude, critiquing his age and culture from afar. Nietzsche thus appealed both to Camus' artistic and critical disposition. More importantly, Nietzsche was a lucid thinker who directly engaged the nihilism of his time – given his historical moment, Camus likely found this aspect of Nietzsche admirable. While Camus would later concede that Nietzsche was partly responsible for this crisis, he nonetheless recognized the urgency of Nietzsche's admonitions.

As a thinker, then, Nietzsche was deeply engaged with the problem of nihilism. Unable to dismiss it, Camus writes, "Nietzsche accepts the entire burden of nihilism."⁹ Nietzsche's philosophical courage was a kind of model for Camus. In his notebooks, for example, Camus writes

It is said that Nietzsche, after breaking with Lou, entered into a final solitude, walked at night in the mountains that dominate the Gulf of Genoa and lit immense fires there that he watched smolder. I've often thought of these fires and their gleam has danced behind my entire intellectual life. So even though I've sometimes been unjust toward certain thoughts and

⁸ The article, entitled "Essay on Music," was published in June 1932 in the Algerian review *Sud*. Camus wrote this during his first year of college, during which he was introduced to Nietzsche by his mentor and professor, Jean Grenier.

⁹ Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 67.

certain men whom I've met in this century, it is because I've unwillingly put them in front of these fires and they were promptly reduced to ashes.¹⁰

Camus' admiration for Nietzsche is apparent, as is his tendency to judge himself and others by Nietzschean standards. Camus' writing room, moreover, as Herbert Lottman notes, was "decorated with portraits of Dostoevsky and Nietzsche."¹¹ It is important to emphasize these details at the outset, as they speak to Nietzsche's lasting influence on Camus.

As an intellectual influence, Dostoevsky was equally important to Camus. Indeed among Camus' literary models, Thomas Epstein has claimed that "Dostoevsky was the most important case, the inspiration, idol, and obstacle needed by Camus in order to define himself."¹² With Dostoevsky, however, there are some biographical parallels that help to explain Camus' fascination. To begin, Camus and Dostoevsky experienced comparable intellectual evolutions. Both, for instance, were initially drawn to socialist ideologies. In 1849, in fact, Dostoevsky was arrested and exiled in Siberia for conspiring with members of the Petrashevsky Circle, a literary group of progressive intellectuals. Dostoevsky's memories of this period would later serve as the basis for his political novel *The Possessed*. Camus similarly joined (albeit reluctantly and not for long) the Communist Party during his college years in Algeria.¹³ Shortly after joining, however, both Camus and Dostoevsky rejected the doctrinal inflexibility of these movements.

¹⁰ Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1951-1959*, trans. Ryan Bloom (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2008), p. 89.

¹¹ *Albert Camus: A Biography*, p. 580.

¹² Thomas Epstein, "Tormented Shade: Camus' Dostoevsky," in *The Originality and Complexity of Albert Camus' Writings* (New York: Palgrave, 2012), p. 146.

¹³ *Ibid*, pp. 88-90.

There is also an aporetic quality to Camus and Dostoevsky's thought that warrants discussion. Neither thinker was able to resolve the contradictions in their life and works. Dostoevsky, for instance, as Camus points out in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, understood the absurd problem, yet posited a solution wholly inconsistent with it.¹⁴ Dostoevsky thus acknowledges the absence of meaning in human history, but persists in his faith. Camus' thought is also antagonistic. His philosophy of revolt rejects foundationalism, for example, while preserving a sense of foundations. Camus also denies the existence of God, but insists that he is not an atheist.¹⁵ Much of Camus' later thought also revolves around a contradiction: affirming limits and values in a world in which limits and values are not given; as the chapter on revolt will demonstrate, this affirmation of contradiction was the guiding theme of Camus' political thought.

The persistence of contradictions in Camus and Dostoevsky's writings is related to a more fundamental commonality. Dostoevsky was plagued by doubt his entire life.¹⁶ Indeed the most powerful arguments in Dostoevsky's novels are often those with which he disagrees. The clearest example of this is Ivan's atheistic pronouncements in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Camus shared Dostoevsky's self-questioning nature. Born a French Algerian, Camus struggled to reconcile his European and Mediterranean identities. Camus' cultural ambivalence is reflected in his writings. His dissertation and

¹⁴ Camus writes that Dostoevsky undergoes a "complete metaphysical u-turn" (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 111) when he posits God and belief in immortality as the only solution to the absurd. Camus also questions the veracity of Dostoevsky's religious conviction. "It is hard to believe," he writes, "that a novel [*The Brothers Karamazov*] sufficed to transform into joyful certainty the suffering of a lifetime."

¹⁵ In a response to a question about the religious tone of one of his plays, for instance, Camus is quoted by his biographer Todd as saying "It's true that I don't believe in God, but that doesn't mean I'm an atheist" (*Albert Camus: A Life*, p. 356).

¹⁶ Dostoevsky was quite candid about the extent of his self-doubt. Indeed he referred to himself as a "child of disbelief and doubt" (*Correspondence of Dostoevsky*, I, p. 157).

first formal philosophical work, for example, tries to integrate Greek and Christian thought. And while Dostoevsky's Christianity existed in perpetual tension with doubt, Camus' secular humanism was shrouded in Christian symbolisms.¹⁷ In any event, the abundance of aporias in Camus and Dostoevsky is an important point of convergence. On the one hand, it reflects their resistance to absolutism. But it also explains their preference for art and fiction. Formal philosophy demands order and coherence. Camus and Dostoevsky wanted their art to reflect reality, which is tensional and uncertain. Hence their art and ideas attempt to express this uncertainty. Understanding this is essential to any effort to make sense of Camus and Dostoevsky's thought.

Camus' Dialogue with Nietzsche and Dostoevsky

For most of his adult life Camus was directly engaged with the works of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. This was partly the result of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky's use of art as a medium for the exploration of social problems. But it was also because Camus shared their thematic interests and political concerns. In his notebooks, novels, plays, political journalism, and essays, Camus takes up specific motifs he first encountered in Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. The cardinal themes of Camus' thought, for instance, are absurdity and revolt, and the terms of these problems are defined by Nietzsche and Dostoevsky; indeed the resulting tension between them eventually crowns Camus' political thought.¹⁸ To illustrate this as well as the larger significance of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky to Camus' art and political philosophy, this study follows Camus' attempts to

¹⁷ There is a considerable literature on Camus' tenuous relationship to Christianity, as well as his use of Christian imagery. As I will deal in greater detail with this in the following chapters, it suffices here to note that Camus' thought is never entirely divorced from the Christian vision to which it is often opposed.

¹⁸ This will be examined in detail in chapter five, where Camus' philosophy of revolt is analyzed.

develop and respond to their ideas. Particular attention is paid to direct references to Nietzsche and Dostoevsky in Camus' notebooks and non-fiction, as these will help to corroborate more general claims concerning Camus' fictional works. Although Nietzsche and Dostoevsky's influence on Camus has received sporadic attention in the literature, the significance of this dialogue has not been fully elucidated. Consequently, the nature and motivating concerns of Camus' thought (as well as its political import) are not entirely understood.

To help frame Camus' dialogue Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, three conceptual periods of Camus' writing are delineated. The first is Camus' sensualist period, which begins with Camus' college years in the early 1930s and extends roughly until the 1940s. This cycle of works is largely apolitical. Camus' inquiries are chiefly metaphysical, focusing on the role of aesthetics and meaning in human life. Camus' encounter with Nietzsche begins in the sensual period, as questions of affirmation and purposelessness are explored in a variety of contexts. The second period, which emerges around 1942, is concerned with the metaphysics of absurdity. Here Camus is interested in man's relation to the world and in deducing the moral and epistemological consequences of absurdity for human life. Accordingly, his analyses are more existential than political, more solipsistic than social. During this period, Camus continues to engage Nietzsche, but his dialogue with Dostoevsky begins to take shape as well, particularly when Camus develops a psychology of the absurd. Camus' third and final period coincides with the publication of his novel *The Plague* in 1947. Here Camus develops a positive philosophy of revolt and, not surprisingly, his interaction with Dostoevsky becomes paramount. Camus tries to map the lessons of the absurd onto the social-ethical sphere, and his

dialogue with both Dostoevsky and Nietzsche begins to crystallize. Henceforth, Camus' thought reflects his postwar concerns and we discover what Thomas Hanna aptly calls a "positive attack on the ethical-political problems of the twentieth century."¹⁹ Throughout his revolt period, moreover, Camus formulates an ethos that is uniquely his own. For this reason, this period will be instrumental to establishing the final significance of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky to Camus' thought.

In terms of his broader dialogue with Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, Camus' transition from absurdity to revolt is particularly significant. For the first time, Camus appears to reject Nietzsche on ethical grounds. Camus' desire to affirm life on absurdist terms is weighed against his desire to impose limits on action. As Camus wrestles with this dilemma, his engagement with Dostoevsky increases. More precisely, absurdity and political action are seen as problematic in a world without transcendence. It is thus in these works that Camus responds most directly to Dostoevsky's essential claim: that without God and belief in immortality life becomes not only impossible to love but "something unnatural, an unbearable nonsense."²⁰

Ultimately, Camus' thought will be understood in terms of its engagement with Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. Nietzsche shapes Camus' conception of modern nihilism. As his notebook entries suggest, Nietzsche becomes the catalyst for Camus' understanding of nihilism as a crisis of culture; he challenges Camus to identify the proper attitude one ought to adopt towards an absurd world. Nietzsche's psychology also informs much of Camus' absurdist thought in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Dostoevsky awakens Camus to two

¹⁹ Thomas Hanna, *The Thought and Art of Camus* (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Company, 1958), p. 85.

²⁰ Quoted in Ray Davison's *The Challenge of Dostoevsky* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 1997), p. 44.

existential realities. First, Dostoevsky's Christianity profoundly alters Camus' beliefs concerning the social utility of unifying ideas (such as the Christ-ideal). While Camus does not accept Dostoevsky's Christianity, he is clearly affected by Dostoevsky's understanding of the sources of order in society. Hence Camus' dialogue with Dostoevsky intensifies during the absurd and revolt periods; in works such as *The Plague*, *The Fall*, and *The Rebel*, this is most apparent.²¹ Dostoevsky also awakens Camus to the connections between individual crime and collective revolution. Indeed in his notebooks Camus sums up Dostoevsky's argument as follows: "Dostoevsky's Thesis: The same paths that lead the individual to crime lead the society to revolution."²² This Dostoevskian insight anchors Camus' analysis of historical rebellion, and is central to his broader conception of revolt.

To sum up, the approach of this study is to identify the substantive foundations of Camus' dialogue with Nietzsche and Dostoevsky in Camus' non-fiction and to examine the ways in which Camus engages these thinkers in his fictional works. I argue that Nietzsche's thought is more significant in Camus' early works while Dostoevsky's is more important in Camus' later writings. In both cases, however, the influence is more of a dialogue, in which and through which Camus grapples with various conceptions of absurdity and rebellion.

²¹ Thomas Epstein has also emphasizes this, noting that as "Camus' art matures, his references to Dostoevsky become more frequent, more overt, and more coherent" (*Tormented Shade*, p. 146).

²² Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1951-1959*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2008), p. 94.

Previous Literature

Much of the scholarship on Camus, Nietzsche, and Dostoevsky has ignored the philosophical implications of their dialogue and instead focused on overlapping literary themes. Given the significance of these thinkers to Camus' thought, this dearth in the literature is surprising. However, several studies are exceptional in this respect. Fred Willhoite's *Beyond Nihilism: Albert Camus' Contribution to Political Thought*, for example, briefly examines the substantive importance of Nietzsche to Camus. As the title implies, Willhoite is primarily interested in Camus' importance as a political philosopher. Sensitive to what he calls Camus' "existential method," Willhoite begins by acknowledging Camus' deliberate avoidance of systematic thinking.²³ On his account, which this work adopts, Camus' overarching concern was to confront nihilism and to re-establish "norms for human conduct in the political realm."²⁴ Willhoite's contribution to Camus scholarship is critically important mostly because of its emphasis on experience. In particular, he elucidates Camus' attempts to move beyond the "inadequate choices of positivism and idealism," neither of which captures the essence of lived experience for Camus.²⁵ Building on this insight, I try to explain Camus' "existential method" by considering it in the light of his engagement with Nietzsche and Dostoevsky.

In terms of Camus' dialogue with Nietzsche, Willhoite argues persuasively that Nietzsche's creative nihilism was central to Camus' philosophical development. As I argue in subsequent chapters, Willhoite's claims are borne out in Camus' absurd and revolt periods, where the creation and affirmation of values are seen as absurd

²³ Fred Willhoite, *Beyond Nihilism* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), p. viii.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 11.

imperatives. Despite its many insights on the Camus-Nietzsche dynamic, however, Willhoite's analysis is limited in that it does not adequately address the reasons for Camus' divergence from Nietzsche. For instance, Willhoite explores the Nietzschean roots of Camus' early momentist works, but there is little discussion of Camus' humanist alternative to Nietzsche or of Camus' attempts to develop a political philosophy within an explicitly Nietzschean framework.

While several scholars have examined Nietzsche and Camus' foundational inquiries, David Owen's *Nietzsche, Politics and Modernity* is among the few to comparatively analyze them. Owen is particularly insightful in his analysis of Nietzsche's critique of Western metaphysics, which he rightly identifies as a precursor to Camus' absurdist thought.²⁶ However, Owen's study does not examine Camus' critical engagement with Nietzsche's ideas, particularly Nietzsche's *ubermensch* doctrine. This project examines Camus' critique of Nietzsche and explains why Camus ultimately remains faithful to Nietzsche's fundamental vision. Perhaps most importantly, I explore Camus' interaction with Nietzsche against the backdrop of Dostoevsky's thought. In addition to clarifying Camus' political resistance to Nietzsche, this will also help to crystallize the importance of Dostoevsky to Camus' mature philosophy of revolt.

One of the more recent studies of Camus' political thought is Jeffrey Isaac's *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion*. Emphasizing Camus' rejection of traditional grounds for action, Isaac ably distinguishes Camus as uniquely "antifoundational"

²⁶ David Owen, *Nietzsche, Politics and Modernity* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), p. 95.

thinker.²⁷ This aspect of Camus' thought is an enduring concern of this work. Unlike Isaac, however, I try to account for Camus' antifoundationalism by understanding it primarily as a reaction to Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. Camus' broader interest in "the pathos of modernity," Isaac also notes, was in part due to the influence of Nietzsche, whose writings seemed to prophesize twentieth-century politics.²⁸ The pathos to which Isaac refers corresponds to the modern experience of exile, the dominant theme of Camus' absurdist writings. Isaac identifies an important parallel between Camus and Nietzsche, which points to the enduring influence of Nietzsche during Camus' revolt period:

"Like Nietzsche, Arendt and Camus view the condition of modernity as one of homelessness and estrangement in which men, having dethroned God, hopelessly and dangerously seek through their own efforts the certainty and solidity that only a God can provide. Like Heidegger, they see modern subjectivity as engendering an unbridled, Promethean will to power."²⁹

The persistent search for certainty and meaning, as Isaac notes here, was central to Camus' view of the modern condition. Indeed when Camus criticizes ideologies in *The Rebel*, these are seen as the animating impulses of all modern historicist movements. Isaac is thus right to emphasize the Nietzschean origins of this insight.

Isaac also makes a critical observation concerning Camus' complicated departure from Nietzsche. Nietzsche's account of nihilism, Isaac contends, was deeply influential to the young Camus. Given his historical moment, Camus could not help but accept Nietzsche's diagnosis of modernity. However, as Isaac notes, Camus could not embrace

²⁷ Jeffrey Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 11.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 33.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 69.

Nietzsche's response to nihilism, which precluded a ground for solidarity or limits.³⁰ In the analysis of Camus' philosophy of revolt, I build on Isaac's limited analysis by showing how Camus' antifoundationalism tries to go beyond Nietzsche's amoral individualism. Additionally, I try to better elucidate the positive characteristics of Camus' antifoundationalism, which become clearer when contrasted with Nietzsche's creative nihilism and Dostoevsky's conception of active love.

Isaac's study is also instructive in its emphasis on Camus' commitment to action. Isaac sees Arendt and Camus as unique among the postmoderns because of their desire to engage politics in a more concrete way. Unlike contemporary theorists such as Derrida or Adorno, Isaac contends, Camus and Arendt recognized the urgency of the moment and "sought to get to the bottom of the civilizational crisis of the twentieth century."³¹ This meant avoiding the pitfalls of doctrinaire thinking (particularly Marxism) and "helping to reconstitute political thought in a nihilistic age."³² The modern civilizational crisis was anticipated and explained with remarkable clarity in the nineteenth century by Nietzsche and Dostoevsky; it is therefore not surprising that Camus remained in constant dialogue with these thinkers. Isaac notes the influence of Nietzsche on Camus in general terms, but he does not discuss Dostoevsky at all. A fuller account of this dialogue will both advance our understanding of Camus and reinforce the enduring importance of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky.

Camus' engagement with Dostoevsky has also generated a fair amount of scholarly interest. Particular focus has been given to Dostoevsky's psychological account

³⁰ Ibid, p. 11.

³¹ Ibid, p. 13.

³² Ibid, p. 15.

of metaphysical revolt. Hanna's *The Thought and Art of Camus* is notable in this regard. Indeed Hanna comments extensively on Camus' ideas concerning Ivan Karamazov's place in the history of metaphysical revolt.³³ By explaining the appeal of Ivan's peculiar humanism to Camus, Hanna lays the groundwork for much of this study, which claims that Camus imbues Ivan's revolt with an explicitly positive content. Unlike Hanna, however, I include key Dostoevsky texts such as *The Possessed* in a broader discussion of Camus' experiential alternative to Dostoevsky's foundationalism. By drawing on additional Camus texts such as *The First Man* (which was unpublished at the time of Hanna's study), I also develop a more comprehensive account of Camus' dialogue with Dostoevsky.

Although it is somewhat dated, Maurice Friedman's *Problematic Rebel* remains among the most penetrating studies of rebellion and modern literature. While Friedman is not directly concerned with the relationship between Camus and Dostoevsky, he does identify some key points of contrast. In particular, Friedman's discussion of *The Plague* points to what I consider a vital distinction between Camus and Dostoevsky. Referring to the protagonist Rieux, for instance, Friedman writes: "Camus portrays a number of genuinely different images of man, to each of which he lends validity, yet he commits himself in *The Plague* to one image above all others – that of the dialogical rebel Dr. Rieux."³⁴ The notion of the dialogical rebel is especially significant. As Friedman observes, it emphasizes Camus' momentist concern with dialogue, solidarity and

³³ *The Thought and Art of Camus*, p. 85.

³⁴ Maurice Friedman, *Problematic Rebel* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 492.

suffering, as well as his “commitment to the concrete demands of the hour.”³⁵ By developing Camus’ notion of dialogical rebellion, Friedman accounts for the ethical importance of Dostoevsky to Camus while contextualizing the dispute between Camus and Dostoevsky concerning transcendence and experience. In the chapter on revolt, I extend Friedman’s analysis by contrasting Rieux’s revolt with Ivan and Father Zossima from Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. This will help to distinguish Camus’ experiential humanism from Dostoevsky’s religious mysticism.

Friedman’s study is also noteworthy for its insight into Camus’ uniqueness as a political thinker. Like Willhoite and Bree, Friedman emphasizes Camus’ interest in the social implications of man’s ontological and epistemological situation. Recognizing the limits of reason, Friedman asserts, Camus sought a more authentic politics in the realm of human experience. Although Friedman does not explore this aspect of Camus’ thought as exhaustively as Willhoite, he nonetheless treats Camus as an artist seeking to recover a moral ground beyond the confines of transcendent religion and positivist science.³⁶ In his discussion of dialogical rebellion in particular, Friedman skillfully connects Camus’ political morality to his existential account of the human condition. This part of Friedman’s will be discussed at length when I examine the Dostoevskyan roots of Camusian revolt.

More recently, Mark Orme has explored the significance of Dostoevsky’s Ivan Karamazov to Camus’ experiential humanism. In *The Development of Albert Camus’s Concern for Social and Political Justice*, he suggests that Camus discovered in Ivan

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ For example, Willhoite invokes Buber’s “I-Thou” relationship in a larger effort to explain Camus’ rejection of the modern subject-object dichotomy (*Beyond Nihilism*, p. 201).

Karamazov a more concrete ground for action. Ivan's moral outrage combined with his refusal "of the divine," Orme writes, marked an essential moment in the history of rebellion for Camus.³⁷ Although Ivan falls into negation as a result of his revolt, the moral impulse behind it was an affirmation of human solidarity. Emphasizing this moment, Orme points to the increasing importance of suffering and solidarity to Camus' political thought. While it never went beyond the realm of abstraction, Ivan's identification with human suffering represented one the animating impulses of Camusian revolt. In several works, notably *The Plague*, Camus suffuses his fictional rebels with this sentiment, and in other texts such as *The Rebel* Camus identifies Ivan's humanitarianism as a starting point for a more authentic mode of revolt. In any case, by examining Camus' enduring interest in Ivan, Orme offers important insights into Camus' fascination with one of Dostoevsky's most enigmatic characters.

Perhaps the most comprehensive study of the Camus-Dostoevsky relationship is Ray Davison's *Camus: The Challenge of Dostoevsky*. Focusing on the importance of Dostoevsky's fiction to Camus, Davison provides an excellent overview of Camus' literary dialogue with Dostoevsky. In the context of this study, Davison's analysis of Dostoevsky's absurd fiction is particularly instructive. Indeed Davison offers a richly detailed account of Camus' engagement with Dostoevsky's literary characters. "The world of Dostoevsky's rebels," he writes, "is well tuned . . . to the aspirations of the young Camus. They, like himself, want to live according to the dictates of logic and

³⁷ Mark Orme, *The Development of Albert Camus' Concern for Social and Political Justice* (Cranbury, NJ: Rosemont Publishing and Printing Corp., 2007), p. 159.

absurdity. They wish to deny nothing and to face the truth of existence.”³⁸ Here Davison elucidates the fundamental appeal of Dostoevsky’s fiction to Camus. By exposing the individual’s inner confrontation with absurdity, Dostoevsky defines the absurd problem for Camus. Davison is thus most insightful when discussing Camus’ fascination with specific Dostoevsky characters. For this reason, I draw extensively on his text when discussing Camus’ interaction with Dostoevsky’s absurd psychology. If there is a difference, it is that I view the Camus-Dostoevsky dialogue through a distinctly political prism. Dostoevsky’s psychology is critical, to be sure, but the central task is to explain how Camus deals with the political implications of Dostoevsky’s thought.

Although he does not develop the connection, Davison does discuss Camus’ political interest in Dostoevsky’s absurdism. However, as Davison is concerned mostly with Dostoevsky’s problematization of the absurd, he does not adequately address Camus’ humanist extension of Dostoevsky’s absurdism. For instance, Davison points to Ivan Karamazov’s “everything is permitted” as the essential theme of Camus’ absurd and revolt writings. It is certainly true that Ivan (as well as Nietzsche) help to define the problem of nihilism for Camus, but equally important is Camus’ response to Ivan. Ivan’s “everything is permitted” was merely a point of departure for Camus. In his notebooks, for example, Camus writes:

The truly free person is the one who accepting death as it is, accepts simultaneously the consequences – namely the overturning of all traditional notions of values in life. Ivan Karamazov’s ‘Everything is Permitted’ is the only expression of coherent freedom. But it is imperative to get to the bottom of the statement.³⁹

³⁸ Ray Davison, *The Challenge of Dostoevsky* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 1997), p. 51.

³⁹ Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1935-1942*, trans. Phillip Thody (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), p. 118.

Here Camus' desire to move beyond Ivan is clear. As with Nietzsche, Camus regards Ivan's diagnosis of nihilism as an injunction to create and affirm new values. To accept Ivan's negation as final, moreover, is to sanction crime and fail to see the creative potential of rebellion. Camus speaks directly this in a 1946 *Combat* article:

Terror can be legitimized only if one adopts the principle that the end justifies the means. And this principle can be embraced only if the efficacy of an action is taken to be an absolute end, as in nihilist ideologies (everything is permitted, success is what counts) or philosophies that take history as absolute.⁴⁰

Wresting a moral imperative from Ivan's "everything is permitted" is thus a central aim of Camus' political thought. Davison recognizes Camusian revolt as a response to "Ivan's dilemma," but he does not resolve the question of whether revolt works as a political solution to this dilemma.⁴¹

Beyond his engagement with Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, Camus' political thought has received considerable scholarly attention. As mentioned, the works of Thomas Hanna, Germaine Bree, Jeffrey Isaac, and Fred Willhoite are notable examples. Before continuing, however, mention must also be made of David Sprintzen's *Camus: A Critical Examination*. Sprintzen insists that despite his fame, "few have adequately appreciated Camus' cultural significance."⁴² For Sprintzen, this has to do with a failure to understand the nature of Camus' project. After diagnosing "those interior forces seemingly propelling us toward destruction," he argues, Camus sought to instantiate a different way of thinking, what Sprintzen calls a "cultural rebirth."⁴³ Sprintzen's analysis is insightful

⁴⁰ Albert Camus, *Camus at Combat*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 262.

⁴¹ *The Challenge of Dostoevsky*, p. 124.

⁴² David Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), p. xiii.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

mostly because of its focus on Camus' concern with foundations. Recognizing that "metaphysical problems plague the modern world as never before," Camus was always in search of a new ground, one that did not point beyond.⁴⁴ Aware of this, Sprintzen evaluates Camus' thought in terms of its possibilities for more authentic politics, not as a system or blueprint for action.

Like Friedman, Sprintzen understands Camus' emphasis on "dialogue and community" as essential to his political pragmatism. Indeed Sprintzen makes a strong case (which I corroborate in subsequent chapters) that Camus' political thought privileged experience as the only means of affirming limits and avoiding ideological abstractions. This was the impetus, Sprintzen claims, for "Camus' exploration of the preconditions for the creation of dialogic communities."⁴⁵ While Sprintzen is not alone in pointing this out, he is unique in describing Camus' dialogical rebellion as an attempt to wrest "us out of the metaphysical isolation to which the experience of the absurd bears witness."⁴⁶ This is a crucial point as it draws an important connection between absurdity and revolt. One of the few imperatives to emerge from Camus' absurd analysis, for example, is acceptance of ambiguity. As Sprintzen notes, Camus emphasizes experiential sharing as a way of encouraging mutual respect and undercutting "any claim of a right to suppress the views and oppress the person of the Other."⁴⁷ To engage others in this way is to accept, on mutual terms, the impossibility of absolute truth and the necessity of a politics wherein no perspective is privileged over another. The absurd, in other words,

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 67.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. xvi.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 246.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 247.

negates absolutist claims and revolt aspires to build a dialogic community in which values can be affirmed on relative terms.

Although Sprintzen is later critical of Camus' efforts to establish a new experiential ground for politics, his insights into Camus' metaphysical and ontological projects are an important contribution to Camus scholarship. In the final chapter on revolt, I respond to Sprintzen's critique of Camus, which resembles those of Sartre and other Marxist-oriented contemporaries of Camus. In brief, Sprintzen contends that Camus fails to account for concrete historical processes. Failing to see man as trapped "within an engulfing history," Camus falsely assumes he can transcend his historical-technical existence. By misunderstanding man's relation to the world, Sprintzen concludes, Camus' theory of revolt fails to go "beyond the tragic-tension-dualism that counterposes nature against history."⁴⁸ Worse still, it exaggerates man's capacity (via revolt) to practically transform his world. While Sprintzen's critique is not altogether wrong, this study suggests that it is based on a flawed conception of Camus' philosophical anthropology. As chapter three argues, Camus' ontology implies that human beings can order their existence and orientation to others through symbols and a commitment to concrete action.

While Sprintzen seems to understand Camus' concern for foundations, he does not adequately address Camus' central political aim: imposing limits on action. It is untrue, for instance, that Camus neglects man's historical situation or even the material origins of revolution; on the contrary, he concedes that "if rebellion exists, it is because

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 276.

falsehood, injustice, and violence are part of the rebel's condition."⁴⁹ Camus, moreover, does not assume the rebel can escape or transcend this condition. Instead the question was always how to avoid the temptation to use history "to legitimize murder."⁵⁰ From Camus' perspective, the tragedy of twentieth century ideology was its urge to serve history by hastening its climax. Against this destructive attitude Camus taught a new political morality, one tethered to experience and accepting of limits. Sprintzen and other commentators fail to fully explore Camus' efforts in this respect. This work aims to fill this void, and to show how instrumental Nietzsche and Dostoevsky were to the evolution of Camus' thought.

To accomplish this task, several questions must be addressed. In the following chapter, I examine Camus' sensualist literature, which begins in the early 1930s and ends around 1940. Although this is the most apolitical of Camus' conceptual periods, it is critical to establishing the initial importance of Nietzsche to Camus. The primary claim here is that Camus' early absurdist orientation was shaped in large part by Nietzsche. While Camus' mature political thought diverges in crucial ways from this period, the core insights he borrows from Nietzsche remain fundamental to his subsequent writings.

In chapter three, Camus' absurdist writings are explored. Here Camus' early thought is challenged as a result of his engagement with Dostoevsky's absurd literature. As Camus considers the social implications of absurdity, he confronts more directly the links between individual and political disorder. Such themes as solipsism, self-affirmation, and estrangement are all problematized within a distinctly Dostoevskyian

⁴⁹ *The Rebel*, p. 285.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

framework. During this period, Camus struggles to reconcile his early affirmative response to absurdism with the inner nihilism of Dostoevsky's characters.

Chapter four explores the political implications of Camus' absurdist inquiries. Here Camus' dialogue with Nietzsche and Dostoevsky reaches its climax. Camus draws an explicit connection between absurdity and the apotheosis of reason; and political ideologies are seen as extensions of man's essentially religious pursuit of totality. The core claim is that Camus' epistemological skepticism and metaphysical account of totalitarian ideologies are deeply informed by Nietzsche and Dostoevsky.

The fifth chapter addresses Camus' revolt period. Here the central theme is Camus' attempt to ground a political morality in a world defined by absurdity. In this period, Camus' chief concerns are values and limits. He accepts Nietzsche's relativism, but Dostoevsky's emphasis on transcendence and foundations continues to loom large. As a result, Camus formulates a philosophy of revolt that affirms moral limits while avoiding the problem of metaphysical essentialism. The chapter makes two broad claims. First, that Camus replaces transcendent foundations with an experiential ground, which takes the agonism of revolt as a tensional source of order. Second, that Camus' philosophy of revolt can be seen as an amalgamation of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky's thought.

In the final chapter, I sum up Camus' philosophical dialogue with Nietzsche and Dostoevsky and comment briefly on the political import of Camus' project. I also ask what is unique and enduring about Camus' thought? What, if anything, can Camus' plea to moderation and dialogue teach us today? Does Camus resolve the problem of foundationalism? What are the practical implications of revolt? And finally, how does

an examination of Camus' dialogue with Nietzsche and Dostoevsky add to our understanding of all three?

The works of Camus that are given considerable attention in this study include the following: the two philosophical essays, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*; the collections of essays on general topics, *Lyrical and Critical Essays* and *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*; the novels *A Happy Death*, *The Stranger*, *The Plague*, *The Fall*, and *The First Man*; the collection of short stories, *Exile and the Kingdom*. Finally, as mentioned, all of Camus' published notebooks are consulted for additional insight into his thought and intentions

CHAPTER TWO

CAMUS' SENSUALIST LITERATURE

Camus' sensualist writings are concerned primarily with metaphysical and aesthetic questions. The ethical and political problems that pervade his later texts are not yet visible. During this period, Camus is engaged almost exclusively with Nietzsche, and the central motif of his work is the problem of happiness in a world without apparent meaning. This chapter begins with a brief examination of Camus' early non-fiction, paying particular attention to the Nietzschean roots of Camus' early anti-foundationalism. I then discuss Camus' interaction with Nietzsche's metaphysics and aestheticism in such fictional works as *A Happy Death* and *Caligula*. I argue that several Nietzschean concepts (acceptance and creative affirmation in particular) guide much of Camus' early thought.

In light of the significance of Nietzsche's aestheticism to Camus, it will help to first summarize Nietzsche's thesis in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche's task is to associate the decline of tragedy with the rise of Socrates and his disciple Euripides. He argues that Euripides' mania for logic reduced tragedy to a kind of contrived intellectual exercise. Before Euripides, tragedy was life-affirming, the "truly metaphysical activity of man."¹ Tragedy also spoke to the anguish and nobility of human living. It denied the comforts of reason, Nietzsche writes, and said yes "to life even in its strangest and hardest problems."² For Nietzsche, then, pre-Euripidean tragedy embraced the contradictions of life without attempting to resolve them on stage. Under the sway of Socrates, however, tragedy was altered; it became reasonable. Worse still, Euripides

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Douglas Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 22.

² Ibid.

upsets the balance between Apollo and Dionysus, the two Greek gods of art. Set in opposition to one another, Apollo represents beauty, individuation and reason. Dionysus stands for the community or tribe; it symbolizes the bursting of boundaries and the loss of self. The antagonism of these deities gives birth to tragic art, according to Nietzsche. Under the sway of Socrates, however, this tension was lost and virtue was redefined as knowledge.³ Following this turn, it became the business of philosophers and artists alike to know and to explain rather than to create and to affirm. Henceforth tragedy required not only that the “virtuous hero must be a dialectician” but that there also “be a necessary, visible connection between virtue and knowledge, faith and morality.”⁴ This is this sense in which Nietzsche believes Socratism destroyed tragic art.

As Joseph McBride has noted, Nietzsche is concerned with this movement in tragic art because it paved the way for the modern apotheosis of reason, or what Nietzsche often called the will to truth. Nietzsche, he writes, believed “this decline . . . begun with advent of Socratic philosophy and . . . culminated in Christianity.”⁵ In his early writings, Camus appears to adopt Nietzsche’s attitude concerning the relationship between Socrates, tragedy, and reason. The first indication of this can be seen in 1932, when Camus published his first essay.⁶ Entitled “Nietzsche and Music,” the article examines Nietzsche’s aesthetic and tragic philosophy. The essay is mostly a restatement

³ Specifically, Nietzsche claims that Euripides introduces a false optimism into tragedy by transforming what was a true reflection of the human condition into a model of reason and sense (See *Birth of Tragedy*, p. 88). As a result, Nietzsche argues, knowledge emerged as the highest of virtues.

⁴ Ibid, p. 91.

⁵ McBride, Joseph. *Albert Camus: Philosopher and Litterateur* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), p. 16.

⁶ “Nietzsche and Music,” in Camus’ *Youthful Writings*, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976).

of the central arguments in *The Birth of Tragedy*.⁷ The impact of Nietzsche's work, however, can be seen as late as 1955. That year Camus was asked to speak about the future of tragedy. In his remarks, Camus reveals his continued fidelity to Nietzsche. Of Euripides, for instance, Camus says: he "upset the tragic balance by concentrating on the individual and on psychology. He is thus a forerunner of individualistic drama, that is to say, of the decadence of tragedy."⁸ Camus then depicts Descartes as the philosophical equivalent of Euripides. Specifically, Camus argues that Descartes reduced man's relationship to experience by encouraging a shift from passionate ritual to "individual reason."⁹ To emphasize his resistance to reason, Camus insists that a renaissance in tragic art is possible only because

The world that the eighteenth-century individual thought he could conquer and transform by reason and science has in fact taken shape, but it's a monstrous one. Rational and excessive at one and the same time, it is the world of history. But at this degree of hubris, history has put on the mask of destiny. Man doubts whether he can conquer history; all he can do is struggle within it.¹⁰

These parallels are worth noting as they suggest that Camus developed his aestheticism against the backdrop of Nietzsche. They also suggest that Camus' epistemological

⁷ For instance, Camus writes that tragedy "declined when the Greeks sought to substitute reasoning for enthusiasm," and that "Socrates, with his 'Know thyself' destroyed the beautiful . . . He killed the beautiful dream with his evil need for a rational debate" (*Youthful Writings*, pp. 142-43). Later, Camus evokes Nietzsche in his praise of music, calling it a redemptive art "capable of bringing a new bloom to the rationalist and systematic minds of our era" (*Youthful Writings*, p. 151).

⁸ Albery Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), p. 304.

⁹ Ibid, p. 298.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 306.

skepticism, which is not apparent until later, was shaped early on by Nietzsche's critique of reason.¹¹

This aspect of the Camus-Nietzsche relationship has received considerable attention in the literature. Germaine Bree, for instance, mentions this in her study of Camus:

Camus draws on his conception of the fundamental nature of tragedy from the Greeks, but within the Nietzschean perspective: tragedy is born of the conflict between two equally strong, equally valid antagonistic forces, man's passionate assertion of his freedom and will to live, and the irreducible natural order to which he must first submit. Since there can be no real final reconciliation between these forces, man inevitably goes down to his doom. But tragedy contains a revelation: in the tragic universe man, the victim of a fate incomprehensible to him in rational terms, becomes through his struggle with death and suffering the conscious participant in a higher order of greatness which surpasses him. The hour of death in which tragedy culminates is, therefore, for hero and audience alike, the hour of truth. Camus is quite familiar with the Apollo-Dionysus opposition."¹²

Bree offers an important insight here, but it remains undeveloped. Of the few studies that do pursue this facet of Camus' dialogue with Nietzsche, two in particular stand out. The first is James Arnold's analysis of Camus' play *Caligula*. Arnold's work is notable for its exposition of the evolution of the *Caligula* manuscript, which Camus began in 1938 and presented on stage in 1944. Concerning *Caligula* Arnold makes two general claims. First, that Camus attempted to work out an aesthetic of modern tragedy and "that this aesthetic derives directly from Nietzsche."¹³ Second, that the changes Camus made to

¹¹ Camus even writes in one his early essays that "What I had dreamed of was one of those rare philosophies along with Nietzsche's that denied everything to Reason" (*Lyrical and Critical Essays*, p. 127).

¹² Germaine Bree, *Camus* (New York: Hancourt, Brace & World, 1964), p. 143.

¹³ James Arnold, "Camus' Dionysian Hero: *Caligula* in 1938," *South Atlantic Bulletin* 4 (1973): 45.

the manuscript reflect his growing concern with absurdity.¹⁴ Arnold's study focuses on the dramatic structure of *Caligula*; much of it is therefore beyond the scope of the present inquiry. However, Arnold's findings support two claims I intend to develop over the course of this project. The first is that Camus originally found in Nietzsche a justification for his early sensualism. Indeed, Arnold writes that Camus discovers in Nietzsche "a confirmation of his own tendency toward a pagan mysticism."¹⁵ Although Arnold discusses this in the context of Camus' tragic aesthetic, it nevertheless speaks to Nietzsche's influence on Camus' early Mediterranean disposition. By convincing Camus of the limits of reason and Western metaphysics more generally, Nietzsche stimulates Camus' sensualist inclinations. Arnold's analysis also supports my larger claim that Camus begins to diverge from Nietzsche as he pivots to his absurdist period. The thematic shift in *Caligula*, which Arnold rightly associates with the era's political turmoil, signals an important transition in Camus' intellectual life. As noted, the specter of nihilism redirected Camus' attention away from narrow existential concerns and towards the political realities of the mid-twentieth century. Arnold's study, if only obliquely, identifies the reasons for this shift.

The second notable study is George Sefler's comparative analysis of Nietzsche and Camus' aesthetical theories. Sefler's inquiry focuses mostly on the relationship

¹⁴ To support this claim Arnold points to the evolution of the character Caligula between Camus' 1938 and 1944 drafts. In the original manuscript, Caligula's despair and subsequent collapse "is motivated entirely by the sudden death of his sister/mistress Drusilla" (48). However, in the final draft, Drusilla's death is far less significant; it becomes an impetus for Caligula's confrontation with absurdity.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 46.

between art and revolt.¹⁶ However, Sefler also touches upon Nietzsche's early importance to Camus: "Both culturally and academically, Camus matured in a world tinged with Nietzschean hues."¹⁷ Sefler's conclusion is important, as it is consistent with the claim herein that from 1932 onwards Camus is defining his philosophical world in Nietzschean terms. As for Camus' aesthetics, Sefler writes: "Life is without structure, without design. In art, it is given somewhat of a design, a style . . . this is Camus' aesthetical theory."¹⁸ Apart from its obvious indebtedness to Nietzsche, Camus' aesthetics points to Nietzsche's broader significance. For one, as Sefler concludes, Camus clearly "built upon a Nietzschean foundation, altering, modifying, and rejecting elements of his thought."¹⁹ Though Sefler is referring to Camus' aesthetical theory, his conclusion applies equally to Camus' absurd and rebellious thought. That is to say, the notion that life is without structure or design informs all of Camus' philosophical investigations. In both *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*, for example, this Nietzschean premise is presupposed – and Nietzsche is often referenced. Sefler explains the minor dissimilarities between Camus and Nietzsche's aesthetics by pointing to the context in which they were developed: "Unlike Camus who develops his philosophy of art primarily in a context of social thought, Nietzsche propounds his in an essay of, among other themes, classical Greek culture."²⁰ To Sefler's account I would add the following: the social context out of which Camus' aesthetics emerged is also the context

¹⁶ For this reason, Sefler's arguments will be examined in greater detail when Camus' absurd and revolt periods are analyzed.

¹⁷ George Sefler, "The Existential vs. the Absurd: The Aesthetics of Nietzsche and Camus," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 3 (1974): 415.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 416.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 420.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 417.

out of which his moral and political thought emerged; therefore, to the extent that it explains Camus' and Nietzsche's diverging aesthetical theories, it also explains the incongruity among their moral and political philosophies. That Camus never abandons his Nietzschean premises, despite drawing different conclusions, suggests two things: that Camus was determined to ground his thought within a Nietzschean framework and that Camus' divergence from Nietzsche was more politically than philosophically motivated.

There is yet another 1932 essay in which Camus appears to engage Nietzsche directly. In "The Philosophy of the Century," Camus critically examines the prominent French philosopher Henri Bergson. A proponent of experience and intuition, Bergson appealed to Camus for similar reasons as Nietzsche. Camus, in fact, describes Bergson's philosophy as a "defense of direct knowledge, of intuition . . . It pleaded the case for the immediate givens of our awareness. It also cautioned against the dangers of analysis; that is to say, against reason and the intelligence."²¹ The exuberance with which Camus writes of Bergson is difficult to overstate. "There is nothing more attractive than this idea: to set the intelligence aside as dangerous, to base a whole system of immediate knowledge and raw sensation . . . The philosophy was awaited and ought, in fact, to have been able to play the role of religion in our century."²² The Bergson piece is notable for three reasons. First, it illuminates Camus' early anti-foundationalism, which is not anti-reason so much as opposed to a certain species of rationalism. At any rate, though undeveloped, Camus' absurdism can already be seen in this refusal to rationalize the world. Second, because Camus invokes Nietzsche in his dismissal of Bergson, it

²¹ Albert Camus, *Youthful Writings*, trans. Ellen Conroy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 126.

²² Ibid.

suggests that Nietzsche helped to define the parameters of Camus' philosophical worldview.²³ Third, it helps to clarify Camus' enduring interest in Nietzsche's radical skepticism.

Camus' early engagement with Nietzsche points to a final parallel in terms of their larger projects. Nietzsche constantly celebrates the affirmative character of tragic art. In *Ecce Homo*, his final work, Nietzsche restates this conviction: "The highest art in the saying of yea to life, tragedy, will be born again when mankind has knowledge of the hardest, but most necessary of wars, behind it, without, however, suffering from that knowledge."²⁴ Here Nietzsche equates affirmation with acceptance.²⁵ When Nietzsche condemns idealism and its various manifestations, moreover, it is really the consequences of these phenomena that he opposes. By design they deny the sources of anguish – untruth, impermanence, irrationality, purposelessness. However, to console they must conceal their illusory origins.²⁶ For Nietzsche, this accounts for many of late modernity's metaphysical conflicts. The importance of these insights to Camus' absurdism will be the

²³ Indeed, Camus directly references Nietzsche when expressing disappointment with Bergson: "This, at least, is what I had dreamed of. His philosophy seemed to me the most beautiful of all philosophies, for it was one of those rare ones, along with Nietzsche's, that denied everything to Reason" (*Youthful Writings*, p. 127).

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. Anthony Ludovici (New York: Barnes and Noble Publishing, 2006), p. 47.

²⁵ We know also that Camus was familiar with this aspect of Nietzsche's tragic philosophy. In a 1938 notebook entry, for example, Camus quotes the following line from Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*: "The tragic artist is not a pessimist. He says 'Yes' to everything terrible and problematical" (*Notebooks 1935-1942*, p. 145).

²⁶ In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche extends this logic to the evolution of truth and morality: "A moral – that is to say, a method of living which long experience and experiment have tested and proved efficient, at last enters consciousness as a law, as dominant . . . And then the whole group of related values and conditions become part of it: it becomes venerable, unassailable, holy, true; a necessary part of its evolution is that its origin should be forgotten" (296).

subject of subsequent chapters. Here I want to suggest that Nietzsche's emphasis on affirmation or acceptance influenced Camus long before his absurdist period.

The connections between Nietzsche's aestheticism and Camus' sensualism become more explicit in Camus' 1935 dissertation on Christian metaphysics. Here Camus rejects Gnosticism on both aesthetic and sensualist grounds. In his defense of Plotinus, for instance, Camus echoes Nietzsche's praise of the pre-Socratics in *The Birth of Tragedy*.²⁷ As for Gnosticism, Camus regards it as life-denying and sides instead with Plotinus, whose "artist's point of view" he admired.²⁸ Here again Camus' remarks are reminiscent of Nietzsche's claims in *The Birth of Tragedy*.²⁹ In any case, I note Camus' refutation of Gnosticism because it reveals the increasingly Nietzschean prism through which Camus interprets the world. Already suspicious of reason, Camus views the world largely in aesthetic terms; indeed, his critique of the Gnostics is rooted in his conviction that Gnosticism is itself an aesthetic (and negative) judgment of the world. Such a view is consistent with (and indeed identical to) many of Nietzsche's objections to Christianity.³⁰

²⁷ Nietzsche is drawn to the pre-Socratics because of their aestheticism and their refusal to divorce being from action. Camus likewise sees in Plotinus an alternative to dualistic thinking, one in which sensual life is supreme. In his dissertation Camus praises Plotinus' indifference to appearances and writes approvingly of his sensual description of intelligence.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ In the section 'Attempt at Self-Criticism,' for instance, Nietzsche condemns Christianity for its hostility to art and life while extolling the ancient Greeks for understanding that "the world is only justified as an aesthetic phenomenon" (8).

³⁰ This connection has been noted recently by Samantha Novello (2010). Novello writes that "Camus describes the Gnostic' theoretical solutions to the problem of evil as an illustration of a romantic attitude and an expression of a pessimistic viewpoint upon which a moral position of contempt and negation of the world is founded . . . The pessimism of the Gnostics and their proud refusal to accept are said to recall a truly modern sensibility – Camus is clearly alluding to the modern attitude that is explored by

In 1937, just two years after completing his dissertation, Camus gave a lecture at the Communist Party Cultural Center in Algiers in which he defended Mediterranean culture. The lecture is noteworthy for two reasons. First, in praising Mediterranean culture, Camus criticizes Christianity in Nietzschean terms. Originally, Camus argues, Christianity was otherworldly, “a moving but hermetic teaching, primarily Judaic in character.”³¹ However, once Christianity entered the Mediterranean, it was naturalized. It was “Francis of Assisi, a Mediterranean, who turned Christianity from a religion of inner torment into a hymn to nature and naïve joy.”³² Camus’ depiction of Christianity as life-denying is mirrored in Nietzsche’s *Twilight of the Idols*, which we know Camus was reading at the time.³³ In the section “Morality as Anti-Nature,” for example, Nietzsche condemns early Christianity for its “hostility to life” and its “extirpation of sensuality.”³⁴ Camus’ critique of Christianity’s “inner torment” is also prefigured in Nietzsche’s account of Christian “revengefulness.”³⁵ The second noteworthy aspect of the lecture is Camus’ remarks on the Greeks and Romans. Camus begins by condemning the Roman obsession with “puerile abstraction and reasoning,” which he says is too neglectful of

Scheler under the category of resentment, and the roots of which Nietzsche traces back to the eighteenth century age of enthusiasm, of which the pessimistic judgment of the world’s ugliness culminates in radical idealism” (*Albert Camus as Political Thinkers*, p. 65).

³¹ Albert Camus, *Algerian Chronicles*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 189.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 190.

³³ In the month of September 1937 alone, for example, Camus quotes four passages directly from Nietzsche’s *Twilight of the Idols* in his notebooks (*Notebooks, 1935-1942*, pp. 144-45).

³⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 52.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

experience.³⁶ The Greeks, on the other hand, were more appreciative of nature and the sensual life. “What we take from Mediterranean culture,” therefore, “is not the taste for reasoning and abstraction but the life – the streams, the cypresses, the bouquets of color. It is Aeschylus, not Euripides, the Doric Apollos, not the copies in the Vatican.”³⁷ Camus also laments the decadence of post-Euripidean Greece, just as Nietzsche does in *The Birth of Tragedy*.³⁸ In any case, Camus’ defense of Greek philosophy closely resembles Nietzsche’s. And while the parallels are by no means conclusive, they do suggest that Nietzsche informed Camus’ early sensualist disposition.

Between 1937 and 1938, Camus wrote a series of essays that were published separately under the titles “The Wrong Side and the Right Side” (1937) and “Nuptials” (1938). These works are dominated by sensualist and momentist themes. As Philip Thody writes in the preface to *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, Camus is

exploring within the context of his own experience, the ideas of the absurdity of the world, the inevitability of death, and the importance of the physical life . . . The Camus that emerges from these pages is, on an intellectual level, the young pagan rejecting Christianity, and the Mediterranean sensualist already preparing that criticism of Northern metaphysics which informs *The Rebel*.³⁹

Thody’s emphasis on the early signs of Camus’ absurdist thought as well as his critique of metaphysics is especially important in this context. Already Camus is attuned to the absurd and its implications for human life. Nietzsche is a critical catalyst for Camus in

³⁶ *Algerian Chronicles*, p. 191.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ “Even when the Roman copied, they diminished, Camus declares, “And what they imitated was not even the essence of Greek genius but rather the fruit of Greek decadence and error. It was not the strong, tough Greece of the great tragedians and comedians but the prettiness and daintiness of the final centuries” (191). I will explore Nietzsche’s corresponding theses in *The Birth of Tragedy* in the following chapter.

³⁹ Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), p. xi.

this respect. Indeed, Camus was deeply troubled by the nihilistic implications of Nietzsche's thought. "The ambitions of a Lucien de Rubempre or a Julien Sorel often disconcert me in their naiveté and their modesty," Camus writes in the introduction to "The Wrong Side and the Right Side," but "Nietzsche's . . . overwhelm me, precisely because of his failure."⁴⁰ Here Camus seems to be referring to Nietzsche's inability to wrest meaning (beyond individual self-affirmation) out of his deconstruction of metaphysics.

In "The Wrong Side and the Right Side," Camus takes up a number of Nietzschean motifs, including beauty, creative affirmation, and worldliness. In the opening essay, for example, Camus condemns idealists for their denial of life. Man's "kingdom is of this world," he declares.⁴¹ Throughout this collection, Camus uses Nietzschean language to explore affirmative responses to absurdity. As Thody suggested, Camus urges acceptance of life's contradictions without illusion or false hope. As I argue below, this is a distinctly Nietzschean injunction.

Camus' early notebooks also suggest that he was constantly grappling with Nietzsche. There is a particular entry in which Camus cites the following passage from Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*: "Nietzsche: It is to the most spiritual souls, assuming them to be the most courageous, that it is given to live out the most painful tragedies. But it is for this reason that they honor life, because it is to them that it shows its greatest hostility."⁴² That Camus was writing about the tragic nature of existence at the same time that he was reading Nietzsche is hardly surprising. But what Camus is most influenced

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 11.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 60.

⁴² Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1935-1942*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), p. 96-97.

by is Nietzsche's affirmative ethos. "The great courage," Camus wrote in 1937, "is still to gaze as squarely at the light as at death."⁴³ Although there are critical differences between Camus and Nietzsche at this point, the momentism of Camus' early thought is closely related to his embrace of Nietzsche. Indeed one of the earliest imperatives Camus draws from Nietzsche is that the lack of transcendent purpose means one ought to be more attentive to present experience.

Nietzsche's influence persists in "Nuptials," Camus' second collection of essays. One of Camus' most astute biographers, Germaine Bree, has argued that the four essays of *Nuptials* "constitute a simple but sumptuously orchestrated spiritual credo: there is no after-life; each man's life is an end in itself with no significance in terms of a personal God; we die and our kingdom is of this earth."⁴⁴ Bree's interpretation of "Nuptials" is more than justified, and the credo she identifies is equally applicable to Nietzsche's texts. But more importantly, the themes of "Nuptials" reflect Camus' continued dialogue with Nietzsche. For example, the first essay, "Nuptials at Tipasa," is replete with Nietzschean affirmations of life and nature.⁴⁵ The same is true of "Wind at Djemila," where Camus' momentism is equally clear: "If I obstinately refuse all the later on's of this world, it is because I have no desire to give up my present wealth."⁴⁶ In the final essay, "Summer in Algiers," there is also a Nietzschean emphasis on beauty and the body, which can be seen in Camus' admiration of Algerian life:

⁴³ *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, p. 61.

⁴⁴ Germaine Bree, *Camus* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1959), p. 77.

⁴⁵ "I love this life with abandon and wish to speak of it boldly," Camus writes, "it makes me proud of my human condition. Yet people have often told me: there's nothing to be proud of. Yes, there is: this sun, this sea, my heart leaping with youth, the salt taste of my body and this vast landscape in which tenderness and glory merge in blue and yellow" (*Lyrical and Critical Essays*, p. 69).

⁴⁶ *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, p. 76.

Intelligence does not occupy the same place here that it does in Italy . . . This race is indifferent to the mind. It worships and admires the body . . . These people, wholly engaged in the present, live with neither myths nor consolation. Investing all their assets on this earth, they are left defenseless against death. The gifts of physical beauty have been heaped upon them. And, also the strange greediness that always goes along with wealth that has no future. Everything people do in Algiers reveals a distaste for stability and a lack of regard for the future.⁴⁷

There are numerous textual parallels in these essays, but those cited above suffice to establish the general tone of Camus' early non-fiction.

Camus' Early Fiction

In his first novel, *A Happy Death*, Camus engages Nietzsche through the exploration of two key notions: acceptance and affirmation. Nietzsche's conception of affirmation and acceptance are best expressed through his doctrines of eternal recurrence and *amor fati*, both of which are at the core of Nietzsche's affirmative ethos. This section begins, therefore, with a brief explication of these doctrines. This will help to connect the life-affirming sensualism of Camus' fiction to its roots in Nietzsche's metaphysics.

There are sporadic references to eternal recurrence throughout Nietzsche's texts. The doctrine first appears in *The Gay Science* (1882), where Nietzsche introduces it in the form of a parable and a question:

What, if some day or night, a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you" "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sign and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence . . . Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse them demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 89.

when you have answered him: ‘You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.’⁴⁸

That Nietzsche introduces his theory of the eternal recurrence in this way is instructive.

It speaks to his intent, which is to offer eternal return as a test of one’s relation to life.

How one responds to the demon’s message, Nietzsche implies, will reveal to what extent one has affirmed one’s own existence.⁴⁹

Of the texts in which Nietzsche writes of eternal recurrence, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is the most important. Indeed, Nietzsche later considered eternal return “the fundamental idea of the work.”⁵⁰ This is evident in the text as well, as Zarathustra is said to be the definitive teacher of this doctrine.⁵¹ Concerning the meaning of the eternal return, Zarathustra says:

Behold, we know what you teach: that all things recur eternally, and we ourselves too; and that we have already existed an eternal number of times, and all things with us. You teach that there is a great year of becoming, a monster of a great year, which must, like an hourglass, turn over again and again so that it may run down and run out again; and all these years are alike in what is greatest as in what is smallest; and we ourselves are alike in every great year, in what is greatest as in what is smallest.⁵²

Zarathustra’s description of eternal recurrence is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s account in *The Gay Science*. In both texts eternal return functions as a test of one’s love of life.

⁴⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Randomhouse, 1974), p. 273-74.

⁴⁹ Robert Solomon, among other commentators, has offered a similar interpretation of Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence. Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence, Solomon writes, “does not aggrandize the repetition of despair, but rather it uses repetition as the ultimate test of meaningfulness” (*The Passions*, p. 47).

⁵⁰ *Ecce Homo*, p. 63.

⁵¹ For example, in the section entitled “The Convalescent,” Nietzsche writes: “O Zarathustra, who you are and must become: behold, you are the teacher of the eternal recurrence – that is your destiny” (220).

⁵² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Common (Blacksburg, VA: Wilder Publications, 2009), p. 220.

There is also an implied cosmology according to which all things recur; however, this is intended to underscore the absence of a higher meaning or goal – it urges acceptance of life as it is, as pure becoming. For this reason, Nietzsche’s cosmology should be seen as secondarily important. This point has been made by Alexander Nehamas, who similarly argued that the philosophical “use Nietzsche makes of the eternal recurrence does not require that this highly doubtful cosmology be true or even coherent.”⁵³ Nehamas also maintains that Nietzsche’s cosmological claims have in fact obscured the most important aspects of eternal recurrence, “which is the psychological consequences he draws from the recurrence.”⁵⁴ By psychological consequences Nehamas means the behavioral imperative of Nietzsche’s doctrine. Nietzsche is describing (in *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) the “attitude one must have toward oneself in order to react with joy and not despair to the possibility that the demon raises.”⁵⁵ Following Nehamas, I regard this as the central aim of the eternal return.

Additional support for this interpretation can be found in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In the section “On the Vision and the Riddle,” Zarathustra likens eternal recurrence to a vision that recalls the demon’s message in *The Gay Science*. Indeed, Zarathustra repeats the demon’s question to a dwarf he encounters in the wilderness:

Behold . . . this moment! From this gateway, Moment, a long, eternal lane leads backward: behind us lies an eternity. Must not whatever can walk have walked on this lane before? Must not whatever can happen have happened, have been done, have passed by before? And if everything has been there before – what do you think, dwarf, of this moment?⁵⁶

⁵³ Alexander Nehamas, *Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 150.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 151.

⁵⁶ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 158.

To this Zarathustra adds what the demon only implied: “Courage . . . is the best slayer – courage which attacks: which slays even death itself, for it says, Was *that* life? Well then! Once More!”⁵⁷ Courage, then, is the willingness to face life (and death) without shrinking from it. Whoever responds affirmatively (and creatively) to the demon’s message is courageous in precisely this sense.⁵⁸ In his final text, *Ecce Homo* (1888), Nietzsche confirms his intent:

The psychological problem presented by the type Zarathustra is, how can he, who in an unprecedented manner says no, and *acts* no, in regard to all that which has been affirmed hitherto, remain nevertheless a yea-saying spirit? How can he who has the hardest and most terrible grasp of reality, and who has thought the most abysmal thoughts, nevertheless avoid conceiving these things as objections to existence, or even objections to the eternal recurrence of existence?⁵⁹

Nietzsche’s meaning is clear: one can either see in eternal recurrence an imperative to act and create or one can deny it on account of its implications for one’s own life. For Nietzsche, however, only the former can be both happy and honest; for the latter, happiness demands delusion and resignation.

Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence has been subject to myriad interpretations in the literature. Among the most influential is Walter Kaufmann’s. For Kaufmann, eternal recurrence is the culmination of Nietzsche’s affirmative (and momentist) philosophy. As a doctrine, eternal recurrence is a product of Nietzsche’s “supra-historical point of

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 157.

⁵⁸ In the section “On Redemption,” Zarathustra emphasizes the creative imperative that follows from knowledge of eternal recurrence: “I led you away from these fables when I taught you, ‘The will is a creator.’ All ‘it was’ is a fragment, a riddle, a dreadful accident – until the creative will says to it, ‘But thus I willed it.’ Until the creative will says to it, ‘But thus I will it; thus I shall will it’” (141).

⁵⁹ *Ecce Homo*, p. 72.

view.”⁶⁰ It was Nietzsche’s attempt to eternalize the moment and to describe the proper affective response to becoming.⁶¹ In a world of becoming, the moment is everything; there is no beginning or beyond: there is only the present. In this way, Kaufmann regards eternal recurrence as a manifestation of Nietzsche’s opposition to teleological notions of progress or salvation.⁶² To support this claim Kaufmann points to a revealing passage in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

Pain too is a joy . . . Have you ever said yes to a single joy? O my friends, then you said Yes too to all woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored; if you ever wanted one thing twice, if ever you said, You please me, happiness! Abide, moment! Then you wanted *all* back. All anew, all eternally, all entangled, ensnared, enamored – oh, then you *loved* the world. Eternal ones, love it eternally and evermore; and to woe too, you say: go, but return! *For all joy wants – eternity.*⁶³

In this passage Nietzsche’s message of acceptance (this-worldliness) is apparent; it includes the embrace of suffering and joy, both of which are indispensable to life and growth.⁶⁴ In the end, then, eternal recurrence is more than a divinization of the moment;

⁶⁰ Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 319.

⁶¹ Bernard Magnus (1978) and Ivan Soll (1973) have also argued that eternal recurrence, at bottom, is a device with which Nietzsche eternalizes the moment.

⁶² Nehamas also emphasized the “nonteleological” aspect of Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence (*Life as Literature*, p. 145).

⁶³ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 323.

⁶⁴ As the passage above suggests, there is also a sense in which all things and events are interrelated; consequently, one can either accept the totality of life or one must negate it entirely. In her analysis of eternal recurrence, Maudemarie Clark (1990) also points to the importance of interconnectedness: “We can interpret Zarathustra’s ‘abysmal thought’ as the realization that to affirm life is to affirm the eternal recurrence of everything” (262). This interpretation finds support in Nietzsche’s *The Will to Power*: “we should say yea to any single moment, we have then affirmed not only ourselves, but the whole of existence. For nothing stands by itself, either in us or in other things: and if our soul has vibrated and rung with happiness, like a chord, once only and only once, then all eternity was necessary in order to bring about that one event – and all eternity, in this single moment of our affirmation, was called good, was saved, justified, and blessed” (580).

it is, as Kaufmann observes, “the most extreme repudiation of any deprecation of the moment, the finite, and the individual – the antithesis of any faith in infinite progress.”⁶⁵

Mostly concurring with Kaufmann, Arthur Danto has argued that eternal recurrence both denies *telos* and “entails the meaninglessness of things.”⁶⁶ Like Kaufmann, Danto claims that Nietzsche’s intent was to posit eternal repetition as an imperative to will meaning and impose form. This is also the sense in which Danto imagines eternal recurrence as a momentist imperative: “It does not matter that we pass away and return and pass away again. What counts is what we eternally *do* . . . and the meaning we give to our lives.”⁶⁷ The interpretation set forth here is entirely consistent with Danto’s momentist reading of Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence.

More recently, Maudemarie Clark has interpreted Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence as a “practical doctrine,” designed to help human beings “become the kind of person who . . . would consider the demon’s message divine.”⁶⁸ Following Solomon (1993) and other commentators, Clark considers eternal recurrence a “device for articulating Nietzsche’s ideal of the life-affirming person.”⁶⁹ For Clark, eternal recurrence is directed at two ends, both of which concern overcoming. The first involves acceptance of life as an end unto

⁶⁵ *Nietzsche*, p. 321.

⁶⁶ Arthur Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 211. If there is a difference in Danto’s interpretation, it is that takes seriously Nietzsche’s cosmological claims. According to Danto, Nietzsche believed he needed a proof of his doctrine “which was scientifically impregnable” (*Nietzsche as Philosopher*, p. 203). However, in the final analysis, Danto shares Kaufmann’s view that “the reasons for believing it [eternal recurrence] true are less important for the understanding of his [Nietzsche’s] thought than the reasons for supposing the belief in it to be *important*” (203).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁶⁸ Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 248.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

itself. Eternal recurrence, in other words, means one must be willing “to engage in the same activities again and again, even if one had no hope of the goal being finally achieved.”⁷⁰ The second end at which eternal recurrence aims is the overcoming of “moral condemnation.”⁷¹ Here Clark refers to the importance of conquering resentment, envy, and other forms of moral judgment.⁷² For the present inquiry, it is important to stress Clark’s focus on acceptance and affirmation as key aspects of Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence doctrine. Much of the debate in the literature orbits around Nietzsche’s recurrence cosmology; however, this is largely unrelated to Camus’ interaction with Nietzsche. Here it suffices to note the scholarly agreement regarding the life-affirming implications of eternal recurrence, as this is what most influenced Camus’ early fiction.

Before turning to Nietzsche’s concept of *amor fati*, it is worth noting that the joint themes of eternal recurrence and affirmation appear on at least three occasions in Dostoevsky’s novels as well. First, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky introduces the concept when the devil tells Ivan that “our present earth may have been repeated a billion times” and “that the same sequence may have been repeated endlessly and exactly the same way to every detail.”⁷³

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 272.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 285.

⁷² To adequately explore this aspect of Clark’s claim would require an analysis of Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality*, which is beyond the scope of the present inquiry. However, Nietzschean resentment will be discussed in detail when Camus’ *The Fall* is examined.

⁷³ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Randomhouse, 1996), p. 619.

Second, in *The Idiot*, Prince Muishkin expresses the idea while recounting a memory of an execution:

The repugnance to what must ensue almost immediately, and the uncertainty, were dreadful . . . but worst of all was the idea, ‘What should I do if I were not to die now? What if I were to return to life again? What an eternity of days, and all mine! How I should grudge and count up every minute of it, so as to waste not a single instance!’ He said that this thought weighed so upon him and became such a terrible burden upon his brain that he could not bear it.⁷⁴

Lastly, in *The Possessed*, Kirilov experiences a brief vision of eternity, which he describes to Shatov as follows:

There are seconds – they come five or six at a time – when you suddenly feel the presence of eternal harmony in all its fullness. It is nothing earthly. I don’t mean that it is heavenly, but a man in his earthly semblance can’t endure it. . . . It is as though you suddenly apprehended all nature.⁷⁵

The question of whether and to what extent Dostoevsky influenced Nietzsche in this respect is beyond the present inquiry. The focus here is on Nietzsche, as he was the first to formally develop these doctrines. However, that these themes appear also in Dostoevsky only adds to the thrust of my larger claim concerning the influence of both writers on Camus’ intellectual development.

Nietzsche’s doctrine of *amor fati* (love of fate) is inextricably linked to eternal recurrence. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche describes *amor fati* thus: “My formula for greatness in man,” he writes, “is *amor fati*: the fact that a man wishes nothing to be different, either in front of him or behind, or for all eternity.”⁷⁶ Previously, eternal recurrence was understood as an experiential test resulting from one’s awareness of the

⁷⁴ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Richard Pevear (New York: Random House, inc, 2001), p. 56.

⁷⁵ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004), p. 614-15.

⁷⁶ *Ecce Homo*, p. 33.

repetition of things. *Amor fati* is best understood as the attitude that corresponds to this experience; or, as Maudemarie Clark suggests, *amor fati* “the attitude of one who affirms eternal recurrence.”⁷⁷ *Amor fati* is therefore a love of necessity, of the fact that, as Nietzsche writes in *The Twilight of the Idols*, one’s existence is bound to “the fatality of all that which has been and will be.”⁷⁸ With *amor fati*, Nietzsche also points to the interrelatedness of things. To love fate is to realize that one’s existence is the product of all that has happened, and that nothing in that chain of events is dispensable; Nietzsche considers this the highest affirmation of life possible. Kaufmann’s account of *amor fati* captures the importance of interconnectedness well:

The projection of one’s feeling toward oneself upon a cosmic scale may seem to hinge on a metaphysical premise, but it can be defended empirically. That I am here, now, doing this – that depends on an awe-inspiring series of antecedent events, on millions of seemingly accidental moves and decisions, both by myself and many others whose moves and decisions in turn depended on yet other people. And our very existence, our being as we are, required that our parents had to choose each other, not anyone else, and beget us at the precise moment when we were actually begotten; and the same consideration applies to their parents, and to all our ancestors, going back indefinitely. Thus any affirmation of the present moment points far beyond the present.⁷⁹

Understood in this way, it is apparent why Nietzsche thought *amor fati* such a life-affirming attitude. Additionally, Kaufmann’s explanation helps to clarify the connections between *amor fati*, eternal recurrence, and Nietzsche’s momentism. These connections are emphasized here because together they inform so much of Camus’ early writings. As I argue in the following section, this is particularly true of Camus’ novel *A Happy Death*.

⁷⁷ Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy, p. 282.

⁷⁸ *The Twilight of the Idols*, p. 67.

⁷⁹ Nietzsche, p. 282.

A Happy Death

Although unpublished until 1971, *A Happy Death* was written between 1936 and 1938. The story revolves around the life of a French Algerian clerk named Patrice. Like Camus' second novel, *The Stranger*, the narrative is divided into two parts, both of which explore the link between happiness and death. Camus' aim in *A Happy Death* is foreshadowed in the first part when Patrice experiences an epiphany of sorts: "If had the time, I would only have to let myself go. Everything else that would happen to me would be like rain on a stone. The stone cools off and that's fine. Another day, the sun bakes it. I've always thought that's exactly what happiness would be."⁸⁰ This passage typifies the affirmative character of *A Happy Death*; it also points to the increasingly Nietzschean hue of the text. As noted, sensualism, momentism, affirmation, and acceptance are interconnected in Nietzsche's writings. In *A Happy Death*, Camus incorporates these themes into a vision of worldly happiness. Here Nietzsche's influence can be seen in the language Camus uses to characterize Patrice's evolution. Considered alongside the concurrent (and previously examined) references to Nietzsche in Camus' early notebooks and essays, this supports my contention that Nietzsche was a significant influence on the text.

The two parts of *A Happy Death* are respectively titled "A Natural Death" and "Conscious Death." Both parts concern the pursuit of happiness, but it is not until the end, as Patrice nears death, that happiness is won. In the first part, Patrice's life is mired in routine; his job is tedious; his relationships are superficial; and his life bereft of meaning. Initially, Patrice looks to nature for a model of happiness. His hope, as

⁸⁰ Albert Camus, *A Happy Death*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage International, 1995), pp. 38-39.

Germaine Bree notes, is “to achieve the impersonality of natural objects.”⁸¹ Increasingly, however, Patrice adopts a momentist orientation. He seeks divinity in the most banal of encounters. If Patrice “gave the usher too big a tip,” Camus writes, “it was because he did not know how else to pay for his joy, and because he worshipped, by making this everyday gesture, a divinity.”⁸² But this strategy is short-lived, as Patrice is continually undermined by his consciousness of death. At this point sensualism emerges as a dominant theme.

As the title implies, the second part of *A Happy Death* explores consciousness of death as both an impediment and a means to happiness. In the first part, Patrice is unable to will happiness, and so falls into a state of ennui. The story pivots when Patrice indifferently befriends Zagreus, a disabled neighbor. In a series of conversations, Zagreus enjoins Patrice to embrace the sensual life. “With a body like yours,” Zagreus says, “your one duty is to live and be happy.”⁸³ Zagreus convinces Patrice to think less and to immerse himself in experience instead.⁸⁴ Henceforth Patrice strives to live by this edict and, indeed, is annoyed when others speak of “ideas” as essential to happiness.⁸⁵

As the story shifts from the first to the second part, acceptance emerges as a dominant theme, and sensualism becomes the posture of one resigned to fate. Unsurprisingly, then, Nietzsche’s influence is most apparent in the second half of the novel. For example, Patrice declares:

⁸¹ Camus, p. 65.

⁸² *A Happy Death*, p. 22.

⁸³ Ibid, p. 38.

⁸⁴ For instance, Zagreus tells Patrice that a “man always judges himself by the balance he can strike between the needs of his body and the demands of his mind” (36).

⁸⁵ To take but one example of this, later in the text Patrice condemns his sister’s predilection for abstraction, remarking scornfully that all “women naturally prefer their ideas to their sensations” (87).

I know what kind of life I'd have. I wouldn't make an experiment out of my life: I would *be* the experiment of my life. Yes, I know what passion would fill me with all its power. Before, I was too young. I got in the way. Now I know that acting and loving and suffering is living, of course, but it's living only insofar as you can be transparent and accept your fate.⁸⁶

Patrice's emphasis on accepting fate seems to be an implicit allusion to Nietzsche.⁸⁷

However, it is not simply acceptance that Patrice urges, but acceptance of life "even in its thanklessness and filth."⁸⁸ Nietzsche, as we have seen, similarly exalted hardship and suffering. Perhaps the clearest indication of Nietzsche's influence can be seen near the end of the text, as he converses with his daughter, Catherine. The conversation converges on the problem of happiness, and Catherine asks her father whether he is happy. Unable to answer, Patrice says

What matters to me is a certain quality of happiness. I can only find it in a certain struggle with its opposite – a stubborn and violent struggle. Am I happy? Catherine! You know the famous formula – 'If I had my life to live over again' – well, I would live it over again just the way it has been. Of course you can't know what that means.⁸⁹

Here the reference to Nietzsche is transparent. For one, Patrice's response restates the demon's proposition in *The Gay Science*. But even more suggestive are the words "famous formula." To what is Patrice (Camus) alluding if not Nietzsche's eternal recurrence doctrine? Moreover, in his final remarks, Patrice serenely affirms and accepts the world with a Nietzschean declaration of contentment:

From his bed, Mersault received that impact, that offering, and he opened his eyes on the huge, curved, glistening sea irradiated with the smiles of his gods. Suddenly he realized he was sitting on his bed, and that Lucienne's face was very close to his. Slowly . . . there rose inside him a

⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 41.

⁸⁷ Later, Patrice even speaks defiantly of his will to live "in the face of his fate" (83).

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 75.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 129.

stone which approached his throat. He breathed faster and faster, higher and higher. He looked at Lucienne. He smiled without wincing, and this smile too came from inside himself. He threw himself back on the bed, and felt the slow ascent within him. He looked at Lucienne's swollen lips and, behind her, the smile of the earth. He looked at them with the same eyes, the same desire. "In a minute, in a second," he thought. The ascent stopped. And stone among the stones, he returned in the joy of his heart to the truth of the motionless world.⁹⁰

Here Patrice's sensualist orientation to the world is clearly infused with a Nietzschean affirmation and acceptance of the earth.

Lastly, Nietzsche's influence is also evident in Camus' thematic treatment of forgetfulness.⁹¹ In *A Happy Death*, forgetfulness is a means to momentist living as well as an essential part of happiness.⁹² "All the misery and cruelty of our civilization," Camus writes, "can be measured by this one stupid axiom: happy nations have no history."⁹³ As for Patrice, he does not so much accept suffering as learn to willfully forget it. Part of happiness, he declares, is recognizing in oneself "that power to forget which only children have, and geniuses, and the innocent."⁹⁴ Forgetfulness is a recurring theme in Nietzsche's writings. In the second essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche writes

Forgetfulness is no mere *vis inertiae* as the superficial believe; rather, it is an active and in the strictest sense positive faculty of suppression, and is responsible for the fact that whatever we experience, learn, or take into

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 151.

⁹¹ It is worth noting that forgetfulness was a dominant theme in Dostoevsky's writings as well. Indeed Dostoevsky often linked forgetfulness with childhood and innocence, just as Patrice does in *A Happy Death*. Most recently, Donna Orwin (2007) has explored this aspect of Dostoevsky's work.

⁹² Camus, it is worth noting, prefigures this sentiment in his 1932 collection of essays "Intuitions." There he writes that "my happiness . . . is in my ability to forget" (*Youthful Writings*, p. 160). In both *A Happy Death* and "Intuitions," then, forgetfulness is associated with sensualism, and suppressing memory (along with consciousness) is seen as central to one's immersion in immediate experience.

⁹³ Ibid, p. 45.

⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 84.

ourselves enters just as little into our consciousness . . . To temporarily close the doors and windows of consciousness; to remain undisturbed by the noise and struggle with which our underworld of subservient organs works for and against each other; a little stillness, a little *tabula rasa* of consciousness so that there is again space for new things . . . that is the use of this active forgetfulness.⁹⁵

On Nietzsche's account, forgetting quiets the pangs of consciousness so that one is continually open to the present. In his essay on "The Use and Abuse of History," Nietzsche praises forgetfulness by way of his distinction between historical and supra-historical men.⁹⁶ Historical men are oriented to the world such that

Their vision of the past turns them towards the future, encourages them to persevere with life, and kindles the hope that justice will yet come and happiness is behind the mountain they are climbing. They believe that the meaning of existence will become ever clearer in the course of its evolution, they only look backward at the process to understand the present and stimulate their longing for the future.⁹⁷

Nietzsche sees the historical sense as a false disposition in which one's absorption in the past and the future obscures the present. For the supra-historical man, however, "the world is complete and fulfils its aim in every single moment."⁹⁸ Ultimately, Nietzsche commends the supra-historical attitude for its indifference to time and, more importantly, for its mastery of the "art of forgetting."⁹⁹ This Nietzschean attitude permeates Camus' *A Happy Death*. In addition to the more general sensualist motif, this text highlights the early influence of Nietzsche on Camus' art and thought.

⁹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan Swensen (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1998), p. 35.

⁹⁶ I will return to this essay later when examining Camus' engagement with Nietzsche during his revolt period of writing. I simply note here that there are good grounds for claiming that Camus was familiar with and had read Nietzsche's essay on history.

⁹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. Anthony Ludovici (New York: Digireads, 2009), p. 100.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 132.

The Stranger

Although *The Stranger* (1942) is generally considered an absurd work, I include it here for three reasons.¹⁰⁰ First, *A Happy Death* is a precursor to *The Stranger*; for this reason, they ought to be examined jointly. Second, *The Stranger*, perhaps more than *A Happy Death*, bears the stamp of Camus' early sensualism. Third, as Thomas Hanna reports, "*The Stranger* reflects a state of mind which was still exploring the ideas we see germinating in his [Camus'] early essays, *Nuptials*."¹⁰¹ Additionally, although it is undeniably an absurd text, *The Stranger* does not reflect Camus' mature absurdist thought. Hanna has touched on the reasons for this:

We can say with certainty that the hero of *The Stranger* [Mersault] is not exemplary of or explained by the principles later sketched out by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* . . . The fact that Mersault lives with the indifference of an absurd hero but lacks the consciousness and revolt of the absurd hero, shows us that the philosophical clarity of *The Myth of Sisyphus* is not yet here present.¹⁰²

Hanna's claim finds considerable support in the text. The protagonist (Mersault) of *The Stranger* is closer to Patrice than to any other Camus character. Mersault, for example, is not conscious of the absurd; he merely acts as though life *is* absurd; that is to say, instinctively. In this way, he is an absurd character, but he is not yet an absurd hero. For these reasons, *The Stranger* is thematically similar to *A Happy Death*.

Like *A Happy Death*, *The Stranger* explores happiness in an absurd context; its foremost themes are sensualism and momentism. The central character of the story,

¹⁰⁰ It is worth noting, as Thomas Hanna (1958) has, that Camus actually completed *The Stranger* in 1939, which places the text in both Camus' sensualist and absurd periods (*The Thought and Art of Camus*, p. 39).

¹⁰¹ Thomas Hanna, *The Thought and Art of Albert Camus* (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Company, 1958), p. 39. Hanna adds that Camus indicated as much to him in private conversation (192).

¹⁰² *Ibid*, p. 42.

Mersault, is among Camus' more mysterious figures. He is an absurd man, but he also embodies innocence and a fidelity to a certain kind of life. In a 1954 letter to a radio and television producer who was adapting *The Stranger*, Camus explains Mersault thus: "He simply exists, like the wind or a stone in the sun . . . If you interpret the book in this light, you will find in it a paean to sincerity and an at once ironic and tragic eulogy to worldly pleasure."¹⁰³ For Camus, then, Mersault is a model of sensualist living. As he does in *A Happy Death*, Camus uses *The Stranger* to contrast sensualism (and happiness) with reflection.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, Mersault is happy precisely in proportion to his immersion in immediate experience. Several commentators, notably Robert Solomon, have noticed the anti-reflective themes in *The Stranger*. For Solomon, *The Stranger* is principally a "book of phenomenology."¹⁰⁵ Mersault, he argues, illustrates the pitfalls of reflection: "to be aware of all the complexities of life is already to foreclose its simple, unreflective joys."¹⁰⁶ Solomon's interpretation of Mersault is more than justified in the text. Mersault is happiest when he is most attuned to physical existence. The sun, the sand, the sea, all of these he feels intensely. Mersault, in other words, is completely unburdened by consciousness. His momentist disposition is thus the source of his strength.

¹⁰³ Letter from Camus to Rolf Hadrich on September 8, 1954.

¹⁰⁴ Robert Solomon (2006) has recently discussed this aspect of *The Stranger*, calling it a "book about the problematic relationship between the phenomenology of experience and the phenomenology of reflection" (12). Mersault, Solomon claims, "lives his experience, albeit shockingly limited, without reflection. This . . . is what makes him so strange to us" (12).

¹⁰⁵ Robert Solomon, *Dark Feelings, Grim Thoughts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 12.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p. 3.

Even as Mersault awaits his execution and the Chaplain talks of the afterlife, he insists:

I don't know why, but something inside me snapped. I started yelling at the top of my lungs, and I insulted him and told him not to waste his prayers on me. I grabbed him by the collar of his cassock. I was pouring out on him everything that was in my heart, cries of anger and cries of joy. He seemed so certain about everything, didn't he? And yet none of his certainties was worth one hair of a woman's head. He wasn't even sure he was alive, because he was living like a dead man.¹⁰⁷

Facing death, Mersault remains utterly indifferent to God or to thoughts of annihilation; instead, he can think only of sensual experiences (and memories). He reacts violently to the Chaplain because he is overwhelmed by his desire to live again. To Mersault, the Chaplain's obliviousness to experience is revolting. Mersault simply cannot understand the posture of the otherworldly man. His final outburst ["none of his certainties was worth one hair of a woman's head"] is an affirmation of Camus' early momentism.

Thematically, *The Stranger* is similar to *A Happy Death* in its embrace of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence and *amor fati* doctrines. For example, just before his death Mersault proclaims

For the first time in a long time I thought about Maman. I felt as if I understood why at the end of her life she had taken a fiancé, why she had played at beginning again. Even there, in that homes where lives were fading out, evening was a kind of wistful respite. So close to death, Maman must have felt free then and ready to live it all again. Nobody, nobody had the right to cry over her. And I felt ready to live it all again too. As if that blind rage had washed me clean, rid me of hope; for the first time, in that night alive with sings and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Matthew Ward (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 120.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 122.

Nearing death, as Solomon observes, Mersault finds peace in the thought “of an afterlife as a life merely repeated.”¹⁰⁹ Mersault is also relieved by the realization that his is a common fate:

I had lived my life one way and I could just as well have lived it another. I had done this and I hadn't done that. I hadn't done this thing but I had done another. And so? It was as if I had waited all this time for this moment and for the first light of this dawn to be vindicated. Nothing, nothing mattered, and I knew why. So did he [the Chaplain] . . . What did other people's deaths or a mother's love matter to me; what did his God or the lives people choose or the fate they think they elect matter to me when we're all elected by the same fate.¹¹⁰

In both *A Happy Death* and *The Stranger*, joy begins with acceptance. If Patrice and Mersault die happy deaths, it is because they accept death as part of life. Indeed, as Germaine Bree points out, “life and death appear as one.”¹¹¹ These absurd figures come to terms with death the moment they recognize it as inescapable and as an imperative to live. Camus inherited this bit of wisdom from Nietzsche. This is suggested in a March 1942 notebook entry in which Camus writes: “The Eternal Return is easier to understand if it is imagined as a repetition of great moments – as if everything tended to reproduce or echo the climactic moments of humanity.”¹¹²

It will help to recapitulate what I have so far argued. Concerning Camus' early fiction, I have made two broad (and related) claims: first, that it is deeply informed by Nietzsche's ideas regarding acceptance and affirmation of life; second, that Nietzsche's affirmative ethos can be seen in Camus' embrace of sensualism and momentism. In support of these claims I have presented textual evidence as well as direct references to

¹⁰⁹ *Dark Feelings, Grim Thoughts*, p. 31.

¹¹⁰ *The Stranger*, p. 121.

¹¹¹ *Camus*, p. 67.

¹¹² Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1942-1951*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2010), pp. 17-18.

Nietzsche by Camus. We have seen the sensualism in Camus' early fictional works, *A Happy Death* and *The Stranger*. However, it appears most forcefully and dramatically in his play, *Caligula*. *Caligula* is among Camus' most fascinating works. As mentioned, the text was revised over the course of several years and therefore reflects a thematic shift in Camus' writings. Because *Caligula* is a transitional work between Camus' sensualist and absurd periods, it illuminates some of the reasons for his increasing interest in absurdity. While Camus does not abandon his sensualism in *Caligula*, he does reveal its limitations.

Caligula

Camus began work on *Caligula* around the same time he wrote *A Happy Death*. *Caligula* is the story of an emperor driven mad by the loss of his sister. As the play begins, Caligula is announced missing. We learn that he has gone "walking" for three days after hearing of his sister's death. Upon his return, Caligula is unrecognizable; but he appears to have discovered a truth, which is that "Men die, and they are not happy."¹¹³ With this declaration it becomes clear that Caligula has discovered the absurd by way of his sister's death. From this point forward Caligula institutes his reign of terror and the tragicomedy slowly unfolds. Caligula's calculated reaction to absurdity is to emulate it; specifically, he strives to mirror the world's indifference. "The world has no importance," he says, and "I shall teach men the truth of this world, which is that it has none."¹¹⁴ Caligula's decree signals his intent to expose the ultimate equivalence of everything, especially of human values. Much of his actions, therefore, aim to undermine

¹¹³ Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), p. 12.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p. 14.

the foundations of social life.¹¹⁵ For the present inquiry, however, it is essential to focus on the characters surrounding Caligula, as they most reflect Camus' sensualist aspirations.

One of the more interesting aspects of *Caligula* is the tension it creates between absurdity and the sensual life. Following his sister's death, Caligula is consumed by the absurd, and his only desire is to disabuse others of their metaphysical illusions. Caligula's designs, however, brings him into conflict with the other characters, each of whom, as Avi Sagi has justly observed, "share Caligula's basic human experience, but draw different conclusions from it."¹¹⁶ Caesonia, Caligula's mistress, is a sensualist in the strictest sense. She implores Caligula to "stop thinking" and to love in spite of the world's cruelty: "You can't prevent the sky from being the sky, or a fresh young face from aging, or a man's heart from growing cold."¹¹⁷ Caesonia, as Sprintzen argues, "speaks for the body and for love . . . She is of the moment, the immediate."¹¹⁸ Caesonia is fully aware of the absurd, however. She knows "that life's a sad business" and that "there's good and bad, high and low, justice and injustice." Her plea to Caligula is to realize "these will never change."¹¹⁹ Scipio is the romantic, for whom Caligula maintains a distant affection. Scipio embodies the poetical disposition; his love of life and nature is invigorated through his passions. He urges Caligula to find solace in art and nature,

¹¹⁵ Caligula's political actions will be detailed in the following chapter when the relationship between absurdity and values is examined.

¹¹⁶ Avi Sagi, *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd* (New York: Rodolpi, 2002), p. 102.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 16.

¹¹⁸ *Camus: A Critical Examination*, p. 72.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 15-16.

which “has cured wounds more serious” than Caligula’s.¹²⁰ The union of aestheticism and sensualism in Scipio speaks to the essential indivisibility of these two doctrines. Indeed, in all of his sensualist writings, Camus treats sensualism as an outgrowth of aestheticism; it is the posture of the artist. In any case, Scipio is ultimately overwhelmed by Caligula’s absurd logic, and he retreats into the background for much of the play. The third and final character is Cherea. Cherea is Caligula’s confidant and foe, and often he seems to be the voice through which Camus speaks. Cherea is a humanist who emphasizes the importance of acting without the support of a normative system. His only desire is to live humanely; as such, he is indifferent to the metaphysical problems posed by Caligula. When pressed by Caligula to explain his indifference, Cherea explains:

What I want is to live, and to be happy. Neither, to my mind, is possible if one pushes the absurd to its logical conclusions . . . True, there are moments when, to feel free of them, I desire the death of those I love, or I hanker after women from whom the ties of family or friendship debar me. Were logic everything, I’d kill or fornicate on such occasions. But I consider that these passing fancies have no great importance. If everyone set to gratifying them, the world would be impossible to live in, and happiness, too, would go by the board.¹²¹

Convinced that Caligula has made life impossible, Cherea joins with others in a plot to assassinate him. His actions are motivated by a sense of solidarity with others. Cherea accepts that life is meaningless, but he believes in human dignity. If he is driven to extremism, it is because Caligula has forced his hand. “I’ll be no party to your logic,” he tells Caligula, “I’ve a very different notion of my duties as a man. And I know that the majority of your subjects share my view. You outrage their deepest feelings.”¹²²

Although he is not expressly sensualist, Cherea does reflect Camus’ emphasis on

¹²⁰ Ibid, p. 37.

¹²¹ *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, p. 52.

¹²² Ibid, p. 51.

experience. Thus he is not concerned with ideas or metaphysical problems; he merely defends the human order, without which happiness is impossible. Sagi's account of Cherea sums up his disposition quite well:

Cherea's answer is that the criterion rests on practical reasoning, prompted by the need to protect life and attain happiness. No supreme idea, no values rooted in the transcendental are necessary to justify normative preferences; life and its needs direct our choices. Against alienated, absurd rationality, Cherea offers a concrete human existence that embodies wants and needs.¹²³

In terms of Camus' larger philosophical development, *Caligula* is significant for two reasons. First, the work is situated between Camus' sensualist and absurd periods, which makes it an ideal transitional text. Second, it is the first work in which Camus problematizes the absurd in political terms. Again, Camus does not negate his sensualism in *Caligula*; instead he points to the political implications of absurdity. In *Caligula*'s case, the absurd is carried to its logical conclusion and nihilism, which is the political manifestation of absurdity, overwhelms the social order. The problem, therefore, is not so much sensualism but the existential threat posed by absurdity. The sensual life, however desirable, cannot flourish apart from a meaningful human community. And absurdity, particularly in Camus' time, imperiled the very foundations of that community. Consequently, beginning with *Caligula*, Camus' sensualism is subsumed (not replaced) by his absurdist thought.

Conclusion

Before turning to Camus' absurdist writings, it is important to sum up Camus' dialogue with Nietzsche in these early works. To begin, Camus' sensualist writings are apolitical. As his essays suggest, Camus' concerns are metaphysical and aesthetic.

¹²³ *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, p. 103.

Given Nietzsche's radical aestheticism, it is unsurprising that Nietzsche figures so prominently in these texts. Perhaps more than any other modern thinker, Nietzsche stressed the importance of creative engagement and of concrete action in the world. This likely appealed to Camus, who discovered in Nietzsche a justification for his own sensualist orientation.

Camus' sensualist literature appears to grapple with two fundamentally Nietzschean problems: how to accept life without illusions and how to affirm meaning in a world in which meaning is not given. Camus engages Nietzsche's doctrines of eternal recurrence and *amor fati* because these are the doctrines in which Nietzsche offers solutions to these problems. In *A Happy Death* and *The Stranger*, Camus explores the possibilities for meaning and happiness in an implicitly absurd context.¹²⁴ In both texts, Nietzsche's doctrines provide Camus with an affirmative vision and with a means of eternalizing the moment, and Nietzsche's ideas are expressed in the language of Camus' sensualism. In *Caligula*, however, Camus' engagement with Nietzsche seems to shift. Previously, Camus does little in terms of developing Nietzsche's ideas; he simply incorporates (and affirms) them in his own writings. *Caligula* is the first instance in which Camus implicitly problematizes Nietzsche's ideas. This is apparent in the character Scipio, whom I mentioned briefly above. Scipio's silence before Caligula's absurd logic foreshadows Camus' philosophy of revolt, which he would begin to develop shortly after *Caligula*. While Camus does not maintain that an absurd existence and a sensual life are incompatible, or that sensualism demands community, he does point to the necessity of collective revolt against the forces of absurdity. As seen above, *Caligula*

¹²⁴ It is not until *The Myth of Sisyphus* that Camus fully articulates his conception of the absurd.

is absurdity incarnate. Similarly, Scipio represents the aesthetic-sensualist life. That Scipio is overwhelmed by Caligula and that order is preserved by an act of revolt symbolizes the limitations (and dangers) of a sensualist mode of existence.

In the following chapter, these claims will be developed in greater detail. I argue that Camus' transition to absurdity is prompted not by a rejection of sensualism but by an increasing awareness of the inadequacy of an individualist response to absurdity. What emerges is thus a sense of the limits of sensualism. This becomes clear when Camus examines the problem of collective values in an absurd world. Here, perhaps for the first time, Camus directly engages Dostoevsky. Absurdity, negation, and political disorder are linked in crucial ways, and Camus' account of consciousness and the factors that drive individuals to despair and crime begin to crystallize.

CHAPTER THREE THE ABSURD PSYCHE

“Work, worry, toil and trouble are indeed the lot of almost all men their whole life long. And yet if every desire were satisfied as soon as it arose how would men occupy their lives, how would they pass the time? Imagine this race transported to a Utopia where everything grows of its own accord and turkeys fly around ready-roasted, where lovers find one another without any delay and keep one another without any difficulty: in such a place some men would die of boredom or hang themselves, some would fight and kill one another, and thus they would create for themselves more suffering than nature inflicts on them as it is” – Arthur Schopenhauer

The individual's confrontation with absurdity was a consistent theme in Camus' early writings. However, there is a shift in tone and emphasis in Camus' absurdist literature. Owing in part to his engagement with Dostoevsky, Camus becomes increasingly interested in consciousness and the psychological implications of absurdity. This is evident in Camus' absurdist literature, where psychic turmoil is examined in a social context. In this chapter, I locate key Dostoevskyan motifs in Camus' three absurdist works: *Caligula*, *The Stranger*, and *The Misunderstanding*. The aim is to show how Camus wrestles with Dostoevsky's critical link between individual crime and political disorder. In each of these texts, Camus engages Dostoevsky on a variety of problems, including negation, crime, solipsism, and self-consciousness.

In the final section, Camus' *The Fall* and Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* and *Notes From Underground* are comparatively analyzed. These works examine the plight of the conscious absurd man in similar ways, and the interaction with both Dostoevsky and Nietzsche is apparent. *The Fall* is important because it represents a clear departure from Camus' previous works. Consciousness becomes a source of individuation and internal division. The prereflective brand of consciousness personified by Mersault of *The Stranger* gives way to a new, debilitating reflection. In *The Fall*, moreover, Camus

associates certain psychopathologies with social alienation and political nihilism. And the connections Camus makes between these neuroses are based largely on Dostoevsky and Nietzsche's insights into freedom, resentment, guilt, and alienation. I begin, however, with a brief comparative analysis of Camus and Dostoevsky's view of the individual's confrontation with the absurd. This will provide some needed context for the ensuing discussion of *Caligula* and *The Stranger*.

Camus' substantive engagement with Dostoevsky first emerges in Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Here Camus struggles to reconcile the individual's desire for meaning with the absurd. In this text (as well as the notes that accompany it), Camus engages Dostoevsky's psychology directly. Of particular importance is Dostoevsky's link between nihilism, consciousness, and suffering. For Dostoevsky, consciousness was a concomitant of suffering. His most reflective characters are continually tortured by their own intellects.¹ A typical example of this is Dostoevsky's Underground Man, who declares at one point that "to think too much is a disease, a real, actual disease."² In the opening pages of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus echoes this sentiment: "Undermined . . . a more exact word cannot be imagined. Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined."³ In the broader context of Camus' thought, this is a crucial point. In Camus' early works, the absurd is an ontological situation. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus is dealing not with the *feeling* of absurdity but the consequences of conceptualizing it. At this point, awareness is such that thought begins to "undermine"

¹ Camus notes this in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "All of Dostoevsky's heroes question themselves as to the meaning of life . . . In this they are modern" (104).

² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, trans. Jessie Coulson (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 17.

³ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1995), p. 4.

the thinker. Much like Nietzsche, Camus associates consciousness with a tragic break between the individual mind and the world.⁴ Hence Camus insists that consciousness of futility is the source of Sisyphus' suffering. "If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious."⁵ The nature of this suffering was expressed most vividly in Dostoevsky's novels. "Probably no one so much as Dostoevsky," Camus writes, "has managed to give the absurd world such familiar and tormenting charms."⁶

As intimated below, Camus' engagement with Dostoevsky's psychology can also be seen in Camus' tendency to link solipsism and estrangement. Unlike his Marxist contemporaries, who linked estrangement to capitalist rule, Camus understood estrangement in terms of spiritual uprootedness.⁷ It was thus not a matter of simply replacing capitalism with communism for Camus. Like Dostoevsky, Camus' estranged characters suffer from a loss of meaning, a sense of isolation from the world and from others. For Dostoevsky, this is the result of being deprived of a "higher idea" of life. Camus' view of estrangement is essentially the same as Dostoevsky's, although it is expressed in the language of Camus' absurdism. It was largely because of this overlap, as Lev Braun has suggested, that Camus thought Dostoevsky's literature a more universal articulation of the absurd problem.⁸

⁴ Ibid, p. 51.

⁵ Ibid, p. 121.

⁶ Ibid, p. 110.

⁷ Lev Braun makes a similar point in his study of Camus, arguing that Camus "deliberately avoided the world alienated" because of its Marxist connotations (*Witness of Decline*, p. 238).

⁸ Braun argues that the reason Camus adapted so many of Dostoevsky's works for the theatre was because he believed Dostoevsky was "no less accessible to an intelligent and sensitive worker than to any member of the educated classes" (*Witness of Decline*, p. 239).

Camus' dialogue with Dostoevsky in *The Myth of Sisyphus* orbits around yet another absurd problem: suicide. The central question in this text is whether an absurd life is worth living at all. "There is but one truly philosophical problem," Camus writes, "and that is suicide."⁹ Camus' discussion of suicide is deeply informed by Dostoevsky. Indeed Camus says explicitly that with Dostoevsky suicide becomes "an absurd theme."¹⁰ If life cannot be justified on its own terms, then the value of life as such is undermined. Suicide was an abiding concern for Dostoevsky as well, and it is why he thought belief in the immortality of the soul indispensable. "Without the conviction of one's immortality on Earth," Dostoevsky wrote, "the links between man and earth slacken, become more fragile, decay, and the loss of the sense of life's higher meaning . . . inevitably leads to suicide."¹¹

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus challenges Dostoevsky's claim that absurdity leads inexorably to suicide. Indeed Camus' engagement with the problem of suicide in this text revolves around Kirilov, a character from Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* who kills himself in response to his absurd condition. Thomas Epstein has recently argued that Camus' analysis of Kirilov is best seen as a response to Dostoevsky. "Unlike the Kirilov that Dostoevsky gives us," Epstein writes, "Camus' absurd man does not want to become God . . . he wants to become a man, *a* man, who thus must not kill himself . . . He will be lucid and happy, like Sisyphus."¹² Epstein's point here is correct. Camus does in fact appear to argue against Dostoevsky's logic in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. At the same time,

⁹ Ibid, p. 3.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 108.

¹¹ Dostoevsky quoted in Ray Davison's *Camus: The Challenge of Dostoevsky*, p. 28.

¹² Thomas Epstein, "Tormented Shade," in *The Originality and Complexity of Albert Camus' Writings*, ed. Emmanuelle Anne Vanhome (New York: Palgrave Martin, 2012), p. 148.

however, Camus continues to struggle with Dostoevsky's assertion that suffering and suicide follow from the absence of meaning. Consider, for instance, the following two passages from Dostoevsky and Camus in which the logic of suicide is described in remarkably similar terms. First, Dostoevsky:

I condemn this nature which with such impudent lack of concern brought me into the world in order to suffer – I condemn it to be destroyed with me. But since I cannot destroy nature, I shall therefore destroy myself expressly to show my disgust at having to endure a tyranny which cannot be ascribed to anyone.¹³

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus similarly writes:

Living, naturally, is never easy. You continue making the gestured commanded by existence for many reasons, the first of which is habit. Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering.¹⁴

I note these parallels in order to show the degree to which Camus develops his absurd arguments in contrast to Dostoevsky. By raising meaning and suffering as fundamental questions, Dostoevsky helps to define the absurd problem for Camus. Even as late as 1949, Camus continues to reflect on Dostoevsky's thematic treatment of suicide in his notebooks: "One must love life before loving its meaning, Dostoevsky says. Yes, and when the love of life disappears, no meaning consoles us for it."¹⁵

As an author of psychological realism, then, Dostoevsky was able to propound the absurd problem in all of its complexity. It was this psychological dimension of

¹³ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Journal d'un Ecrivain*, trans. Jean Chuzeville (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), p. 373.

¹⁴ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁵ Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1942-1951*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2010), p. 218.

Dostoevsky's literature that most influenced Camus' conception of the absurd psyche.¹⁶ In Camus' sensualist writings, much like Dostoevsky's novels, reflection is regarded as an impediment to happiness. During his absurdist phase, however, there is a shift in Camus' attitude. The absurd is now the defining characteristic of modern life. Thus when Camus describes thinking as "beginning to be undermined," it is to say that consciousness of absurdity is an ineludible problem; it must be accepted without appeal or avoided through self-delusion. The fundamental question for Camus, then, is how to live meaningfully *with* absurdity.

To answer this question, Camus probed Dostoevsky's most tortured characters. There was something about Dostoevsky's heroes and their habit of questioning "themselves as to the meaning of life" that made them uniquely modern (and instructive) for Camus.¹⁷ For Dostoevsky, human beings suffer immensely in a world deprived of transcendence. In many of his novels, the felt absence of meaning poisons life and saps the individual's will. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky expresses this powerfully through the Grand Inquisitor: "For the mystery of human life is not only in living, but in knowing why one lives. Without a clear idea of what to live for man will not consent to live and will rather destroy himself than remain on the earth."¹⁸ Contrary to the early Camus, then, Dostoevsky discovered little metaphysical consolation in nature. Instead it was faith, active love, and a belief in the immortality of the soul that sustained the

¹⁶ It is worth noting that Nietzsche was similarly influenced by Dostoevsky's psychological depth. Nietzsche famously said, for instance, that "Dostoevsky is the only psychologist from whom I was able to learn something. I rank my acquaintance with him among the most splendid achievements of my life" (Nietzsche quoted in Shestov's *Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Tolstoy*, p. 146).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 1996), p. 261.

individual's happiness and established a common bond between men. Dostoevsky suggests, moreover, that such sublime ideas ought to be accepted on existential rather than empirical grounds. In this sense, Dostoevsky was uninterested in truth as traditionally conceived. Certain "ideas" were justified by their effects on the believer, by their capacity to promote internal harmony and social order.¹⁹

In any case, at this point it appears that Camus and Dostoevsky disagree about what human beings *require* for happiness. Camus' dialogue with Dostoevsky becomes more complicated, however, when Camus begins to reflect on the relationship between absurdity and nihilism. For example, in a late notebook entry, Camus summed up Dostoevsky's thesis as follows: "The same paths that lead the individual to crime lead the society to revolution."²⁰ This became a guiding theme of Camus' political thought. In Camus, though, absurdity succeeds nihilism as the source of internal malaise. But the factors leading individuals to crime are the same: egoism, self-assertion, hyper-consciousness, a compulsion for logic, and a failure to acknowledge the other. This can be seen in the protagonists of Camus' three absurdist works of fiction. In these texts Camus examines sources of modern alienation, and Dostoevsky's insights inform much of his work.

¹⁹ In Dostoevsky's *The Adolescent*, "lofty ideals," while perhaps illusory, are similarly affirmed: "A lofty ideal is mostly a feeling that sometimes remains undefined for a very, very long time. All I know is that it has been always the source of living life, not the intellectual and theoretical life, but the sparkling, joyful life... We may say, then, I suppose, that the lofty ideal from which this life flows is absolutely indispensable" (227). Dostoevsky also emphasizes this in an 1854 letter to Mme. N.D. Fonvisin: "If anyone could prove to me that Christ is outside the truth, and if truth really did exclude Christ, I should prefer to stay with Christ and not with truth."

²⁰ Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1951-1959*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2008), p. 94.

The Stranger and Caligula

In his notebooks, Camus wrote that “*The Stranger* described the nakedness of man facing the absurd.”²¹ The innocence of Mersault, the hero of *The Stranger*, is a reflection of this nakedness. But Mersault does not so much face the absurd as give himself over to it. As mentioned, it is not until the end that Mersault confronts absurdity in the form of his own mortality. For much of the text, he exists moment to moment, with no awareness of others or of time itself. Mersault’s solipsism is important for two reasons. First, it is among the earliest indications of a burgeoning theme in Camus’ absurdist writings. With Mersault Camus points to the consequences of an overly narrow response to absurdity. If Mersault revolts against absurdity, he does so only as an individual. Consequently, the absurd never assumes a social meaning and Mersault is unable to act with or on behalf of others. Second, Mersault’s egoism points to an important thematic overlap with Dostoevsky. On Dostoevsky’s view, self-transcendence was essential both to individual wellbeing and to social harmony. Dostoevsky explores this in many of his novels, particularly *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Possessed*. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the absence of self-transcendence blinds Ivan’s ethical intuition and leads inexorably to the death of his father. There is a similar logic at work in *The Stranger*. Although Ivan and Mersault differ in significant ways, they share a limited lucidity that acknowledges the absurd but fails to connect experientially with others.

²¹ *Notebooks 1942-1951*, p. 24.

The pivotal event in *The Stranger* is Mersault's murder of an Arab man on the beach. Though it is not clear at first why Mersault pulls the trigger, Camus offers a clue in his description:

It occurred to me that all I had to do was turn around and that would be the end of it. But the whole beach, throbbing in the sun, was pressing on my back . . . The Arab didn't move . . . Maybe it was the shadows on his face, but it looked like he was laughing. I waited. The sun was starting to burn my cheeks, and I could feel drops of sweat gathering in my eyebrows. The sun was the same as it had been the day I'd buried Maman, and like then, my forehead especially was hurting me, all the vein in it throbbing under the skin. It was this burning, which I couldn't stand anymore, that made me move forward. I knew that it was stupid, that I wouldn't get the sun off me by stepping forward. But I took a step, one step, forward. And this time, without getting up, the Arab drew his knife and held it up to me in the sun. The light shot off the steel and it was like a long flashing blade cutting at my forehead . . . My whole being tensed and I squeezed my hand around the revolver. The trigger gave; I felt the smooth underside of the butt; and there, in that noise, sharp and deafening at the same time, is where it all started. I shook off the sweat and the sun. I knew that I had shattered the harmony of the day.²²

The first thing to notice here is the absence of motive. Mersault's behavior is instinctive.

If his actions are dictated by anything, it is external elements – the sun, the sweat on his brow, the bright light. Indeed his only explanation is that it was “because of the sun.”

Mersault's failure appears to be a lack of attention. He is overwhelmed by physical sensations. David Sprintzen has emphasized the significance of this failure. Mersault, he claims, enters “into complicity with the forces of destruction” because he fails “to maintain the necessary human distance from the forces of nature.”²³ Sprintzen's main contention, however, is that Mersault's immersion in experience blinds him to the intersubjective reality in which he exists. As a result Mersault reinforces absurdity by

²² Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Matthew Ward (New York: Vintage International, 1989), pp. 58-59.

²³ David Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1988), p. 36.

unwittingly killing a man. Sprintzen's interpretation is persuasive, and it underscores my larger claim concerning the inadequacy of individual responses to (or revolts against) absurdity. Ultimately, Mersault is guilty of paying attention to the wrong things. He is attuned to his private sensations but completely indifferent to the experiences of others.

A similar theme re-emerges in the final draft of *Caligula*.²⁴ Previously I noted the destruction wrought by Caligula's individual revolt.²⁵ Here I emphasize a parallel between *The Stranger* and *Caligula* concerning absurd awareness and individual crime. To begin with *The Stranger*, there is a revealing remark by Mersault just moments before he kills the Arab man:

The sun glinted off Raymond's gun as he handed it to me. But we just stood there motionless, as if everything had closed in around us. We stared at each other without blinking, and everything came to a stop there between the sea, the sand, and the sun, and the double silence of the flute and the water. It was then that I realized that you could either shoot or not shoot . . . and it would come to absolutely the same thing.²⁶

In this passage Mersault appears suddenly aware of the equivalency of things: "I realized that you could either shoot or not shoot . . . and it would come to absolutely the same thing." With the exception of the closing scene, this is the only moment in which Mersault is fully conscious of the absurd. Thomas Hanna points to this passage for similar reasons: "At this moment Mersault is more deeply aware than ever of the meaninglessness and indeterminacy of human life."²⁷ Hanna's interpretation is correct, but here I want to stress the implications of Mersault's absurd epiphany. Mersault's realization that everything comes to "absolutely the same thing" is preceded by an

²⁴ The final version of *Caligula* was performed on stage in 1944, just two years after the publication of *The Stranger*.

²⁵ See chapter two, pp. 25-27.

²⁶ *The Stranger*, p. 56.

²⁷ Thomas Hanna, *The Thought and Art of Albert Camus* (Chicago, IL: Regnery Company, 1958), p. 44.

awareness of the world's indifference. Here, in embryo, is the value problem posed by absurdity; that is, Mersault has moved directly from absurdity (meaninglessness) to an equivalency of values and actions. If everything amounts to the same thing, it matters little whether Mersault shoots the man or walks away. That Mersault pulls the trigger moments after his epiphany, however, only confirms its nihilistic implications.

In *Caligula* the value problem becomes explicit. Consciousness is heightened and the logic of absurdity is carried to its extreme.²⁸ Much like Ivan Karamazov, Caligula experiences what Roger Quilliot has aptly called a “crisis of the intellect.”²⁹ This is dramatized in an exchange between Caligula and his confidant Cherea. With implacable logic, Caligula reasons from absurdity to nihilism. He then asks Cherea if he “believes in some higher principle?” Cherea accepts Caligula’s nihilistic logic, but insists that “some actions are . . . more praiseworthy than others.” Predictably, Caligula dismisses Cherea’s claim, maintaining instead “that all are on an equal footing.”³⁰ Most relevant here is Caligula’s uncompromising logic. Despite his desire for meaning, Caligula is trapped in a kind of absurd logic, as a result of which he is driven to destruction. “Who can condemn me in this world,” he laments, “where there is no judge, where nobody is

²⁸ This is evident in Caligula’s desire to play the part of the Gods as well as his uncompromising quest to show people the ultimate meaninglessness of things. Caligula’s attitude prefigures what Camus would later call the “all or nothing attitude” of logical crime.

²⁹ Roger Quilliot, *The Sea and Prisons* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1970), p. 47.

³⁰ Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), p. 52.

innocent . . . where nothing lasts?”³¹ Thus we know that Caligula’s nihilism follows directly from his absurd awareness.³²

Caligula and *The Stranger* are united by a common theme of the individual’s confrontation with absurdity. Additionally, both Mersault and Caligula deduce the equivalency of things from the perceived indifference of nature. Without a community of revolt or a sense of solidarity, they fall into crime and despair. Caligula is more extreme, but this is attributable to his logical disposition and to his power. In the case of Mersault, the absurd is either ignored or left unresolved. Caligula, on the other hand, is too conscious to live with (or accept) absurdity; instead, he externalizes its inhumanity in order to liberate himself, and by doing so he plunges the human community further into chaos.³³ In their own way, however, the actions of Mersault and Caligula mirror the absurd. If there is a difference, it is that Caligula does so intentionally and with obvious indifference.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, we also find the motif of crime and absurdity. Indeed, like Mersault, Ivan Karamazov unwittingly involves himself in an act of murder. Although Ivan does not commit murder, his absurd logic (which mirrors Caligula’s) facilitates the crime. Since we know Camus was reading *The Brothers Karamazov* at the

³¹ Ibid, p. 72.

³² Before signing execution orders, for instance, Caligula declares that since everything is equivalent, “all these executions have an equal importance . . . all those fellows are on a par, one’s as guilty as another” (12).

³³ Caligula also represents the incessant need to translate an idea into practice. His reason convinces him of the meaninglessness of things, and he is determined to live out this conclusion. This is a common theme in Dostoevsky as well. In *The Adolescent*, for example, Dostoevsky expresses this tendency through the character Vasin, who speaks often of the link between ideas and action. “In some people,” he says, “a logical conclusion may be transformed into the most violent passion, which often gets hold of the entire personality and becomes very difficult to overcome” (54).

same time he was writing *The Stranger* and *Caligula*, a brief comparative analysis seems justified.³⁴ As noted previously, Mersault's mistake is to act as though the world were absurd without realizing it. Ivan errs in the opposite way; he acknowledges absurdity but the humanist impulse which emerges from his absurd awareness remains abstract; he never moves from theory to *praxis*. Part of the reason for this is Ivan's intellectual intransigence. But it is also because he pays insufficient attention to those in whose name he revolts. Ivan is determined to resolve the absurd in intellectual terms, just as Caligula is, and when he is unable to do so he abandons his original rebellious impulse.

Ivan can be seen as an intellectual precursor to Mersault and Caligula insofar as he anticipates their logic and actions. However, Ivan's engagement with absurdity is strictly theoretical. He perceives the meaninglessness of things and deduces that "everything is permitted," but makes no effort to live out this edict; Caligula, as we have already seen, does the opposite. Caligula and Ivan are therefore united only by their attachment to logic. Ivan's relation to Mersault is more concrete, however. Despite their divergent dispositions and their complete lack of malice, both Ivan and Mersault become embroiled in murder. In the case of Ivan, the victim is his own father, who is killed by Smerdyakov, a follower of Ivan and a servant in the Karamazov house. Ivan learns of his father's death in the following exchange with Smerdyakov:

Can you really not have known till now?" Smerdyakov asked once more.
"No, I did not know. I kept thinking of Dmitri. Brother, brother! Ach!"
He suddenly clutched his head in both hands. "Listen. Did you kill him alone? With my brother's help or without?"
"It was only with you, with your help, I killed him, and Dmitri Fyodorovitch is quite innocent."
"All right, all right. Talk about me later. Why do I keep on trembling? I can't speak properly."

³⁴ See chapter one, pp. 19-20.

“You were bold enough then. You said ‘everything was lawful,’ and how frightened you are now,” Smerdyakov muttered in surprise.
“Was I so eager then, was I?” Ivan snarled again.
“To be sure you were, and by your consent you silently sanctioned my doing it . . . and I am not the real murderer, though I did kill him. You are the rightful murderer.”³⁵

It is striking how similar Ivan’s predicament is to Mersault’s. Ivan is both innocent and guilty. He does not commit murder, but he tacitly consents to it. Ivan no more desired the death of his father than Mersault sought to kill that Arab stranger, and yet both are somehow responsible. Ivan’s nihilism, his “everything is permitted,” is the impetus for the crime. Smerdyakov is a wayward spirit who has rejected God but still thirsts for transcendent guidance.³⁶ Without God, Smerdyakov finds a justification for his base impulses in the ideas and logic of Ivan. As Robert Louis Jackson suggests in his study of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan’s “moral nature will not permit him openly to sanction the death of his father, but his ideas are picked up by his disciple Smerdyakov, who implements them with a ruthless logic.”³⁷ At any rate, the point here is not that these episodes are analogous; rather, it is that they are guided by similar themes. Caligula, Mersault, and Ivan cause suffering because they either pay attention to the wrong things or they accept moral license as a logical consequence of a Godless world. Whether it is Mersault’s reflexive response to absurdity or Ivan and Caligula’s self-conscious obsession with its implications, each takes his behavioral cues from an absurd world. Because there is no consciousness of revolt and no recognition of the need to create

³⁵ *The Brothers Karamazov*, pp. 662-666.

³⁶ This aspect of Smerdyakov’s personality is continually stressed by Dostoevsky. For example, Ivan and his father, Fyodor, both agree that Smerdyakov, despite his atheism, secretly embodies the Russian desire for faith and belief in miracles (136).

³⁷ Robert Louis Jackson, *Dialogues with Dostoevsky* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 296.

rather than justify values, these men are unable to reject (or resist) the absurd as a rule of action.

The Misunderstanding

There is a continuation of these themes in Camus' final absurdist work, *The Misunderstanding*. Written in 1944, *The Misunderstanding* is the story of a son, Jan, who returns home after twenty years to reunite with his widowed mother and sister. Jan hopes to share his wealth with his family, who run a small inn out of their home. When Jan arrives, however, he is not recognized. Inexplicably, he decides to conceal his identity and pose as a regular customer. He requests a room and vows to objectively observe his family "from the outside." He is convinced that this will give him a "better notion of what makes them happy."³⁸ By all accounts, Jan is sincere in his desire to move his family from the country to his seaside home. The tragedy unfolds as we learn that Jan's sister, Martha, has long dreamed of leaving Europe to live "beside the sea."³⁹ In fact, Martha is so fixated on her goal that she immediately plots to rob and murder their new houseguest. The misunderstanding is thus apparent: Jan and his family share the same goal, but their inability to communicate puts them at cross-purposes. And it is not until Martha and her mother have already killed Jan that they discover his true identity.

There are several ways to interpret *The Misunderstanding*. Thomas Hanna reads the play as a meditation on individual revolt. Thus his analysis centers on Martha. On Hanna's view, Martha consents to crime because she revolts angrily against the absurd. "The wretchedness of her present condition warrants any action which can give her the

³⁸ *Caligula and three other Plays*, pp. 83-84.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 79.

irreplaceable experience of the sun and sea.”⁴⁰ Hanna’s interpretation is just; however, Martha’s revolt also fails because of her solipsism. The only suffering against which she revolts is her own:

There is no love for me, so let her [the mother] die . . . all I wish is to be left in peace with my anger, my very rightful anger. I have no intention of rolling my eyes heavenward or pleading forgiveness before I die . . . I hate this narrow world in which we are reduced to gazing up at God . . . I am suffering from the injustice done me . . . and I shall leave this world without being reconciled.⁴¹

Martha cannot see beyond her own pain and longings. Hence she has only two aims: “to get what I desire” and to “sweep away every obstacle on my path.”⁴² Martha makes no distinction between people and things. This is why she kills with such ease. Irina Kirk has come closest to this interpretation, arguing that Martha is “blind to mankind” and that her actions suggest “that pagan love for the earth must include a concern for one’s brother – for mankind – since man is bound both to this earth and to the other human beings on it.”⁴³

More recently, Jeffrey Isaac has argued that Camus uses *The Misunderstanding* to emphasize the need for “mutual comprehension and dialogue.”⁴⁴ This is undeniably part of Camus’ intent. As Camus notes later in *The Rebel*, “Every ambiguity, every misunderstanding, leads to death; clear language and simple words are the only salvation.”⁴⁵ But *The Misunderstanding* also concerns the individual’s failure to think

⁴⁰ Thomas Hanna, *The Thought and Art of Albert Camus* (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Company, 1958), p. 52.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 125.

⁴² Ibid, p. 105.

⁴³ Irina Kirk, *Dostoevskij and Camus* (Germany: Wilhelm Fink Verlag Munchen, 1974), p. 61.

⁴⁴ See Isaac’s *Arendt, Camus and Modern Rebellion*, pp. 123-24.

⁴⁵ Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 283.

intersubjectively. Like Patrice in *A Happy Death*, Martha pursues happiness in isolation. She has no concept of the other. Thus she goes to her death alone and without the conciliations of love and communion. In this sense, her fate speaks to the impossibility of happiness in a world in which isolated I's narrowly fulfill their desires.⁴⁶ Martha is blind to Jan's intentions because her attention never extends beyond her wish to escape. Jan is seen only as a means to that end. This is evident when Jan and Martha are alone in Jan's room. As Jan tries repeatedly to engage Martha in dialogue, even hinting at one point that they are related, Martha insists "that we should keep our distance."⁴⁷ Martha willfully avoids Jan in order to depersonalize him; for "it's easier," as the mother finally admits, "to kill what one doesn't know."⁴⁸ Hanna has captured the symbolic significance of Martha and her mother: "Camus presents them not as ideal examples of how to live in an absurd universe; he offers them as dramatic examples of two persons clearly aware of such a universe, who suffer from it, struggle against it and are finally defeated by it."⁴⁹

If Martha's mistake is her inability to transcend self-interest, Jan's failure consists in refusing to speak plainly.⁵⁰ Because of his subterfuge, Jan facilitates Martha's crime

⁴⁶ Hanna makes a similar point in his review of *The Misunderstanding*: "Le Malentendu is a drama which concerns the life of desperate and confused people who attempt to fulfill their hopes in an absurd universe and are defeated by a foolish misunderstanding" (*The Thought and Art of Albert Camus*, p. 55).

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 92.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 79.

⁴⁹ *The Thought and Art of Albert Camus*, p. 55.

⁵⁰ Camus was constantly concerned with the problems of language and the unwillingness (or impossibility) of people to use clear, precise terms. Interestingly, Camus hints at this in an article about the French author Brice Parain. After praising Parain for his focus on language and meaning, Camus invokes Socrates: "The situation Socrates faced is analogous to our own. There was evil in men's souls because there were contradictions in communication, because the most ordinary words had several different meaning, were distorted and diverted from the plain and simple use that people imagined" (*Lyrical and Critical Essays*, p. 231). *The Misunderstanding* highlights this problem. Each of the

against him. Thomas Merton has suggested that Jan is Camus' caricature of modern man. Jan's desire to be "reasonable" and to "study his family objectively," Merton argues, are symptoms of an overly confident "scientific mind."⁵¹ There are good grounds for Merton's claims. But Jan's error is more elemental. Despite his good intentions, Jan remains hopelessly self-involved. For instance, he conceals his identity initially out of a rather shallow disappointment. He "expected a welcome like the prodigal son's."⁵² When instead he is received as a stranger, his reflex is to distance himself from the situation; it is only then that he attempts to intellectualize things. Jan's failure is highlighted by his wife, Maria, who implores him to be forthcoming. "There are situations," she says, "in which the normal way of acting is obviously the best. If one wants to be recognized, one starts by telling one's name. Otherwise . . . one simply muddles everything."⁵³ But Jan's excessive self-awareness prevents him from doing this. Even when moved by the noblest of intentions, he is undermined by internal confusion.

From Mersault's narrow sensualism to Caligula's absurd obsession to Martha's egoism, Camus consistently links the individualist instinct to crime and the destruction of alterity. Even Jan, a sympathetic figure, brings about his own ruin as his self-involvement severs his connection to the concrete. Like Caligula and Martha, he is unable to pay attention to what is in front of him – namely other people. All of these characters, then, are united by an inability to transcend or surpass absurdity, and as a result they are alienated from others and the world. Further, with the exception of Jan,

characters engages in a monologue rather than a dialogue. Consequently, they fail to communicate with one another.

⁵¹ Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1981), p. 283.

⁵² *Caligula and three other Plays*, p. 83.

⁵³ Ibid.

they all commit or consent to crime. I have tried to show that their failures are rooted in their solipsistic orientations as well as their expression of self-will at the expense of others. However, there is another individual (and related) response to absurdity that is equally problematic: indifference. Indifference and inertia are recurring themes in Dostoevsky, and they are central to his absurd psychology. Camus grappled constantly with this aspect of Dostoevsky. To illustrate this, I turn to one of Camus' later works, *The Fall*. Here Camus tries to capture the essence of the modern, alienated soul. In doing so, Camus incorporates themes from several of Dostoevsky's works, including *The Possessed*, *Notes From Underground*, *The Adolescent*, and *The Idiot*.

The Fall

The Fall is arguably Camus' most Dostoevskyian text, and the importance of Dostoevsky's absurd psychology to Camus cannot be grasped apart from it. Published in 1956, *The Fall* is a confessional narrative and an absurd character study. Through the protagonist, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, Camus raises a host of moral and religious questions. Chief among these are guilt, innocence, meaning, judgment, exile, and the motivations and justifications for action. More importantly, as Thomas Hanna observes, "*The Fall* reveals Camus as a psychologist. For the first time he deals directly and seriously with the psychological make-up of men."⁵⁴ Following Hanna, this section focuses on Camus as psychologist. There are numerous parallels between Clamence and Dostoevsky's nihilistic protagonists. Here I identify these parallels and associate them with more general Dostoevskyian motifs in *The Fall*. The aim is to show how Camus'

⁵⁴ *The Thought and Art of Albert Camus*, p. 165.

engagement with Dostoevsky influenced Camus' view of the relationship between absurdity and estrangement.

The Possessed is Dostoevsky's most political novel. Based loosely on historical events, the book concerns a group of revolutionaries who plot a series of attacks against the government.⁵⁵ It is difficult to overstate Camus' admiration for this work. In addition to adapting it for the theatre, Camus placed *The Possessed* "among the four or five supreme works" in all of literature.⁵⁶ Camus' principal interest was Stavrogin, the anti-hero of *The Possessed*.⁵⁷ Stavrogin's personality is defined by negation and indifference.⁵⁸ In *The Possessed*, he functions as a provocateur, driving much of the story's chaos. The narrative quickly unfolds when Stavrogin encounters Verkhovensky, the leader of the revolutionary group. Unlike Stavrogin, Verkhovensky's nihilism is insidiously active; it results not in paralysis or indifference but in blind submission to the *libido dominandi*. Enamored by his strength, Verkhovensky solicits Stavrogin's

⁵⁵ On November 25, 1869, the body of a college student of the Moscow Agricultural Academy was found after washing up on the shore of a nearby pond. It was later discovered that the student was part of a revolutionary group and was killed by his fellow-conspirators. The crime was conceived and led by Sergey Nechayev, a founding member of the organization. In his *Diary of a Writer*, Dostoevsky claims he wrote *The Possessed* in order to ask "how, in our contemporaneous, transitional and peculiar society, are the Nechayevs, not Nechayev himself, made possible?" (142).

⁵⁶ Quoted in Todd's *Albert Camus: A Life*, p. 395.

⁵⁷ This is evident in Camus' notebooks, particularly when Camus was writing *The Fall* and working on his adaptation of *The Possessed*. In the month of October 1953, for example, Camus records several entries about Stavrogin's personality. Camus even suggests that the surrounding characters in *The Possessed* are "disaggregated fragments of Stavrogin's . . . extraordinary personality" (*Notebooks 1951-1959*, pp. 93-94). Additionally, the translator of Camus' notebooks, Ryan Bloom, notes that two of the lines from these entries were specifically adapted for *The Fall* (93).

⁵⁸ This was Camus' reading of Stavrogin as well. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, for example, he refers to Stavrogin as a "tsar in indifference" (109).

membership in the group. Stavrogin obliges, but he remains utterly indifferent to Verkhovensky's political schemes.

Stavrogin is a passive nihilist. He values nothing and so cannot will himself to meaningful action. Hence much of his behavior defies description.⁵⁹ Stavrogin leads, as Camus observes in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, an empty and “ironic life.”⁶⁰ But the key to understanding Stavrogin lies in his inability to transcend negation. In a letter before committing suicide, Stavrogin explains his failure:

I've tried my strength everywhere. You advised me to do this that I might learn to know myself . . . But to what to apply my strength, that is what I've never seen, and do not see now in spite of your praises . . . I am still capable, as I always was, of desiring to do something good, and of feeling pleasure from it; at the same time I desire evil and feel pleasure from that too. But both feelings are always too petty, and are never very strong . . . One may argue about everything endlessly, but from me nothing has come but negation, with no greatness of soul, no force . . . Everything has always been petty and spiritless.⁶¹

The source of Stavrogin's anguish is his conscience, which strives for tranquility and purpose but lacks the spiritual capacity to attain either. Stavrogin's significance to Camus has been noted by several commentators. In one of the few comprehensive studies of Camus and Dostoevsky, Ray Davison claims that Stavrogin's influence on *The Fall* is apparent in Clamence's ironic disaffection.⁶² Davison touches on an important parallel here. Stavrogin can be seen as a model for Clamence in several ways. For one,

⁵⁹ At a meeting, for instance, Stavrogin pulls a man by the nose simply because of the man's habit of using the refrain “nobody leads me by the nose.” There is another incident in which Stavrogin kisses another man's wife directly in front of him only to make the point that rules are pointless in a meaningless world. This is the sense in which Stavrogin leads an “ironic life.”

⁶⁰ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1991), p. 109.

⁶¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), pp. 685-86.

⁶² Specifically, Davison argues that “the ironic life which Stavrogin leads” is reminiscent of Clamence and of Camus' absurdism more generally.

Stavrogin arouses admiration in those around him. This is partly because of his individual strengths, but it is also, as Felix Rysten notes, because Stavrogin “lives on solitary heights.”⁶³ His solitude and indifference are seen as signs of greatness. In the first part of *The Fall*, Clamence similarly lives aloft. “My profession,” he admits, “satisfied most happily that vocation for summits.”⁶⁴ Although Clamence, unlike Stavrogin, consciously elevates himself above others in order to be “seen and hailed by the largest number,” his solitude is nonetheless an essential part of his character. Second, both Stavrogin and Clamence are esteemed by bourgeois intellectuals. In *The Possessed*, it is the young socialists who are most drawn to Stavrogin; in *The Fall*, it is the Parisian bourgeoisie who are impressed by Clamence’s perceived virtues. In both works, however, this reflects the vacuousness of their contemporaries as well as the absence of guiding norms. Lastly, Stavrogin and Clamence embody the disorder of their day.⁶⁵ Dostoevsky suggests this in an 1869 notebook entry. “Everything is within the character of Stavrogin,” he writes, “A depraved aristocrat and nothing more. Nothing but disorder.”⁶⁶ It is not clear to what extent Camus was familiar with Dostoevsky’s notebooks, but we know Camus interpreted Stavrogin more or less in this way.⁶⁷

⁶³ Felix S.A. Rysten, *False Prophets in the Fiction of Camus, Dostoevsky, Melville, and Others* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1972), p. 75.

⁶⁴ Albert Camus, *The Fall*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 25.

⁶⁵ Rysten has also noted this similarity in her analysis of *The Fall* and *The Possessed*: “Stavrogin, like Clamence, is a mirror in which each can recognize his anxieties, his ambivalence, his guilt, and his complicity in the perpetuation of the fraud of . . . civilization” (*False Prophets in the Fiction of Camus, Dostoevsky, Melville, and Others*, p. 78).

⁶⁶ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Les Demons; Carnets des Demons*, trans. B. de Schloezer and S. Luneau (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), pp. 784-87.

⁶⁷ As noted above, Camus wrote in his notebooks that Stavrogin bears in himself all of the flaws and “disaggregated fragments” of the remaining characters in *The Possessed*.

Furthermore, Clamence appears to fulfill the same role in *The Fall*. In an interview cited by his biographer Herbert Lottman, for instance, Camus said of Clamence:

The mirror into which he looks will finally be held out to others. Where does the confession begin, where the accusation? Is the man who speaks in this book putting himself on trial, or his era? Is he a particular case, or the man of the day? There is, in any case, a sole truth in this studied play of mirror: pain and what it promises.⁶⁸

In their dysfunction and disaffection, Stavrogin and Clamence bear the crosses of their cultures. As Camus writes in his notebooks, the name Stavrogin is derived from the Greek word for “cross,” *stauros*.⁶⁹ The problem, though, as Father Tihon says to Stavrogin during the latter’s semi-confession, is that “It is difficult for a man to take up his cross when he does not believe in the cross of Christ.”⁷⁰ Like Stavrogin, Clamence cannot love or repent because there is no one to whom he can appeal or from whom he can seek forgiveness.

Stavrogin’s despair also dramatizes the link between metaphysical angst and nihilism. In *The Possessed* and *The Fall*, this is explored through the theme of sexual promiscuity.⁷¹ In the case of Stavrogin, sex is a diversionary activity rather than a source of pleasure or an affirmation of love.⁷² “I’ve tried the depths of debauchery, and wasted

This, Camus continues, is “the enigma of Stavrogin” and “the unique theme of *The Possessed* (Notebooks 1951-1959, p. 94).

⁶⁸ Herbert Lottman, *Albert Camus: A Biography* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1979), p. 564.

⁶⁹ *Notebooks 1951-1959*, p. 93.

⁷⁰ *The Possessed*, p. 711.

⁷¹ It is worth noting that Camus was also aware of this theme in Dostoevsky. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus mentions in a footnote that “almost all Dostoevsky’s heroes are polygamous” (112).

⁷² This theme recurs in another character in *The Possessed*, Liputin, who grows tired of life and gives himself over to “drinking” and “a debauchery that exceeded all bounds” (683).

my strength over it.”⁷³ Stavrogin frequents brothels, misleads women, and inexplicably marries a disabled girl for whom he feels nothing. These pointless acts are done either out of a spirit of irony or in an effort to relieve boredom.⁷⁴ Such is the fate, Dostoevsky suggests, of an incoherent personality. In *The Fall*, Camus imbues Clamence with a similar disposition. Throughout the text, Clamence seeks solace in sex and debauchery. “Alcohol and women provided me,” he admits, “the only solace of which I was worthy.”⁷⁵ For Clamence as well as Stavrogin, depravity is “a substitute for love.”⁷⁶ I emphasize Clamence and Stavrogin’s licentiousness because it is a symptom of their internal disorder. Their world is emptied of meaning as a result of their hyper-active consciousness. Unable to fill this void, they grow increasingly estranged from the world and others. Their inability to love must, therefore, be seen as a consequence of their inability to transcend their own subjectivity.

The alienation experienced by Clamence is also analogous to Stavrogin. Clamence cannot love because of his debauchery and isolation. To ease his suffering, he indulges his excesses, which “decrease vitality, hence suffering . . . It is but a long sleep.”⁷⁷ The excesses are thus a means to diminish consciousness. For Stavrogin, however, nothing, including excess, sufficed. He commits suicide instead. What I want to emphasize here is the theme of the isolated consciousness. Neither Clamence nor Stavrogin are able to connect meaningfully with others. Their inner turmoil leaves them

⁷³ *The Possessed*, p. 685.

⁷⁴ “I was so utterly bored,” Stavrogin declares at one point, “that I could have hanged myself, and if I didn’t, it was because I was still looking forward to something, as I have all my life” (pp. 705-05).

⁷⁵ *The Fall*, p. 103.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p. 102.

⁷⁷ *The Possessed*, p. 105.

broken and restless, and their individual strengths prove useless without a sense of purpose or community. Ultimately they divorce themselves from a world to which they no longer feel connected. Stavrogin takes his own life and Clamence retreats to the bourgeois hell of Amsterdam. In both cases, the path from self-estrangement to social isolation is straightforward.

Along with the motif of estrangement, Dostoevsky and Camus also stress the importance of transcendence and roots; in Dostoevsky's universe in particular, characters typically suffer from the absence of both.⁷⁸ This is especially true of Stavrogin. "I have no ties in Russia," he laments, "everything is as alien to me there as everywhere."⁷⁹ Seeking stability, Stavrogin travels abroad, but he is unable to find fulfillment. He enjoys all the trappings of modern life: wealth, travel, education, culture, etc. Yet he has no sense of self and no community with which he can identify. Like Mersault of *The Stranger*, Stavrogin is an outsider wherever he goes. "I'm an outsider," he says to his wife, "not your husband, nor your father, nor your betrothed."⁸⁰ As his doubt increases, Stavrogin sinks deeper into isolation and his social ties are completely severed.⁸¹ In this

⁷⁸ It is difficult to overstate the importance of this theme in Dostoevsky's writings, as it is connected to his more general critique of the West. In key works such as *The Adolescent* and *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky continually affirms the link between European atheism and rootlessness. In *The Idiot*, for example, there is an exchange in which Ivan Petrovitch laments the intellectual influence of Europe on contemporary Russia: "Atheism! In our country it is only among the upper classes that you find unbelievers; men who have lost the root or spirit of their faith" (531).

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 685.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 184.

⁸¹ In his adaptation of Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, Camus makes explicit the social consequences of Stavrogin's rootlessness. Shatov remarks to Stavrogin at one point, for example, that "You cannot love anyone because you are a man without roots and without faith" (82).

way, he personifies the rootless individualism of modern man.⁸² Stavrogin is among the clearest incarnations of Dostoevsky's view of the link between reason (intelligence) and individualism. This is suggested in Maria Banerjee's account of Stavrogin: "reason decoupled from faith and individualism without self-transcendence are linked together by the fatal flaw of egocentrism."⁸³ Stavrogin is an unmoored ego in precisely this sense and for precisely these reasons.⁸⁴

Clarence's descent into negation is similarly linked to rootlessness in *The Fall*. Ray Davison has recently pointed to this thematic parallel. "Camus appears in *The Fall*," he writes, "to embrace the despair and tormented rootlessness of Dostoevsky's hapless atheists."⁸⁵ Though Davison is speaking in general terms here, his claim is correct and is especially clear when comparatively analyzing Clarence and Stavrogin. Clarence, for example, begins as a successful Parisian lawyer, just as Stavrogin is introduced as an esteemed figure in St. Petersburg. However, after experiencing a moral failure,

⁸² Dostoevsky references this aspect of Stavrogin in his notebooks for *The Possessed*. Although the line does not appear in the text, Dostoevsky planned to have Stavrogin declare: "I consider myself . . . an independent unity and I shall say that others have betrayed me, not that I myself have betrayed others. Leave me. I stand alone. I am an egoist and I want to live within my egoism" (*Les Demons; Carnets des Demons*, p. 825).

⁸³ Dostoevsky: *The Scandal of Reason*, p. 110.

⁸⁴ The kind of inertia typified by Stavrogin emerges throughout Dostoevsky's writings, and often it is linked directly to rootlessness. This connection is perhaps most explicit in Dostoevsky's *The Adolescent*. In this text, Russian intellectuals are reproached continuously for their obsession with European ideas. To take but one example, there is a pivotal scene in which Dolgoruky associates his aimlessness with the broader malaise of contemporary Russians. "Since all my thinking then was based on *borrowed* ideas, I couldn't produce any of my own to form an independent decision. There was nothing to guide me at all" (306). Shortly thereafter, Dolgoruky and his father are said to be "stricken by that common Russian fate: neither of us knows what to do with himself. As soon as a Russian finds himself thrown out of his time-honored routine, he no longer knows what to do" (313).

⁸⁵ Camus: *The Challenge of Dostoevsky*, p. 181.

Clamence's self-image deteriorates. His account of the humiliating event is worth quoting in full:

It was an hour past midnight, a fine rain was falling, a drizzle rather . . . I had just left a mistress . . . I was enjoying that walk, a little numbed, my body calmed and irrigated by a flow of blood gentle as the failing rain. On the bridge I passed behind a figure leaning over the railing and seeming to stare at the river. On closer view, I made out a slim young woman dressed in black . . . I had already gone some fifty yards when I heard the sound . . . of a body striking the water. I stopped short, but without turning around. Almost at once I heard a cry, repeated several times, which was going downstream; then it suddenly ceased . . . I wanted to run and yet didn't stir. I was trembling, I believe from cold and shock. I told myself that I had to be quick and I felt an irresistible weakness steal over me. I have forgotten what I thought then. Too late, too far . . . or something of the sort. I was still listening as I stood motionless. Then, slowly under the rain, I went away. I informed no one.⁸⁶

Clamence is permanently altered as a result of his inaction on the bridge that night.

Indeed, as Avi Sagi suggests, Clamence "discovers that he is no more than an actor."⁸⁷

Realizing that something false about his character was exposed, he flees Paris, wanders about Europe, and ends finally in the slums of Amsterdam. Increasingly, he becomes disconnected and overly self-conscious. And he begins, almost pathologically, to subject everything and everyone to relentless scrutiny. I note Clamence's moral failure because Stavrogin experiences a similar fall from grace, the effects of which he describes in his final confession:

Toward evening I felt afraid again, but this time the fear was incomparably more intense. The main thing was that I was afraid and that I was so conscious of being afraid. Oh, I know of nothing more absurd and more abominable! I had never experienced fear before . . . but this one time in my life I was afraid, and in fact, I literally trembled. The

⁸⁶ Ibid, pp. 69-70.

⁸⁷ Avi Sagi, *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd* (New York: Rodopi, 2002), p. 136.

intense consciousness of it was a profound humiliation. If I could, I would have killed myself, but I felt myself unworthy of death.⁸⁸

Here Stavrogin is referencing his failure to stop a young girl, whom he had just raped, from hanging herself. Like Clamence, Stavrogin's sense of self is shattered in this scene. As Felix Rysten notes, Stavrogin is "faced with the absurd in his recognition of the discrepancy between his actual self and the way he has conceived himself to be."⁸⁹ In both works, these are pivotal events; they trigger an internal confrontation as a result of which neither character can escape the feeling of guilt and estrangement. Alone and deprived equally of transcendence and communion, Clamence and Stavrogin withdraw from life. If there is a discernible difference between them, it is that Clamence hides behind a veneer of strained, self-glorifying cynicism, whereas Stavrogin is more bewildered and apathetic. But they both suffer from a sickness of spirit. And their inability to construct meaning in experience results finally in exile and despair. Worse still, because they mirror and magnify the disorder in which they live, they drag everyone they encounter into negation and crime.

Estrangement and negation are explored from a slightly different angle in Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground*. Here Dostoevsky uses his protagonist to examine the despair of the typical bourgeois Russian, and the result is a more illuminating look at the inner life of an estranged and ordinary man. Because the hero of *Notes From Underground* is intended to indict an entire era, there are several parallels between this text and Camus' *The Fall*.⁹⁰ The next section discusses these parallels and

⁸⁸ *The Possessed*, p. 707.

⁸⁹ Felix Ryster, *False Prophets in the Fiction of Camus, Dostoevsky, Melville, and Others* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1092), p. 81.

⁹⁰ As I demonstrate below, Camus similarly used *The Fall* to condemn the bourgeois values of his time.

argues that *Notes From Underground* was vital to Camus' conception of the modern absurd psyche.

Estrangement in *The Fall* and *Notes From Underground*

Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground* is a first- person confessional narrative in the vein of Camus' *The Fall*. Like *The Fall*, *Notes From Underground* is also a polemic directed at the dominant philosophical movement of its time.⁹¹ In addition to noting various structural similarities, this section emphasizes three points of thematic overlap. First, Camus and Dostoevsky both explore the plight of the conscious absurd man, whose search for identity within a community is continually undermined by internal disorder. Second, I examine the theme of estrangement and its relation to egoism, freedom, and resentment. Here I also draw on Nietzsche's concept of bad conscience to help clarify the psychological conditions of Clamence and the Underground Man. Lastly, I explore the problem of guilt and innocence without absolute standards. The concern here is to demonstrate how Camus' understanding of the modern psyche and condition overlaps with Dostoevsky's.

It is important to begin by situating these works in their proper political and cultural context. Both *The Fall* and *Notes From Underground* are veiled attacks on the bourgeois virtues of modernity. In *Notes From Underground*, Dostoevsky links the neuroses and self-division of contemporary Russians to the corrupting influence of Western rationalism. The state of the Underground Man's soul speaks to the

⁹¹ This has been noted by several commentators, most notably Irina Kirk (1974), who points out that these two "polemics arose on ideological grounds and contained Dostoevsky's and Camus' protest against the views taken by their antagonists, Cernysevski and Sartre" (*Dostoevskij and Camus*, p. 42). Cernysevsky and Sartre were generally considered the leading voices of their movements, which were socialism and existentialism, respectively.

consequences of abandoning traditional virtues and beliefs. In an authorial note on the first page of the text, Dostoevsky explains his intentions in *Notes From Underground*:

The author of these Notes, and the Notes themselves, are both, of course, imaginary. All the same, if we take into consideration the conditions that have shaped our society, people like the writer not only may, but must, exist in that society. I have tried to present to the public in a more striking form than is usual a character belonging to the very recent past, a representative figure from a generation still surviving.⁹²

As noted, Camus similarly uses Clamence to caricature modernity. Like the Underground Man, Clamence has fully internalized the zeitgeist.⁹³ Referring to this in a 1959 interview, Camus remarked that “My hero is indeed discouraged, and this is why, as a good *modern* nihilist, he exalts servitude.”⁹⁴ There are nonetheless some important differences between Clamence and the Underground Man. For one, the Underground Man’s critique is implicit in his fate; that is, he fails insofar as he embodies the virtues of contemporary culture.⁹⁵ He has also lived underground his entire life.⁹⁶ Clamence, on the other hand, lived happily in society for years. His exile begins with his inaction on the bridge. Once his self-image collapses, however, he is reduced to a state of ironic detachment in which he parodies the virtues he once affirmed. Further, by admitting his

⁹² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, trans. David McDuff (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 15.

⁹³ This is a common interpretation of these two figures. Maria Banerjee (2006), for example, writes that “Like his Russian predecessor [the Underground Man], Jean-Baptiste personifies the moral malaise of the historical moment” (*Dostoevsky: The Scandal of Reason*, p. 69).

⁹⁴ Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), p. 364.

⁹⁵ The Underground Man suggests this in a faux confession to his contemporaries: “I am not trying to excuse myself with that allness. As for what concerns me personally, after I have only carried to a logical conclusion in my life what you yourselves didn’t dare to take more than half-way; and you supposed your cowardice was common sense, and comforted yourselves with the self-deception” (123).

⁹⁶ This is made explicit when the Underground Man tells the reader he has survived in exile for forty years, which is also his age.

own guilt, he pronounces judgment on all.⁹⁷ As Clamence proclaims, he is “an empty prophet for shabby times, Elijah without a messiah.”⁹⁸ At any rate, despite their differences, both of these anti-heroes are captives of the same absurd psyche.⁹⁹ They try to live alone and without illusions but are unable to do so.

Before examining the theme of estrangement, it is essential to stress the problematic nature of consciousness in these works. In *Notes From Underground*, consciousness is a disease. “I tell you solemnly,” the Underground Man proclaims, “that I have many times tried to become an insect. But I was not equal even to that. I swear, gentlemen, that to be too conscious is an illness.”¹⁰⁰ Consciousness as *pathos* is also a key motif in *The Fall*. Thomas Merton describes this well in his brief but insightful study of *The Fall*:

Clamence is a bourgeois man whose conscience has died of self-analysis and whose frustrated reasoning has become a kind of moral eczema . . . His confession cures nothing and finds relief only in passing on the contagion to another. The plague, which in the novel of that name was physical, is here revealed as a moral sickness unto death, an utter despair which can do anything but live with itself and accept life without analysis – a plague of self-examination which turns narcissism into self-hate.¹⁰¹

The “plague of self-examination,” as Merton describes it, infects both Clamence and the Underground Man; it is the source of their suffering and their isolation.¹⁰² Indeed the

⁹⁷ Hence Clamence’s full name is Jean-Baptiste Clamence, an obvious pun on John the Baptist who foretold the Gospel and tried to “make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke: 1:17).

⁹⁸ *The Fall*, p. 117.

⁹⁹ It is worth noting that Camus also thought of Stavrogin as a uniquely modern hero. In the foreword to his theatrical adaptation of Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed*, for instance, Camus describes Stavrogin as “a contemporary hero” (vi).

¹⁰⁰ *Notes From Underground*, p. 28.

¹⁰¹ *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, p. 229.

¹⁰² In Dostoevsky’s *The Adolescent*, the pathological attachment to an “idea” similarly leads to exile. Dolgoruky, the hero of the story, “cuts himself off from society” as a result of his internal preoccupations.¹⁰² He rationalizes his “violent dislike for contact or association with people” by insisting

Underground Man's consciousness leads inexorably to inertia. To combat this, he turns to books and "ideas." "I was always alone," he says, "I did a lot reading. I wanted to stifle all that was smoldering inside me with external impressions and reading was for me the only possible source of external impressions."¹⁰³ Reading thus becomes a substitute for experience and human contact. In *The Fall*, Clamence repeatedly scorns this modern tendency. Europeans are derided for their indifference to experience and their preoccupation with "ideas."¹⁰⁴ In both texts, then, there is an implicit connection between consciousness and inertia.¹⁰⁵ But there is also a link between consciousness and social atomism. As Irina Kirk notes, *The Fall* and *Notes From Underground* ask whether in the absence of "traditional remedies for the human condition there does not exist an existential answer to each man's isolation."¹⁰⁶ The answers proffered by Camus and Dostoevsky are difficult to discern. Here I point to thematic parallels and suggest that Camus appropriated many of Dostoevsky's insights into the causes and consequences of modern estrangement.

In *The Fall*, Clamence's isolation increases in proportion to his self-awareness. The more he questions and doubts, the more divided his personality becomes. At the core of Clamence's disarray is a perverse need for contradiction.¹⁰⁷ Clamence knows

that isolation is a byproduct of his fidelity to a noble "idea." But this is merely a post-hoc justification. In truth, he is estranged from others because he lives inside himself.

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 51.

¹⁰⁴ *The Fall*, p. 6.

¹⁰⁵ Avi Sagi emphasizes this link as well, noting in his analysis of *The Fall* that the cost of Clamence's self-consciousness is paralysis. "Clamence discovers," writes Sagi, "that freedom and conscious life have a price: the inability to commit. Freedom and consciousness translate into alienation from the other" (*Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, p. 136).

¹⁰⁶ *Dostoevskij and Camus*, p. 63.

¹⁰⁷ This is also a common motif in Dostoevsky's work. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example, Ivan repudiates the idea of immortality even though he acknowledges its utter

what he ought to do but can no longer do it. In this way, Clamence resembles Ivan Karamazov, who, as the devil observes, wants to “perform an act of heroic virtue” but is tormented by his disbelief “in virtue.”¹⁰⁸ Clamence’s conscience, as Germaine Bree has observed, is reduced “to an endless, formless, chaotic parade of inner consciousness.”¹⁰⁹ There are several reasons for Clamence’s confusion. For one, he has rejected the virtues and traditions that bind him to others, and can no longer practice them in good faith. But his embeddedness in a community means that his identity, his sense of worth, depends upon the judgments of others. This is why his exile follows from the disintegration of his self-image. His self-image was preserved so long as it corresponded to his public image. Having failed to act on the bridge, Clamence is confronted by two facts. First, he realizes that his self-esteem was a product of his perceived social standing, and that his virtues were merely for self-elevation. “When I was concerned with others,” he concedes, “I was so out of pure condescension, in utter freedom, and all the credit went to me: my self-esteem would go up a degree.”¹¹⁰ In effect, as Sagi also observes, Clamence discovers that “he lives constantly vis-à-vis others.”¹¹¹ Second, and more importantly, he recognizes that his freedom was illusory. As Kirk points out, before the incident on the

necessity. Ivan’s dilemma is described by another character in the novel, Miusov, as follows: “He [Ivan] solemnly declared . . . that if love did exist on earth, it was not because of any natural law but solely because men believed in immortality . . . and that if you were to destroy the belief in immortality in mankind, not only love but every living force on which the continuation of all life in the world depended, would dry up at once” (77). Ivan aspires to love of mankind, recognizes what is necessary for it, but his inner thirst for truth and immediate justice forces him to reject it. As Bruce Ward (1986) has noted, “The contradiction between Ivan’s love of humanity and his nihilism manifests itself in him throughout the novel” (*Dostoevsky’s Critique of the West*, p. 126).

¹⁰⁸ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 693.

¹⁰⁹ Germaine Bree, *Camus* (New York: Hancourt, Brace & World, 1964), p. 131.

¹¹⁰ *The Fall*, p. 48.

¹¹¹ *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, p. 136.

bridge, Clamence “exercised his will within the framework of what is considered virtuous by conventional standards.”¹¹² However, when given a chance to be authentically virtuous, to save another human being, he shrinks. Consequently, he discovers that he was only playing the role of the virtuous man and, moreover, that his happiness and freedom were “not free from social opinion.”¹¹³ Clamence sinks under the weight of these realizations. Thomas Hanna’s account of the significance of this is worth quoting at length:

Clamence was undistinguished from his habitual virtues until that crucial moment when the plaints of a drowning woman inserted itself between Clamence and his virtue. In that instant Clamence chose himself and not his virtue, he suddenly acted as a completely free individual, and, in this very act, took upon himself the enormous, inescapable responsibility for his act. He was no longer safe or unconscious, he was in trouble. His virtue could not justify his action; he alone had to be its justification. From this point onward, Clamence moved toward consciousness and the agony of decision.¹¹⁴

Following his failure on the bridge, then, Clamence is thrust into a state of genuine freedom, which obliges him to take responsibility for his choices and actions. But his neutrality on the bridge exposed his inability to accept this responsibility. As a result Clamence is overwhelmed by a sense of guilt.

Clamence’s estrangement is hastened by this sense of guilt because it occurs in an absurd context in which, as John Cruikshank notes, “there is no available standard of innocence.”¹¹⁵ “We cannot assert the innocence of anyone,” says Clamence, but “we can state with certainty the guilt of all.”¹¹⁶ Because there is no God, no ultimate redemption,

¹¹² Ibid, p. 74.

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 75.

¹¹⁴ *The Thought and Art of Albert Camus*, p. 224.

¹¹⁵ *Albert Camus*, p. 187.

¹¹⁶ *The Fall*, p. 110.

Clamence is condemned to live in perpetual self-judgment, which he tries to escape by confessing his guilt and implicating the rest of mankind. This alienates him from the community of men to which he properly belongs, as his interactions with others are driven by this desire to provoke a sense of guilt.¹¹⁷ Henceforth Clamence is consumed by an inner need to justify his moral failure, and “the fear of self-judgment,” as Kirk writes, sets him on a “course of self-deceit.”¹¹⁸

Like *The Fall*, estrangement is the foremost theme of *Notes From Underground*.¹¹⁹ Here our main concern is the relationship between resentment and estrangement, which Camus and Dostoevsky depict in similar ways. As seen already, Clamence’s need to discharge his guilt guides much of his behavior. But he is also animated by a spirit of resentment. Indeed, as several commentators have suggested, Clamence is a model of Nietzschean bad conscience.¹²⁰ Walter Kaufmann, for instance, argues that “Camus’ last novel, *The Fall* . . . is a veritable case history of the will to power of the weak, who, as a last resort, derive a sense of superiority from their

¹¹⁷ This was a common theme of Dostoevsky’s novels as well. In *The Idiot*, for example, the nihilist, Natasia, is continually unable to connect with others because she projects her sense of guilt on to everyone she encounters. Prince Muishkin explains this tendency thus: “Try to realize that in the perpetual admission of guilt she probably finds some dreadful unnatural satisfaction – as though she were *revenging* herself upon someone” (424).

¹¹⁸ *Dostoevskij and Camus*, p. 78.

¹¹⁹ Indeed, Albert Levi (1959) has argued that the very notion of estrangement “burst upon the modern world with Dostoevsky’s *Notes From Underground*” (*Philosophy and the Modern World*, p. 203).

¹²⁰ Most notably, Robert Solomon (1996) has suggested that Clamence can be interpreted through this Nietzschean prism. “Crushed by the weight of his guilt and his punishment,” Solomon writes, Clamence salvages “his last crumb of self-respect through resentment, scorn, and silent defiance” (*The Passions*, p. 45).

insistence that they are unworthy and guilt-ridden.”¹²¹ Kaufmann’s insight here is important because it offers an interpretive framework for Clamence and the Underground Man’s compulsive and contradictory actions.

Nietzschean Resentment in The Fall and Notes From Underground

Nietzsche’s notion of bad conscience defies simple explanation. Nietzsche is clearest about its meaning and origins in his essay *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Here bad conscience is associated with man’s entrance into society. “I take bad conscience to be the deep sickness into which man had to fall under the pressure of that most fundamental of all changes he ever experience – the change of finding himself enclosed . . . within the sway of society and peace.”¹²² The emphasis on society is particularly important here. For Nietzsche, society profoundly altered human consciousness. Pre-societal man lived primarily on instinct. Questions of meaning, morality, and justice were entirely alien. In society, however, man was divorced “from his animal past” and plunged “into new situations and conditions of existence.”¹²³ Suddenly, Nietzsche writes, instincts were repressed and men

were reduced to thinking, inferring, calculating, connecting cause and effect, these unhappy ones, reduced to their consciousness, to their poorest and most erring organ! I do not believe there has ever been such a feeling of misery on earth, such a leaden discomfort – and yet those old instincts had not all at once ceased to make their demands: for the most part they had to seek new and as it were subterranean gratifications. All instincts that do discharge themselves outwardly turn themselves inward – this is what I call the internalizing of man.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (New Jersey, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 338.

¹²² Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan Swensen (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1998), p. 56.

¹²³ *Ibid*, p. 57.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 56-57.

Along with this new state of consciousness, man also experienced a radical new freedom – the freedom to decide good and evil, just and unjust, guilt and innocence. Out of this situation, Nietzsche argues, there emerged a consciousness of others and, more importantly, a concern with “the relationship of those presently living to their ancestors.”¹²⁵ This produced in turn a sense of obligation, both to those with whom we live and to those whose previous sacrifices helped to ensure our present existence. According to Nietzsche, this sense of indebtedness is at the root of man’s religious impulse. “In the end,” he writes, “the progenitor is necessarily transfigured into a god . . . This may even be the origin of the gods.”¹²⁶

Nietzsche’s account of consciousness and human obligation is important in this context for two reasons. First, it connects two of the central themes in *The Fall* and *Notes From Underground*, namely absurdity (nihilism) and guilt. Nietzsche, for example, surmises that the death of God should have resulted in a “final victory of atheism” which “might free humanity from the entire feeling of having debts to its beginnings, its *causa prima*. Atheism and a kind of *second innocence* belong together.”¹²⁷ However, this prospect is lost with the rise of Christianity, which proposed a paradoxical solution to the problem of guilt: “God sacrificing himself for the guilt of man, God himself exacting payment of himself, God as the only one who can redeem from man what has become irredeemable for man himself.”¹²⁸ By offering this remedy, Nietzsche argues, Christianity necessitated the modern “bad conscience.” By this he means that Christianity spared man the burden of true freedom and, secondly, preserved

¹²⁵ Ibid, p. 60.

¹²⁶ Ibid, p. 61.

¹²⁷ Ibid, p. 62.

¹²⁸ Ibid, p. 63.

“the will of man to find himself guilty and reprehensible to the point that it cannot be atoned for.”¹²⁹ The guilt-ridden minds of Clamence and the Underground Man are perfect illustrations of this bad conscience. They are isolated egos thrust into a world without God, and are unable to bear the consequences.¹³⁰ This is particularly true of Clamence. “The essential,” he says, “is to cease being free and to obey, in repentance, a greater rogue than oneself. When we are all guilty, that will be democracy.”¹³¹ It is to this attitude that Camus refers when he describes Clamence as a “modern nihilist” who “exalts servitude.” As David Sprintzen correctly observes, Clamence’s “response to the death of God,” like the modern bourgeois he mocks, “has been to assume the unbearable burden of an absolutized individualism in the context of a pervasive political cynicism glossed as morality and practical idealism.”¹³² Sensing the shallowness of modernity as well as his own complicity, Clamence becomes a “judge-penitent.” The religious aspect of this pathology is prefigured by Nietzsche in a remarkable passage in *The Antichrist*:

Let us not be led astray: they say “judge not,” and yet they condemn to hell whoever stands in their way. In letting God sit in judgment they judge themselves; in glorifying God they glorify themselves; in demanding that everyone show the virtues which they themselves happen to be capable of – still more, which they must have in order to remain on top – they assume the grand air of men struggling for virtue . . . in point of fact, they simply do what they cannot help doing. Forced, like hypocrites, to be sneaky, to hide in corners, to slink along in the shadows, they convert their necessity into a duty.¹³³

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ As suggested above, among the many unbearable consequences is freedom. Indeed, Clamence explicitly links the death of God to the problem of freedom and choice: “For anyone who is without God and without a master, the weight of days is dreadful. Hence one must choose a master, God being out of style” (133).

¹³¹

¹³² *Camus: A Critical Examination*, p. 214.

¹³³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 63.

Clamence does precisely what Nietzsche describes above, only in a post-Christian, nihilistic context. Hence he readily admits his delight in being seen as noble and virtuous:

It cleansed me of all bitterness toward my neighbor, whom I always obligated without ever owing him anything. It set me above the judge whom I judged in turn, above the defendant whom I forced to gratitude. Just weigh this, *cher monsieur*, I lived with impunity. I was concerned in no judgment; I was not on the floor of the courtroom, but somewhere in the flies like those gods that are brought down by machinery from time to time to transfigure the action and give it its meaning. After all, living aloft is still the only way of being seen and hailed by the largest number.¹³⁴

Implicit in Clamence is the notion that man's thirst for an absolute, for salvation and repentance, persists even in the shadow of God.¹³⁵ Furthermore, that without God or some unifying idea, this impulse degenerates into the sort of morose, self-serving cynicism typified by Clamence. In his analysis of *The Fall*, Sagi points more directly to this Nietzschean aspect of Clamence:

Religion is an endless human attempt to reject guilt, namely, to renounce freedom and personal responsibility, since only a free creature can be guilty, and only a person who can be guilty can also be free. Like Nietzsche, Camus emphasizes that religion is an escape from freedom, responsibility, and guilt.¹³⁶

As for the Underground Man, though his need to project guilt is less pronounced than Clamence's, the confessional quality of his account is itself a manifestation of this

¹³⁴ *The Fall*, p. 25.

¹³⁵ It is important to note that at least two commentators have made similar points regarding Clamence's need for atonement and recognition. David Sprintzen, for instance, writes that Clamence suggests that "A mind of absolute attachments cannot do without an object of saving faith. When one absolute fails, the psyche demands that another take its place" (*Camus: A Critical Examination*, p. 215). Similarly, Robert Solomon argues that "one apt diagnosis is that Clamence (Camus?) indulged in the wrong kind of reflection, reflection that was tainted with the otherworldly, with comparisons and contrasts to perfection, and consequently with the seeds of failure and resentment. This is the cost of what Nietzsche called the shadows of God" (*Dark Feelings, Grim Thoughts*, p. 207).

¹³⁶ *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, pp. 156-57.

need. Moreover, he continuously shifts from “I” to “we” when addressing his own shortcomings. “I missed life through decaying morally in a corner, not having sufficient means, losing the habit of living, and carefully cultivating my anger underground,” he begins, and then immediately says that “we have all got out of the habit of living, we are all in a greater or lesser degree crippled.”¹³⁷ As Robert Solomon has noted, Clamence adopts the same tactic, “imperceptibly passing from the ‘I’ to the ‘we’” when describing his own lowliness.¹³⁸ For Clamence and the Underground Man, then, implicating others is inherently self-serving. In Clamence’s case, a moral advantage is gained: “The more I accuse myself, the more I have a right to judge you.”¹³⁹ For the Underground Man, it is a means of abdicating personal responsibility and justifying his underground status.

The second reason Nietzsche’s historical account of consciousness is important is that it helps to elucidate the domineering tendencies of Clamence and the Underground Man. As noted previously, Clamence is immobilized by contradictory impulses. One of the reasons for this is that he is unable to displace his resentment in the Nietzschean sense of the term. This is evident in Clamence’s compulsive need to dominate others, which, as Kaufmann notes, is a clear manifestation of Nietzschean bad conscience.¹⁴⁰ Recognizing that he “can’t get along with domineering or being served,” Clamence finds that his sense of superiority is best maintained in solitude: “In a general way, I like all islands. It is

¹³⁷ *Notes From Underground*, p. 122.

¹³⁸ Robert Solomon, *Dark Feelings, Grim Thoughts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 210.

¹³⁹ *The Fall*, p. 131.

¹⁴⁰ According to Kaufmann, the weak man, the man of bad conscience, “either settles . . . for some more or less petty form of power, such as that power over others which is found in positions of command, in bullying, or in crime – or he resigns himself to failure and dreams of greater power in another world” (*Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, p. 280).

easier to dominate them.”¹⁴¹ This is precisely how the Underground Man justifies his isolation. “Without power and tyranny over somebody I can’t live,” and “I could no longer fall in love because, I repeat, with me love meant to tyrannize and hold the upper hand morally.”¹⁴² The Underground Man is also plagued by an internal dialectic, which Donna Orwin suggests is the defining characteristic of his personality. Each of his moods, she writes, “succeeds the previous one as its opposite and as a reaction to it.”¹⁴³

The Underground Man expresses this in the following lamentation:

When I was most capable of recognizing all the subtle beauties of the highest and the best . . . I could not only fail to recognize them, but could actually do such ugly repulsive things as . . . well, such things, in short, as perhaps everybody does, but which always happened to me, as if on purpose, when I was most conscious that I ought not to do them?¹⁴⁴

The paralysis described above recurs throughout Dostoevsky’s novels – indeed it is one of his most pervasive themes.¹⁴⁵ In *Notes From Underground* and *The Fall*, it can be seen in the internal dynamic of contradiction that propels the protagonists. Noticing this

¹⁴¹ *The Fall*, pp. 43-44.

¹⁴² *Notes From Underground*, pp. 118-19.

¹⁴³ Donna Tussing Orwin, *Consequences of Consciousness* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 24.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 18.

¹⁴⁵ For instance, this trait defines Versilov, one of the paramount figures in Dostoevsky’s *The Adolescent*. Versilov is described by his son, Dolgoruky, in the following terms: “He greatly appreciates chivalry and generosity, but I believe that to him it’s only a principle, an abstract idea. I also know that he’s capable of great remorse: he goes around constantly reproaching himself for something, regretting what he’s done. . . . But he never reforms. . . . He’s stuffed with thousands of preconceptions and extraordinary notions. . . . He’s looking for an opportunity to do something noble and heroic, but in the meantime he acts with petty nastiness” (304). Like Clamence and the Underground Man, then, Versilov is unable to bridge the gap between intent and action, and this is attributable to his inner confusion. This is a crucial link for both Dostoevsky and Camus. Dostoevsky refers to this psychological condition as “the presence of a double” (573), by which he means a divided personality. For Camus, this condition characterizes the modern nihilist, whose consciousness is overwhelmed by internal disorder and the absence of absolute standards.

parallel, Maria Banerjee maintains that “Camus, following both Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, zeroed in on this addictive aspect of resentment which affects the self as an autointoxication, the malignant secretion of one’s preconceived impotence inside the enclosure of the self.”¹⁴⁶ As hyper-conscious egos struggling to reconcile their individual freedom in a social context, Clamence and the Underground Man are trapped “in permanent self-contradiction.”¹⁴⁷ For this reason, they act in spite of themselves, and their irony is indistinguishable from their sincerity.

The alienating effects of Clamence and the Underground Man’s states of consciousness can be seen in several analogous episodes, which help to clarify the connection between resentment and estrangement. To begin with *Notes From Underground*, there is a pivotal scene in which the narrator lures a prostitute to his home. She comes out of sympathy, hoping to comfort this strange man whom she hardly knows. But owing to his pathological need to justify his underground status, he immediately shuns her. When this fails, he tries once more to provoke her to reject him:

But at this point something exceedingly strange happened. I was so used to thinking and imagining everything like a book, and seeing everything in the guise in which I had previously created it in my dreams, that at first I didn’t even understand this strange circumstance. But this is what happened: Liza, whom I had so abused and humiliated, understood a great deal more than I imagined. She understood that part of it that a woman always understands first, if she sincerely loves, and that was that I myself was unhappy.¹⁴⁸

Despite Liza’s compassion, the Underground Man is unable to accept her love. His moods swing pendulously from one emotion to its opposite; and he is constantly

¹⁴⁶ Maria Banerjee, *The Scandal of Reason* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfame Books, 2006), p. 52.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 51.

¹⁴⁸ *Notes from Underground*, p. 117.

responding, resisting, mastering.¹⁴⁹ This episode mirrors Clamence's scene on the bridge insofar as both are presented with a choice. For Clamence, the choice is to act virtuously or not; for the Underground Man, it is to accept or reject Liza's love. Neither is able to do what they know they ought to do, and consequently they succumb to guilt and, eventually, resentment. The sense of self-judgment that follows these episodes, however, overwhelms both characters, and their solipsism deepens as a result.

The Underground Man is also paralyzed by a simultaneous (and contradictory) desire to be recognized and humiliated. Like Clamence, he has need of others but obstinately distances himself from them.¹⁵⁰ Moreover, he is seeking self-justification, and because he cannot resolve his internal contradictions, he is overpowered by a sense of his own humiliation and, consequently, a general contempt for mankind.¹⁵¹ This is a consistent theme in both texts, and is illustrated in a number of tragic-comic incidents. In *The Fall*, for instance, there is a revealing scene in which Clamence leaves his car to help a man move his stalled motorcycle off the road. An argument ensues and Clamence receives "a violent blow on the ear."¹⁵² "Instead of giving a drubbing to the idiot,"

¹⁴⁹ This is evident throughout *Notes from the Underground*. In another example, the Underground Man works feverishly to get himself invited to a dinner party for a man whom he openly despises. He hates this man, but his resentment is counterbalanced by his pride. He is paralyzed by a paradoxical desire to win the respect of people he deeply resents. Thus at the party he behaves bizarrely, obsesses over every perceived offense, and is abandoned by the other attendees. See *Notes from the Underground*, pp. 71-81.

¹⁵⁰ It is worth noting that this compulsion to assert himself over and above others, in many ways, mirrors what Nietzsche referred to in *Twilight of the Idols* as "the pathos of distance" (101).

¹⁵¹ Eventually, he declares that "Man," in general, "is stupid, phenomenally stupid" (33). Clamence likewise grows disdainful of mankind. "Anyone who has considerably meditated on man," he says, "is led to feel nostalgia for the primates" (4).

¹⁵² *The Fall*, p. 52.

Clamence recalls, "I docilely returned to my car and drove off."¹⁵³ This otherwise banal affair becomes debilitating when Clamence is unable to forget it. For several days he stewes in solitude.¹⁵⁴ The psychic consequences of this event mirrors an incident in *Notes From Underground* in which the protagonist is casually brushed aside by a military office:

I had been standing by the table and unknowingly blocking the way; he wanted to get past, and he took me by the shoulders and silently . . . moved me from the place where I stood to another; then he walked past as if he hadn't seen me . . . I had been treated like an insect.¹⁵⁵

For Clamence and the Underground Man, these humiliating incidents are destructive of both their public and self-images.¹⁵⁶ "After having been struck in public without reacting," Clamence says, "it was no longer possible for me to cherish that fine picture of myself."¹⁵⁷ As for the Underground Man, his agony is such that he dreams (for an entire year) of "challenging my enemy to a duel" so as to reclaim his sense of honor.

Ultimately, Clamence and the Underground Man are immobilized by their solipsistic and self-undermining need to assert themselves in an intersubjective context. Indeed, Robert Solomon has suggested that Clamence assumes the role of judge-penitent in a "desperate

¹⁵³ Ibid, p. 53.

¹⁵⁴ "I ran off this little film a hundred times in my imagination," he says, "but it was too late, and for several days I chewed a bitter resentment . . . it was no longer possible for me to cherish that fine picture of myself" (54-55).

¹⁵⁵ *Notes From Underground*, p. 52.

¹⁵⁶ Hence both Clamence and the Underground Man try desperately to convince themselves that their inaction was not the result of cowardice. "It was not cowardice that made me shrink," the Underground Man insists, "but infinite vanity. I was not afraid of the height of six feet, or the fact that I should be painfully beaten . . . I really had no lack of physical courage, but I had not enough moral courage. I was afraid that everybody present . . . would fail to understand, and laugh at me when I made my protest speaking in bookish style" (49). Similarly, Clamence laments that "I had collapsed in public . . . I had let myself be beaten without replying, but I could not be accused of cowardice" (53).

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, pp. 54-55.

effort to remain proud and feel superior in the face of his ever-increasing humiliation.”¹⁵⁸

Although there is no direct analogue to the judge-penitent in *Notes From Underground*, the self-justifying antics of the Underground Man mirror Clamence’s in this respect.

Finally, it is important to restate the link between the spiritual disorder of Clamence, Stavrogin, and the Underground Man and broader problem of absurdity and nihilism. The internal confusion of these absurd figures corresponds to the cultural confusion wrought by nihilism. To understand their depravity is to understand to what extent, as Dostoevsky writes in *The House of the Dead*, society is “already contaminated to its foundations.”¹⁵⁹ In the texts above, absurdity has abolished absolutes; nihilism has rendered everything equivalent; and human beings have abandoned the “noble ideas” which bind them together. Hence Camus and Dostoevsky imbue their nihilists with the psychic traits shared (and exemplified) by Clamence and the Underground Man. Furthermore, Camus explores religious themes (exile, judgment, guilt, innocence) in *The Fall* in order to show how absurdity problematizes them anew. Dostoevsky preceded Camus’ efforts in this respect. His absurd characters (particularly the ones discussed above) demonstrate how nihilism disorients – and alienates – the modern psyche by delivering it over to solipsism; Dostoevsky merely helps to illuminate the political implications of this for Camus. When Camus sums up Dostoevsky’s central thesis as “The same paths that lead the individual to crime lead the society to revolution,” this is precisely what he has in mind.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ *Dark Feelings, Grim Thoughts*, p. 209.

¹⁵⁹ *The House of the Dead*, p. 242.

¹⁶⁰ *Notebooks 1951-1959*, p. 94.

Conclusion

To sum up, let us distill what Camus takes from Dostoevsky and Nietzsche at this stage, and try to situate it in the context of Camus' larger thought. In terms of the individual's relation to absurdity, it is Dostoevsky as psychologist that most influences Camus. Dostoevsky's insights into the nature of consciousness and the sources of estrangement pervade Camus' absurdist works. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus asks whether man can find meaning and value in an absurd world. Camus responds affirmatively, and even takes issue with Dostoevsky's leap into faith.¹⁶¹ However, beginning with *Caligula*, Camus appears to re-examine Dostoevsky's insights. In *Caligula*, the absurd problem is made manifest, men are deprived of transcendent meaning, and political nihilism is the result. This is Camus' most forceful depiction of Dostoevsky's link between metaphysical angst and nihilism (negation and crime). In *The Fall*, Camus' dialogue with Dostoevsky is more pronounced. Indeed, Camus applies Dostoevskian themes in a contemporary context, and appears to corroborate many of Dostoevsky's ideas. While Camus' full engagement with Dostoevsky cannot be understood without an analysis of Camus' revolt writings (the subject of the following chapter), the works above suggest that Camus began to reconsider some of his previous claims in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, particularly as it relates to the need for transcendence. Camus' depiction of modern ideology – its emptiness, its pseudo-humanitarianism, and its destruction of social harmony – in *The Fall* indicate at the very least that Camus was struggling to reconcile his absurd humanism with the bleak nihilistic vision of Dostoevsky.

¹⁶¹ Indeed, for this very reason, Camus refers to Dostoevsky as “an existential novelist,” not “an absurd novelist” (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 111).

Camus' interaction with Nietzsche in the above works is less extensive, but nonetheless important. As discussed previously, Nietzsche crystallizes Camus' early conceptions of reason and truth. This was evident in Camus' sensualist writings. In these texts, however, Nietzsche's metaphysics are applied in an absurd context, and the results are devastating.¹⁶² In the case of *Caligula*, Nietzsche's call to self-affirmation and freedom is carried to its logical extreme. Having confronted the absurd, Caligula's reaction is to mirror nature, "to be as cruel" as the Gods.¹⁶³ Indeed, Caligula is liberated by the absurd and, consequently, embraces "the power to enforce my will."¹⁶⁴ As I tried to show above, Caligula makes two mistakes. First, like Ivan Karamazov, he deduces the equivalency of things and accepts the absurd as the only rule of action. Second, he turns inward, severs his connection to others, and blindly exercises his will. For this reason, I read *Caligula* both as a critique of the implications of Nietzsche's metaphysics and as an affirmation of Dostoevsky's link between negation and crime.

In *The Fall*, Nietzsche's psychological insights are as significant as Dostoevsky's. Nietzsche's bad conscience, his will to power of the weak, and his *pathos* of guilt are all woven into Clamence's psyche. In terms of Camus' broader interaction with Nietzsche's ideas, *The Fall* suggests three things. First, that Camus continued to grapple with Nietzsche's ideas well beyond his sensualist writings. Second, that Camus located the pathologies identified by Nietzsche in the modern bourgeois culture, and that he believed they intensified in a climate marred by individualism and political realism. Finally, that

¹⁶² It is important to note that by practice I do not mean portrayed in such a way as to remain faithful to Nietzsche's own vision. Rather, it is to say that Nietzsche's fundamental insights are carried to their logical conclusion by Camus' absurd characters.

¹⁶³ *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, p. 14.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 13.

Nietzsche's philosophy, however insightful, was ethically problematic in Camus' view. In fact, Camus declared in 1946 that it was "time to start the critique of Nietzscheanism."¹⁶⁵ When Camus wrote these words to his mentor Grenier, it was with the historical consequences of Nietzsche's metaphysics in mind.¹⁶⁶ Hence as Camus develops his theory of revolt, Nietzsche remains an important influence, but Camus' orientation to Nietzsche's ideas shifts dramatically. Having endured the "cult of history and the will to power," as Camus calls it, it was necessary to confront Nietzsche and to transcend his thought without betraying its inmost truths.

So far we have seen how the absurd psyche struggles for unity and purpose in a world divested of transcendent meaning. But equally important is the means by which these struggles give way to ideology and dogmatism. In the following chapter I connect the personal pathologies identified above to the persistence of absolutism in modern life. Nietzsche's "will to truth," Dostoevsky's desire for a "sublime idea," and what Camus calls "the nostalgia for unity" all point to the same fundamental impulse for order. This impulse is laid bare by absurdity, and it is channeled in destructive ways in much of Camus' writings. Above I discussed these destructive tendencies at the level of the individual psyche. The next chapter demonstrates how totalizing ideologies emerge as false solutions to the ontological and epistemological problems posed by absurdity.

¹⁶⁵ Albert Camus and Jean Grenier, *Correspondence, 1932-1960*, trans. Jan F. Rigaud (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), p. 90.

¹⁶⁶ As noted in chapter one, Camus says explicitly in that letter that "I will use my essay on revolt to say that this cult of history and the will to power in which we live is both an insanity and a theoretical error" (*Correspondence*, p. 90).

CHAPTER FOUR

ABSURDITY AND THE APOTHEOSIS OF REASON

“The ideologies which guide our world were born in the time of absolute scientific discoveries. Our real knowledge, on the other hand, only justifies a system of thought based on relative discoveries.” – Camus

Following his early absurdist inquiries, Camus’ attention turned increasingly to the political sphere. This was due in part to his particular historical moment, but it was also because he sensed an important connection between nihilism, absurdity, and reason. More precisely, Camus thought reason emerged as a false and dangerous solution to the problem of absurdity. Indeed reason was co-opted in man’s essentially religious pursuit of totality. However, reason does not supplant the God impulse; it merely aids in the construction of ideologies that replace religious truths with ideological dogmas. For Camus, the use of such ideologies to justify crime and political terror was the defining problem of the twentieth century.

Camus engages Nietzsche and Dostoevsky continually as he wrestles with the metaphysical roots of ideologies. Nietzsche in particular illuminates the religious origins of ideology for Camus, and Camus more or less follows Nietzsche in his depiction of socialism as a “degenerate form of Christianity.”¹ Nietzsche’s influence can also be seen in Camus’ critique of Hegel, which amounts to an existential critique of rationalism. In Dostoevsky’s works, Camus discovers a vision of nihilism that prefigures the revolutionary excesses of his own epoch. In a 1959 interview, for instance, Camus identifies Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed* as “prophetic because of the nihilism that is now

¹ Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 69.

part of ideologies.”² In this text Camus encounters characters whose inner nihilism leaves them susceptible to the murderous logic of political realism. For this reason, Camus believed it was Dostoevsky who most anticipated the modern ideological manifestations of nihilism. In this chapter, I interpret Camus’ political thought against the backdrop of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. Camus’ resistance to reason, his metaphysical account of ideology, and his critiques of totalitarian regimes are seen as extensions and syntheses of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky’s thought.

Camus’ confrontation with absurdity begins in 1942, when *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger* are published. This is a pivotal point in Camus’ intellectual life. Having experienced the peculiar disorder of twentieth-century politics, Camus is increasingly concerned with the reality of nihilism. The abstract themes that pervade his earlier writings give way to a growing concern over the political implications of absurdity. Camus’ attitude is summed up well in a 1944 article he wrote for the resistance newspaper *Combat*:

We believe that the truth of this century cannot be discovered unless its tragedy is explored to the bitter end. If the age is afflicted with nihilism, it is not by ignoring nihilism that we will discover the morality we need. True, not everything can be summed up by the words ‘negation’ or ‘absurdity.’ We know this. But negation and absurdity must be posited as ideas because our generation has encountered them and we must learn to live with them.³

Whereas previously Camus sought responses (on an individual level) to nihilism and absurdity, now he wonders if it is possible to live peacefully and meaningfully in an age defined by them. So Nietzsche’s problematization of absurdity, initially a life-affirming

² Quote from a 1959 interview with Pierre Dumayet. This was one of several interviews Camus conducted prior to the opening of his theatrical adaptation of Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed*.

³ Albert Camus, *Camus at Combat*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 100.

revelation for Camus, is now both a metaphysical and a political crisis. Referring to the impetus for this crisis, Phillip Rhein writes that

Camus could say in 1943 that the only serious philosophical problem was the one of suicide; but confronted with the Hitler terror, the occupation, resistance, and final liberation of France, the Communist successes in France, and the events of the Cold War, he soon discovered that the stoic comfort offered by Sisyphus was of little solace or value. As early as 1943 and 1944, although still enmeshed in the theory of the absurd, Camus began . . . a search for some way to transcend the nihilism of his early writings.⁴

This shift in Camus' philosophical and political attitude is evident in his notebooks and in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In these texts Camus searches for value and meaning in an explicitly absurd context. This is particularly true in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where the guiding question is whether absurdity devalues life. Camus begins, however, by asking whether life has (or can have) value for the individual absurd man: "The fundamental subject of *The Myth of Sisyphus* is this: it is legitimate and necessary to wonder whether life has a meaning; therefore it is legitimate to meet the problem of suicide face to face."⁵ Camus seeks to justify the individual's life without sacrificing or denying the absurd. In this pursuit, and yet again, Camus draws heavily on Nietzsche. After quoting a lengthy Nietzsche passage from Nietzsche's *The Twilight of the Idols*, Camus writes that Nietzsche effectively "points the way of the absurd man."⁶ Here Camus is referring to Nietzsche's emphasis on man's creative possibilities; "art, music, dance, reason" and "the mind" are all listed as potential sources of meaning.

Art becomes central to Camus' absurdism for two reasons. First, it is only through art that an absurd world can be made meaningful. Second, art adds aesthetic

⁴ Phillip H. Rein, *Albert Camus* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1969), p. 80.

⁵ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1991), p. v.

⁶ Ibid, p. 64.

value to life without dogmatically reducing reality or pretending to ultimate knowledge of things. Camus' embrace of art also reflects a key point in his transition from sensualism to absurdity. In many ways, sensualism is the posture of the artist; that is, the artist does not define the world so much as experience and transfigure it. If anything, the artist uses myth and symbolisms to communicate experiential truths. As Camus engages the absurdist stance, then, art becomes an invaluable source of meaning. Indeed absurdism is rescued by his sensualism.

Perhaps the most significant convergence between Camus and Nietzsche in *The Myth of Sisyphus* concerns the epistemological implications of absurdity. This can be seen in Camus' attempt to delineate the limits of knowledge in absurdist terms. Here Camus makes considerable use of Nietzsche's perspectivism. However, to illustrate this requires that we first examine Nietzsche's perspectival account of truth. For Nietzsche, truth is a product of man's desire for coherence and fixity. A living and thinking thing requires a horizon, he claims, and if "it is unable to draw one around itself . . . it will come to an untimely end."⁷ Understood in this way, truth is an existential ground, an indispensable fiction that serves life. Truth, however, remains an anthropomorphic projection; it is always an interpretation of things.⁸ Hence Nietzsche considers truth a kind of error that emerges out of the need for intelligibility. Without truth, the ability to order the world and to pass definitive judgment would be greatly diminished. "We can

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. Anthony Ludovici and Adrian Collins (New York: Digireads, 2009), p. 101.

⁸ In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche makes this point with regard to all knowledge: "Of what alone can knowledge consist? – Interpretation, the introduction of a sense into things, not explanation . . . There is no such thing as an established fact, everything fluctuates, everything is intangible, yielding; after all, the most lasting of all things are our opinions" (351).

only take cognizance,” Nietzsche writes, “of a world which we ourselves have made.”⁹ Nietzsche points to the utilitarian function of truth in order to refute the notion that a thing or proposition is true insofar as it corresponds to reality. Instead, by exposing truth as a human contrivance, he can argue that things are *considered* true in virtue of their utility to life itself.

Nietzsche hoped to undermine the conventional sense in which truth is understood. Truth typically implies objectivity or certainty. But this erroneously assumes that truth is independent of human volition.¹⁰ Even science, our most reliable instrument of knowledge, fails to meet this standard. “How is it possible for an instrument to criticize itself,” Nietzsche asks, “when it is itself that exercises the critical faculty?”¹¹ This is not to say that knowledge is impossible or that all truth claims are equivalent; rather, the point is that science relies upon certain constructs and presuppositions that are themselves determined by practical human needs.¹² The same is true of reason. Man uses reason as a conceptual tool in order to differentiate phenomena; in this way, it helps to conceal the chaos of nature. But reason does not produce a dispassionate account of reality; on the contrary, it bears the stamp of its human origins.

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Anthony Ludovici (New York: Barnes and Noble Publishing, 2006), p. 290.

¹⁰ Maudemarie Clark has emphasized why Nietzsche’s metaphysics does not permit such a conception of truth. Nietzsche, she writes, maintains that “once we get rid of the thing-in-itself, we lose all basis for regarding objectivity as the transcendence of subjective factors. If we recognize the perspectival character of knowledge, our only alternative is to think of objectivity as openness to perspectives other than our own” (1990, p. 148).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

¹² As an example of this, Nietzsche points to the assumed distinction between appearance and reality. “We have no categories,” he says, “which allow us to separate a world as thing-in-itself from a world of appearance” (*The Will to Power*, p. 287). There are several other constructs to which Nietzsche points as well, including subject, ego, object, being, thingness, essence, causality, etc. He claims, moreover, that it was “artists in abstraction who created these categories” (*Ibid.*).

“The world appears to us logical,” Nietzsche says, “because *we* first *logicized* it.”¹³

Reason is quite literally, then, a metaphysical illusion; by allowing man to interpret the world as reasonable, it possibilizes truth and imposes sense – but that is all it does.¹⁴

Nietzsche tries constantly to expose this aspect of truth and to identify its origins in the human psyche.

Despite his epistemological critique, Nietzsche does not deny the utility of truth. Instead he emphasizes the consequences of grounding truth outside experience. The need to place truth above the flux of experience has produced a host of suprasensory grounds (God or History, for instance); this is problematic inasmuch as it obscures the creative origins of human values.¹⁵ In fact, Nietzsche attributes the rise of nihilism to this mass obfuscation. As faith in God began to recede in the eighteenth century, the metaphysical justifications of values collapsed. It was apparent to Nietzsche that “the highest values” were “losing their value.”¹⁶ Recognizing the moral implications of this, Nietzsche writes in *The Gay Science*:

Whither is God?’ he cried; ‘I will tell you. We have killed him – you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Who will wipe this blood off us? What

¹³ Nietzsche quoted in Arthur Danto’s *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (1965, p. 89).

¹⁴ Arthur Danto sums up Nietzsche’s claim quite well in his analysis: “He [Nietzsche] means only that reason has application to the surface of things, of ourselves and of reality, and that the highest paradigms of reason are only fantastic edifices sprung forth, insubstantial and unanchored, from the forming imagination of men” (1965, 128).

¹⁵ In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes “how much must collapse now that this faith has been undermined because it was built upon this faith, propped up by it, grown into it; for example, the whole of our European morality” (279).

¹⁶ *The Will to Power*, p. 3.

water is there for us to clean ourselves? Is not the greatness of this deed to great for us?¹⁷

Considering his view of nihilism, it is unsurprising that Nietzsche's philosophy is largely an attack on truth as such. Nietzsche was responding to the emergent positivist model, which associated truth with empiricism. Much of his metaphysics, in fact, is a refutation of positivism. In *The Will to Power*, for example, Nietzsche speaks to the error in divorcing truth from the interpreting subject. "In opposition to positivism, which halts at phenomena and says, these are only facts and nothing more, I would say: No facts are precisely lacking, all that exists consists of interpretations. We cannot establish any fact in itself."¹⁸ That we cannot establish a fact in itself means that knowledge is necessarily nonfoundational. A particular belief may be true or false, but it must perforce rest on relative foundations.¹⁹ Nietzsche's broader point is that truths are incommensurable insofar as they can only be judged relative to a perspective.²⁰ This is consistent with Nietzsche's belief that human beings adopt a conceptual scheme by default in order to make sense of the world. Whether this scheme is scientific, religious, or ideological, it begins fundamentally with a choice. Nietzsche insists that this choice is permeated by

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 181.

¹⁸ *The Will to Power*, p. 284.

¹⁹ Maudemarie Clark illustrates Nietzsche's point concerning the impossibility facts in themselves well: "I therefore interpret Nietzsche's metaphor of perspective as designed to help us avoid the snares of the idea that we can have knowledge of things as they are in themselves. To call nonperspectival knowing an absurdity and a nonsense invites us to think of knowing things-in-themselves as equivalent to the recognizably absurd idea of seeing things from no perspective" (1990, p. 132).

²⁰ This interpretation of perspectivism is rather common among Nietzsche scholars. Arthur Danto, for example, writes that "We cannot speak of a true perspective, but only of the perspective that prevails. Because we cannot appeal to any fact independently of its relation to the perspective it is meant to support" (1980, p. 77). Alexander Nehamas similarly argues that Nietzsche's perspectivist doctrine precludes the possibility of a "privileged perspective" (1985, p. 49).

valuations. “It is our needs,” he writes, “that interpret the world; our instincts and impulses for and against.”²¹ In every conceivable case, then, it is this original impulse that determines truth and falsity, not the physical world. Maudemarie Clark explains this aspect of Nietzsche’s perspectivism by noting that perspectives can be seen as “non-competitors, as offering answers to different questions, in accord with different standards of acceptability.”²² Clark’s point here illustrates what Nietzsche means when he speaks of truth as utilitarian. We choose an interpretive scheme or a perspective on the basis of our prejudices and preferences. Because the standards of that scheme will determine what we accept as true, truth effectively helps us to get what we antecedently preferred. It is in this sense that Nietzsche believes truth claims are reducible to “value judgments.”²³

Nietzsche’s perspectivism informed much of Camus’ absurdist thought. Indeed Camus’ essay on absurdism takes Nietzsche’s epistemology as a point of departure. Consider Camus’ assertion in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that “In psychology as in logic, there are truths but not truth.”²⁴ Camus’ point here is essentially Nietzschean. At bottom he accepts the view that a permanent divide separates the thinker from the object of thought. For this reason, Camus advocates the use of critical reason, but he objects to the sort of uncritical rationalism which assumes that complete knowledge of the world is possible. Indeed, in this way, Camus embodies what Karl Popper called “pragmatic rationalism.”²⁵

²¹ Ibid.

²² Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 143.

²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 3.

²⁴ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p.19.

²⁵ Popper, Karl. *The Open Society and its Enemies* (London: Routledge, 1977), p. 357.

Ultimately, Camus adopts Nietzsche's anti-essentialism and regards all knowledge as construction.²⁶ Science, philosophy, art, all of these activities represent the world; they do not apprehend it. Camus also appears to borrow Nietzsche's conception of truth as metaphor. Camus, for instance, describes the limits of science thus:

All this is good and I wait for you to continue. But you tell me of an invisible planetary system in which electrons gravitate around a nucleus. You explain this world to me with an image. I realize then that you have been reduced to poetry: I shall never know. Have I the time to become indignant? You have already changed theories. So that science that was to teach me everything ends up in a hypothesis, that lucidity founders in metaphor, that uncertainty is resolved in a work of art . . . I realize that if through science I can seize phenomena and enumerate them, I cannot, for all that, apprehend the world.²⁷

In his essay *On Truth and Untruth*, Nietzsche similarly reduces truth to anthropomorphisms and metaphors.²⁸ The overlap here is worth noting as it highlights the shared basis of Camus and Nietzsche's epistemological skepticism.

Eventually, Nietzsche's perspectivism becomes politically problematic to Camus. As the later Camus (primarily in *The Rebel*) deals with responses to absurdity at both the individual and the collective level, Nietzsche's insight into the perspectival nature of truth helps to clarify Camus' early understanding of modern absolutism; specifically, Camus views ideologies as disguised manifestations of this Nietzschean will to truth.

Camus hints at this in *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

The tradition of what may be called humiliated thought has never ceased to exist. The criticism of rationalism has been made so often that it seems unnecessary to begin again. Yet our epoch is marked by the rebirth of those paradoxical systems that strive to trip up the reason as if truly it had

²⁶ "This heart within me I can feel," Camus writes, "and I judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction" (18).

²⁷ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 20.

²⁸ All truth, Nietzsche writes, is but "a sum of human relations that have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, translated and embellished" (*On Truth and Untruth*, p. 29).

always forged ahead. But that is not so much a proof of the efficacy of the reason as of the intensity of its hopes.²⁹

The emphasis on “the intensity of its hopes” seems especially important. The language Camus uses here is reminiscent of Nietzsche, who often spoke of the will to truth as a manifestation of the human desire for metaphysical solace. In the political realm, Camus believed this desire produced a distinctly ideological brand of politics. People cling to ideological systems, he suggests, because ideologies appeal to their thirst for clarity. “That nostalgia for unity” and “that appetite for the absolute,” he writes, “illustrates the essential impulse of the human drama.”³⁰ Politically, then, Nietzsche’s perspectivism has two important implications. On the one hand, it abolishes absolutes. By their very nature, truth claims are interested. Nietzsche is not so much denying certainty as the notion that beliefs can rest on absolute, epistemologically pure foundations. Consequently, there can be no privileged account of reality over and above all others. However, because the impulse for certainty persists, people continue to order the world in accordance with ideological narratives. Further, ideologies concretize truths that are based not on common experience but on particular perspectives. This undermines any experiential basis for shared values and, worse still, it devalues the present by justifying action in terms of the future.³¹ It is therefore Nietzsche’s problematization of truth that crystallizes Camus’ account of the moral and political perils of absurdity.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 22.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 17.

³¹ As I will explore in subsequent chapters, this concern is at the center of Camus’ critique of teleological ideologies in *The Rebel*. Camus claims that ideologies are indispensable to the means-end logic of political realism, which sacrifice the present in the hope of future salvation.

Dostoevsky and Reason

In Dostoevsky's fiction the failure to acknowledge the limits of reason is a central theme. Indeed Dostoevsky's most logical characters often descend into debauchery or give themselves over to nihilism. This motif pervades much of Camus' work as well. His characters are constantly ensnared by contradictions from which they cannot escape. In this way, intelligence becomes a kind of pathology in the works of Dostoevsky and Camus. But the implications of this pathology extend well beyond the individual. Establishing this point of convergence is necessary before pivoting to the political consequences of a society grounded entirely on reason.

In 1922 Andre Gide, a French author whom Camus read and admired, delivered a series of lectures on Dostoevsky. One of Gide's theses is that Dostoevsky juxtaposes love not with hate but with excessive mindfulness.³² Dostoevsky's intent, Gide claims, was to show that "it is the intellect which individualizes, which is the enemy of the Kingdom of Heaven."³³ Gide's interpretation is persuasive, as Dostoevsky continually contrasts intelligence with self-dissolution. Indeed many of Dostoevsky's intellectuals are unable to love because they fail to find reasons for it. Stavrogin, for example, wants to believe – in goodness, in life, in others – but cannot will himself to do it.³⁴ As he confesses in a final letter, "I lack greatness of soul . . . because I can never lose my

³² Gide writes: "Dostoevsky never deliberately states, although he often insinuates, that the antithesis of love is less hate than the steady activity of the mind" (1926, 146).

³³ Andre Gide, *Dostoevsky*, trans. Arnold Bennett (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), p. 146.

³⁴ Near the end of *The Possessed*, Stavrogin questions the strength of Tihon's faith. Tihon responds by readily acknowledging that his "faith is imperfect" (697). But then he suggests to Stavrogin that his problem is not that he does not believe; it is that he "wishes to believe" (698) but is unable to. Stavrogin never refutes this assertion by Tihon.

reason, and I can never *believe* in an idea.”³⁵ Kirilov of *The Possessed* is similarly undermined by his intellect. Without God, Kirilov is consumed by the problem of freedom. Logic convinces him of God’s non-existence but his intellect demands reasons for living. What Kirilov ultimately craves, Dostoevsky implies, is faith. Thus, as Maurice Friedman notes, Kirilov’s intellectual “denial of God conceals the most desperate need of him.”³⁶ Kirilov is forced to unbelief by his intellect, which refuses to accept what it knows to be untrue. In the end, as Stavrogin says, Kirilov “could not compromise with an idea.”³⁷ Unable to live, he kills himself as an example for others:

I am bound to show my unbelief . . . I have no higher idea than disbelief in God. I have all this history of mankind on my side. Man has done nothing but invent God so as to go on living, and not kill himself; that’s the whole universal history up till now. I am the first one in whole history of mankind who would not invent God. Let them know it once for all.³⁸

In *The Brothers Karamazov* Ivan’s brother, Dmitri, is likewise tortured by doubt. Dmitri tries to live a sensual life, but he is increasingly overwhelmed as he is confronted with various materialist notions.³⁹ Finally, he succumbs to doubt and confesses to Alyosha that

I never had any of these doubts before, but it was all hidden away in me. It was perhaps just because ideas I did not understand were surging up in me that I used to drink and fight and rage. It was to stifle them in myself, to still them, to smother them . . . It’s God that’s worrying me. That’s the only thing that’s worrying me. What if He doesn’t exist? What if Rakitin’s right – that it’s an idea made up by men? . . . For whom is man going to love then? To whom will he be thankful? . . . After all, what is

³⁵ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), p. 686.

³⁶ Maurice Friedman, *Problematic Rebel* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 187.

³⁷ *The Possessed*, p. 686.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 628.

³⁹ Despite the wonder he finds in the ascendant sciences, he admits to Alyosha that “I am sorry to lose God! It’s chemistry, brother, chemistry! There’s no help for it, your reverence, you must make way for chemistry” (625).

goodness? . . . Goodness is one thing with me and another with a Chinaman, so it's a relative thing. Or isn't it? Is it not relative thing? A treacherous question! You won't laugh if I tell you it's kept awake for two nights.⁴⁰

Dmitri's tranquility is ruined by exposure to European ideas that erode his belief in God. Gradually his natural contentment gives way to endless questions about the relativity of values. "Goodness is one thing with me and another with a Chinaman, so it's a relative thing? Or is it? . . . You won't laugh if I tell you it's kept me awake two nights."⁴¹ As a result of their disbelief, then, Kirilov and Dmitri are unable to transcend themselves. Kirilov obsesses over the problem of self-will without God and Dmitri agonizes over the loss of transcendent standards. In both cases, though, the fixation on ideas and foundations leads first to doubt and then to solipsistic despair.

This pathological aspect of reason is perhaps best seen in the figure of Ivan Karamazov. Ivan's metaphysical rebellion is itself a product of critical reason, and the nihilism to which it leads is instructive. For one, it illustrates the inability of reason to definitively justify value claims. Ivan, it is important to remember, assents to nihilism for the sake of intellectual coherence. As Robert Louis Jackson notes, Ivan "is a victim, finally, of the fatal logic of his position: believing absolutely in the concrete, as it were, day-to-day interdependence of virtue and faith but lacking personal belief in immortality, he arrives at the intellectual position that all is permissible."⁴² That Ivan's conclusion is a rational outcome of his materialist premise is confirmed by Dmitri: "Excuse me . . . have

⁴⁰ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Randomhouse, 1996), p. 628.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 629.

⁴² Robert Louis Jackson, *Dialogues with Dostoevsky* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 296.

I heard things right? ‘Villainy must not only be permitted but even recognized as the inevitable and even rational outcome of his position for every atheist’!”⁴³

In addition to exposing the justificatory limits of reason, Ivan’s dilemma also emphasizes the need for self-transcendence. Ivan cannot transcend himself because he remains hostage to his intellect. His desire for intellectual consistency condemns him to the either-or logic of nihilism. “Caught between unjustifiable virtue and unacceptable crime,” Camus writes, “this man of supreme intelligence is killed by contradiction.”⁴⁴ Unable to reason his way to God or virtue, Ivan abandons morality altogether. “All I know,” he concludes, “is that there is suffering and that there are none guilty; that cause follows effect, simply and directly; that everything flows and finds its level – but that’s only Euclidean nonsense, I know that, and I can’t consent to live by it.”⁴⁵ As evident here, Ivan vainly searches for a rational response to suffering. He talks incessantly of God, but fails to understand him because he talks (and thinks) only in the language of logic. In a crucial exchange in Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*, Prince Muishkin clarifies Ivan’s failure: “The essence of religious feeling has nothing to do with reason, or atheism, or crime, or acts of any kind – it has nothing to do with these things – and never had. There is something besides all this, something which the arguments of the atheists can never touch.”⁴⁶ For Dostoevsky, then, faith is beyond reason. Indeed a key theme of *The Idiot* is the folly of trying to justify one’s faith in terms of reason. Muishkin appears most idiotic, in fact, when attempting to communicate his religious beliefs in non-religious

⁴³ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 630.

⁴⁴ *The Rebel*, p. 59.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 252.

⁴⁶ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Richard Pevear (New York: Random House, Inc, 2001), p. 211.

terms. As Robin Feuer Miller rightly notes in her study of Dostoevsky, “The atheist cannot talk about God because his atheism is caused by his rational response to evil and to injustice, while faith exists as an instinctual response. The two spheres do not intersect.”⁴⁷ The final result of Ivan’s rebellion is thus defiant resignation.

Camus was also concerned with the tendency of intelligence (consciousness) to overwhelm the individual. As mentioned, this is particularly true of Camus’ Caligula.⁴⁸ In Dostoevsky’s works, however, reason (divorced from faith) is more than a source of individuation; it is also destructive of man’s spiritual health. The evolution of Camus’ political thought suggests that this aspect of Dostoevsky was deeply influential. Of course, as discussed in chapter one, Nietzsche is important to Camus for similar reasons, but Dostoevsky explores this theme from a uniquely religious perspective. Dostoevsky’s novels are full of faithless believers who reject God but persist in their rational search for solidarity and love. Insofar as Dostoevsky connects the religious impulse to modernity’s faith in reason, his insights converge with Nietzsche’s. Dostoevsky and Nietzsche are thus concerned with essentially the same phenomenon; they merely interpret it in different terms. Dostoevsky condemns reason in order to emphasize the fundamentally irrational nature of man, however. His atheists are instructive because, like Camus, they are not atheists in the strictest sense.⁴⁹ Their atheism, as Jackson argues, “is not so much

⁴⁷ *Dostoevsky and The Idiot*, p. 187.

⁴⁸ Caligula, for example, is dominated by his desire to make the world intelligible. “I have resolved to be logical,” he declares, “I shall eliminate contradictions and contradictors” (13).

⁴⁹ Camus refused to self-identify as an atheist. In his notebooks, for instance, he writes that “I often read that I am atheistic; I hear people speak of my atheism. Yet these words say nothing to me; for me they have no meaning. I do not believe in God and I am not an atheist” (*Notebooks 1951-1959*, p. 112).

an ideology as a state of behavior or consciousness.”⁵⁰ For Dostoevsky, to be wholly logical is to be at odds with one’s own nature. As his characters confront the limits of reason, therefore, they become internally divided; they deny what Dostoevsky calls “the source of living life” in his novel *The Adolescent*.⁵¹

Despite their divergent perspectives, however, the political implications of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky’s insights into human nature, faith and reason are remarkably similar. For Camus they were indeed prophetic, particularly as it relates to ideology and the development of reason. This was evident to Camus at both the individual and the collective level. In terms of the individual, there remains a persistent inability to accept absurdity, to affirm life (and meaning) in relativistic terms. For those who do not sink into negation – as Caligula, Stavrogin, Clamence, and Ivan do – this results either in the exaltation of reason or in a destructive mania for certainty. In his short story *The Renegade*, Camus explores the pathological need for certainty in a pseudo-religious context. The protagonist of *The Renegade* is a missionary who has traveled to Africa in search of converts. The renegade is a quintessentially modern man. He is passionate but inauthentic, and his existential insecurity is apparent in his need to proselytize:

I shook my pig-head and repeated the same thing, to get among the most barbarous and live as they did, to show them at home, and even in the House of the Fetish, through example, that my Lord’s truth would prevail . . . I dreamed of absolute power, the kind that makes people kneel down, that forces the adversary to capitulate, converts him in short, and the blinder, the crueller he is, the more he’s sure of himself, mired in his own conviction, the more his consent establishes the royalty of whoever brought about his collapse.⁵²

⁵⁰ *Dialogues with Dostoevsky*, p. 299.

⁵¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Adolescent*, trans. Andrew MacAndrew (New York: Doubleday, 1971), p. 227.

⁵² Albert Camus, *Exile and the Kingdom*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), p. 39.

The renegade represents the worst instincts of the absolutist man. He seeks converts not because of the truth (or utility) of his doctrine but because of the consolation he derives from being right. His beliefs are surface-level props, designed to justify action and the worldview on which those actions are based.⁵³ The renegade is problematic in a modern context because his thirst for meaning is not satisfied by reason alone. Initially he tries to reduce the world to oppositional categories such as good and evil. However, his self-serving Manichaeism is upended as a result of his confrontation with the native Africans, whose fidelity to force awakens him to the truth of things:

I had been misled, solely the reign of malice was devoid of defects, I had been misled, truth is square, heavy, thick, it does not admit distinctions, good is an idle dream, an intention constantly postponed and pursued with exhausting effort, a limit never reached, its reign is impossible. Only evil can reach its limits and reign absolutely, it must be served to establish its visible kingdom.⁵⁴

Here the renegade recognizes the contingency of human judgments, and consequently accepts force as the sole arbiter of truth. If there is no God, there is no binding idea, no standard for good and evil beyond the realm of man. Reason is thus revealed as a tool, capable of guiding action but not of grounding it. This is the beginning of what Camus refers to as political realism; it is the individual's realization that the "reign of truth" can only be established on the plane of force.

In a world ruled by force, truth is the province of the strong. Ideologies, shrouded in reason, define the world in absolutist terms and, in this sense, instantiate a particular view of "truth." However, if they are to be binding, these ideological worldviews must be accepted by others or, if necessary, imposed. Hence in *The Fall* Camus associates

⁵³ In this respect the renegade is reminiscent of the shallow religious man Nietzsche identifies in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Such a man, Nietzsche writes, uses "principles to tyrannize or justify or honor or affront or conceal" (75) his habits.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 54.

ideologies with the suppression of alternative views. What was once “This is the way I think. What are your objections?” has become “This is the truth . . . You can discuss it as much as you want; we aren’t interested. But in a few years there’ll be the police who will show you we are right.”⁵⁵ At the collective level, then, the existential impulse identified by Dostoevsky and Nietzsche results in sweeping ideologies, which exalt reason, eschew epistemological limits, and construct (and defend) fixed interpretations of reality. The consequence of this is a world defined increasingly by totalizing (and irreconcilable) systems.

Ideology and Logical Crime

Camus and Dostoevsky’s critique of ideologies led to a mutual concern with the relationship between reason, ideology and violence. Indeed the most enduring political concern of both writers was the collapse of foundations and the concomitant justification of crime. Camus begins *The Rebel*, for instance, with the following observation:

There are crimes of passion and crimes of logic. The boundary between them is not clearly defined . . . We are living in the era of premeditation and the perfect crime. Our criminals are no longer helpless children who could plead love as their excuse. On the contrary, they are adults and they have a perfect alibi: philosophy, which can be used for any purpose – even for transforming murderers into judges.⁵⁶

The purpose of *The Rebel* was thus to try to understand logical crime and “to examine meticulously the arguments by which it is justified.”⁵⁷ Ideologies are central to Camus’ analysis because they typically supply the theoretical justification for murder.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Albert Camus, *The Fall*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 45.

⁵⁶ *The Rebel*, p. 3.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ In his study of Camus, Jeffrey Isaac (1992) summarizes Camus’ view of the justificatory power of ideology quite well: “Ideology . . . offers comfort and consolation,

Dostoevsky was similarly concerned with the antecedent causes of logical crime. Indeed, in a rejoinder to critics, Dostoevsky wrote that his intent in *The Possessed* was to understand “how, in our contemporaneous, transitional and peculiar society, are the Nechayevs, not Nechayev himself, made possible?”⁵⁹ Here Dostoevsky is referring to the anarchist on which *The Possessed* is based. Dostoevsky’s aim in *The Possessed*, then, was the same as Camus’ in *The Rebel*: to understand how ordinary men are able to take part in the most extraordinary crimes.

On Dostoevsky’s view, eighteenth century Russia was “contaminated” by the influx of various socialist doctrines.⁶⁰ Among the most pernicious was the belief in the progressive power of reason, which supported the Russian mind’s mania for meaningful action. Under the sway of “European progressives,” Dostoevsky argued, socialism emerged as a corrective to Christianity, a modern means to universal harmony.⁶¹ He attributed the rise of political crime, in fact, to a belief in the purifying power of these ideas:

In my novel *The Possessed* I made the attempt to depict the manifold and heterogeneous motives which may prompt even the purest of heart and the naïve of people to take part in the perpetration of so monstrous a villainy. The horror lies precisely in the fact that in our midst the filthiest and most villainous act may be committed by one who is not a villain at all! . . . This

rationalizing criminality and effacing any reliable boundary between innocence and guilt” (56).

⁵⁹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Diary of a Writer*, trans. Boris Brasol (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1949), p. 142.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 148.

⁶¹ Dostoevsky contends that “All these convictions about the immorality of the very foundations (Christian) of modern society, the immorality of religion, family, right of property; all these ideas about the elimination of nationalities in the name of universal brotherhood of men, about the contempt for one’s native country, as an obstacle to universal progress . . . all these constituted such influences as we were unable to overcome and which, contrariwise, swayed our hearts and minds the name of some magnanimity” (148-49).

is the most pathological and saddest trait our present time – the possibility of considering oneself not as a villain, and sometimes almost not being one, while perpetrating a patent and incontestable villainy - therein is our present-day calamity!⁶²

Here Dostoevsky prefigures Camus' argument about the capacity of ideology to imbue action with a sense of justice.⁶³ Dostoevsky also points to specific European thinkers – Mill and Darwin, for instance – as emblematic of the modern devotion to reason, utility, and empiricism. In their pursuit of political perfection, these thinkers declared everything sacred false and outdated.⁶⁴ They were united, moreover, by a fidelity to logic without transcendent foundations. For Dostoevsky, this meant a love of theoretical truth but a complete indifference to truths of experience. Hence there was a willingness to follow the dictates of reason without regard for social consequences. This was the essence of political nihilism for Dostoevsky.

Dostoevsky's account of logical crime informs much of Camus' political thought. In *The Rebel*, for example, such Dostoevskyan themes pervade Camus' analysis of Marxism. There particular attention is paid to the use of logic in the justification of

⁶² *Diary of a Writer*, p. 149.

⁶³ For example, Camus argues in a 1944 *Combat* article that “today many yearn for a socialist politics because it gives their burning desire for justice a concrete form” (*Camus at Combat*, p. 122).

⁶⁴ “I may be told,” Dostoevsky declares, “that these gentlemen do not in any manner teach villainy; that if Strauss, for example, hates Christ and made it the business of his whole life to spit upon and scoff at Christianity, he nevertheless adores humankind as a whole, and his teaching is as lofty and as noble as it can be. It is very possible that all this is true, and that the aims of all modern leaders of European progressive thought are philanthropic and grand. Still I firmly believe that if all these modern, sublime teachers be given ample opportunity to destroy the old society and to build it up anew, there would result such a darkness, such chaos, something so coarse, so blind, so inhuman, that the entire edifice would crumble away to the accompaniment of the maledictions of mankind, even before it would finally have been constructed” (*Diary of a Writer*, pp. 150-51).

violence. When describing the “All or Nothing” mentality of historical rebels, for instance, Camus writes

Just as the movement of rebellion led to the point of ‘All or Nothing’ and just as metaphysical rebellion demanded the unity of the world, the twentieth century revolutionary movements, when it arrived at the most obvious conclusions of its logic, insisted with threats of force on arrogating to itself the whole of history . . . Now that God is dead, the world must be changed and organized by the forces at man’s disposal.⁶⁵

In *The Possessed* Dostoevsky expresses this attitude through the character Chigalev.

Chigalev is the learned rebel who reasons his way to a perfectly harmonious society.

Believing he has solved the problem of freedom and equality, he announces his findings to the group:

Dedicating my energies to the study of the social organization which is in the future to replace the present condition of man, I’ve come to the conviction that all makers of social systems from ancient times up to the present year . . . have been dreamers, tellers of fairy-tales, fools who contradicted themselves, who understood nothing of natural science and the strange animal called man . . . But, now that we are all at last preparing to act, a new form of social organization is essential. In order to avoid further uncertainty, I propose my own system of world-organization.⁶⁶

Chigalev’s “system” is finally embraced on account of its logical consistency. But its methods sacrifice present experience entirely. Like the historical rebels Camus condemns in *The Rebel*, Chigalev is obliged to act in the name of a hope. His actions are directed toward the future, toward the realization of some obscure freedom. As suggested above, denial of the present is a recurring theme in both *The Possessed* and *The Rebel*. To take one example from *The Possessed*, there is a young socialist, Yulia, who is pathologically fixated on the future. “The public must understand,” she demands, “that the attainment of an object of universal human interest is infinitely loftier than the

⁶⁵ *The Rebel*, p. 107.

⁶⁶ *The Possessed*, p. 409.

corporeal enjoyments of the passing moment.”⁶⁷ Camus thought such utopian aspirations fundamental to modern revolutionary ideologies. Marx, he claims, “was obliged to speak in the future tense and in the abstract. Thus it is not astonishing that he could blend in his doctrine the most valid critical method . . . with a utopian messianism.”⁶⁸ For men deprived of God, the future was the only transcendental value.⁶⁹

Against the backdrop of their political thought, then, Camus and Dostoevsky’s resistance to scientism is much clearer. Translated to the political realm, the methods of science – reason, empiricism, and logic – become extensions of the will to mastery. For Camus this was particularly manifest in Nazism. Here science serves as a cover for various irrational impulses. “The systematic and scientific aspect of the Nazi movement,” he claims, “hides an irrational drive that can only be interpreted as a drive of despair and arrogance.”⁷⁰ In this way, Nazism illustrates the consequences of divorcing science and technology from a transcendent or external value system.⁷¹ It also connects Dostoevsky’s philosophical anthropology to Camus’ political thought; that is to say,

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 473.

⁶⁸ *The Rebel*, p. 188.

⁶⁹ In *The Rebel*, Camus makes this claim with respect to historical rebellion: “Until then, those who to die put themselves in the hand of God in defiance of the justice of man. But on reading the declarations of the condemned victims of that period, we are amazed to see that all, without exception, entrusted themselves, in defiance of their judges, to the justice of other men who were not yet born. These men of the future remained, in the absence of supreme values, their last recourse. The future is the only transcendental value for men without God” (166).

⁷⁰ *The Rebel*, p. 184.

⁷¹ In the concluding chapter of *The Rebel*, Camus again emphasizes the consequences of this development: “Science today betrays its origins and denies its own acquisitions in allowing itself to be put in the service of State terrorism and the desire for power. Its punishment and its degradation lie in only being able to produce, in an abstract world, the means of destruction and enslavement. But when the limit is reached, science will perhaps serve the individual rebellion. This terrible necessity will mark the decisive turning-point” (295).

Nazism imbues the negation of nihilism with the individual's passion for higher meaning in a terrifyingly stark way. And this is precisely the vision of nihilism foreshadowed in Dostoevsky's works. When Camus writes, therefore, that Dostoevsky's characters "prefigure our nihilism," this is likely what he had in mind.

In his study of totalitarianism, Camus asks why modern revolutions tend to betray in action what they affirm in theory. Communism, for example, begins with noble aspirations of delivering all men from bondage, but ends nevertheless by enslaving them all. It was essential for Camus to understand how rebellion reached this point of extreme contradiction. He begins by understanding it as a function of the absolutist quest itself. The pursuit of absolute freedom, for instance, collapses into contradiction because such freedom is possible only through totalitarian means; that is, through absolute negation. Thus Camus argues that "complete freedom can only exist and justify itself by the creation of new values identified with the entire human race . . . The shortest route to these new standards passes by way of total dictatorship."⁷²

Camus' admonitions concerning absolutist pursuits are forcefully anticipated in Dostoevsky's works, particularly *The Possessed* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. Indeed in *The Rebel* Camus devotes an entire section to the legacy of Chigalev, whose system he compares to the totalitarian defenders of State terrorism in the twentieth century.⁷³ For Camus, it is the "implacable" nature of Chigalev's mind that marks him as a precursor to modern revolutionaries. The premise of Chigalev's system, for example, is unlimited freedom. "I am perplexed by my own data," he says, "and my conclusion is a direct contradiction of the original idea with which I started. Starting from unlimited freedom, I

⁷² Ibid, p. 175.

⁷³ See *The Rebel*, p. 175.

arrive at unlimited despotism.”⁷⁴ According to Chigalev, a scientific account of man shows that “that there can be no solution of the social problem but mine.”⁷⁵ This same theme is expressed in *The Brothers Karamazov* through the Grand Inquisitor. Here, however, slavery is offered as a gift to mankind. The uncertainty of freedom is replaced by the stability of slavery. Like Chigalev, the Inquisitor’s arguments are rooted in a purely objective view of human nature. To stifle doubt, he claims, men have

Set up gods and challenged one another, “Put away your gods and come and worship ours, or we will kill you and your gods!” And so it will be to the end of the world, even when gods disappear from the earth; they will fall down before idols just the same. Thou didst know, Thou couldst not but have known, this fundamental secret of nature, but Thou didst reject the one infallible banner which was offered Thee to make all men bow down to Thee alone – the banner of earthly bread; and Thou hast rejected it for the sake of freedom and the bread of Heaven. Behold what Thou didst further. And all again in the name of freedom! I tell Thee that man is tormented by no greater anxiety than to find someone quick to whom he can hand over that gift of freedom with which the ill-fated creature is born.⁷⁶

The Grand Inquisitor thus fancies himself as a redeemer. Convinced that men crave coherence more than freedom, he offers them a respite.⁷⁷ At bottom, the inquisitor is a simplifier; he relieves men of the burden of choice.⁷⁸ “Didst Thou forget,” he asks, “that man prefers peace, and even death, to freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil?”⁷⁹ For the inquisitor, then, men are suited to slavery despite their rebellious

⁷⁴ *The Possessed*, p. 409.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *The Brothers Karamazov*, pp. 263-64.

⁷⁷ John Carroll, it is worth noting, has also emphasized the significance of this aspect of the inquisitor’s appeal. “Once he [the inquisitor] has seen that men seek the tangible happiness of bread and miracles, and that they are afraid of the freedom which the anarchist Christ offers,” Carroll writes, “he applies his reason and his knowledge to satisfying their needs” (*Break-Out from the Crystal Palace*, p. 153).

⁷⁸ In this respect, Dostoevsky’s inquisitor anticipates many of Nietzsche’s insights concerning the unwillingness of men to accept the burden of freedom.

⁷⁹ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 264.

nature.⁸⁰ Hence he regards the tyrants of the world as “the unconscious expression” of man’s “craving for universal unity.”⁸¹

It is significant that Dostoevsky considered the Grand Inquisitor the “culminating point . . . of his religious and political thought.”⁸² For his part, the inquisitor’s blueprint represented the realization of a political order dedicated exclusively to order and reason. Indeed the point of his system, as Bruce Ward justly argues, is to “articulate a social order which most closely corresponds to human nature.”⁸³ Thus in his repudiation of Christ, the inquisitor insists that his formula is a logical inference derived from empirical observations of life and man. In this way, he crowns a central theme of Dostoevsky’s, which remains undeveloped in previous works such as *The Adolescent*. There, for example, revolutionaries, inspired by Europe, vow to “live according to the laws of nature and of truth.”⁸⁴ But despite their grandiose aims, they fail to realize their political Utopia. Like the nihilists in *The Possessed*, they incite chaos in order to build a “modern well-organized state.”⁸⁵ But they succeed only in the creation of disorder. In the inquisitor’s social formula, however, the well-organized state of which they dream is fully articulated.

Ultimately, for both Dostoevsky and Camus, totalitarian systems exalted reason at the expense of reality; that is, they assumed life could be made coherent. The absurd teaches the contrary. But the absurd is a truth of experience; it is not a discovery of

⁸⁰ “But Thou didst think too highly of men,” he says to Christ, “for they are slaves, of course, though rebellious by nature” (265).

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 267.

⁸² Dostoevsky quoted in a letter to N.A. Liubimov on May 10, 1879.

⁸³ Bruce Ward, *Dostoevsky’s Critique of the West* (Ontario, Canada: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1968), p. 103.

⁸⁴ *The Adolescent*, p. 53.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 333.

reason. Totalitarian regimes are blind to this fact; they are propelled by an internal logic that aspires to a level of unity unattainable in an absurd world. On Camus and Dostoevsky's view, the pursuit of this illusion obscures the ambiguities of life and produces a politics that reinforces rather than resists the absurd.

It is worth noting that neither Camus nor Dostoevsky were opposed to reason or science as such; instead they objected to scientism or belief in the universal applicability of the scientific method.⁸⁶ Science helps to enumerate the material world but it does not (and cannot) give meaning to history. Totalizing ideologies, however, tend to make two mistakes. First, they presuppose that the world's structure is fully intelligible or follows some general order. It is precisely this sort of epistemological certitude that supports the ideologue's pursuit of totality.⁸⁷ Second, they deny man's existential (that is, irrational) needs. In *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky insists that "man's nature acts as one whole, with everything that is in it, conscious or unconscious, and although it is nonsensical, yet it lives."⁸⁸ To ignore this is to diminish man's capacity to live and choose. As Fred Willhoite aptly notes, Camus followed Dostoevsky in this respect. "Camus," he writes, "implicitly maintained that what we learn through existential

⁸⁶ This distinction has been noted in the literature as well, most notably by Avi Sagi, who also argues that Camus' "rejection of classic rationalism . . . does not necessarily imply a rejection of critical-rational thought" (*Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, p. 59).

⁸⁷ As Fred Willhoite (1968) has pointed out, "Camus attributed the totalitarian impulse to philosophic claims to comprehension of the ultimate order of things" (*Beyond Nihilism*, p. 97). Pete Petrakis (1998) has also noted Camus' connection between inflated epistemological claims and totalitarian regimes. "This false certitude," he writes, "concerning human nature and the path required for its perfection is the central feature of the murderous political regimes of the twentieth century" (*Exile, Judgment, and Kingdom*, p. 187).

⁸⁸ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, trans. David McDuff (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 36.

knowing is just as valid for our genuinely human needs and purposes as are the discoveries and theories of empirical science.”⁸⁹ There is thus an important link between Camus and Dostoevsky’s conceptions of human nature and their epistemological views. It must also be remembered that Camus’ aim was always to defend the dignity of man, the very “dignity that rebellion affirms.”⁹⁰ The experience of the twentieth century taught him that human values required more than a rational defense. As an instrument of knowledge, reason is quite useful. But reason is abstract; it is a conceptual tool that interprets the world but does not speak to meaning or ends. The potentialities for communion and dialogue are thus greatest in experience. Political orders that fail to account for this inevitably exceed the bounds of human reason.

Hegel and the Deification of Reason

To better illustrate Camus’ engagement with Nietzsche and Dostoevsky on the problem of historical progressivism, I turn now to their overlapping critiques of Hegelianism. This will help to clarify three points. First, Camus, Nietzsche, and Dostoevsky each understood Hegelianism as an essentially religious impulse.⁹¹ This is a critical point of convergence, the implications of which become clearer in Camus’ writings on revolt.⁹² Second, it emphasizes what Camus, Nietzsche and Dostoevsky viewed as the Enlightenment effort to ground morality on purely rational grounds. For

⁸⁹ Fred Willhoite, *Beyond Nihilism* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), p. 99.

⁹⁰ *The Rebel*, p. 274.

⁹¹ It is worth noting that, in this respect, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche anticipated Eric Voegelin’s arguments concerning the immanentizing tendencies of Hegelian thought. For more on Voegelin’s discussion of “immanentization” and Hegel, see *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (Chicago, 1968), pp. 88-92.

⁹² Commentators such as Bruce Ward have also emphasized this parallel. The impulse to immanentize “the Christian faith,” Ward writes, “culminated for Dostoevsky, as for Nietzsche, in the philosophy of Hegel” (*Dostoevsky’s Critique of the West*, p. 5).

Camus and Dostoevsky in particular, this fidelity to reason alone was integral to what Camus often referred to as “crimes of logic.”⁹³ Lastly, Hegel’s enormous influence illustrates the totalizing role of reason in the modern world. In the absence of God, reason emerges as the only source of certainty, the only guide to action. Camus refers specifically to this in his discussion of Hegel in *The Rebel*:

If history is, in fact, independent of all principles and composed only of a struggle between revolution and counterrevolution, there is no way out but to espouse wholeheartedly one of the two and either die or be resurrected. Nechaiev [the Russian nihilist and the inspiration for Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed*] pursues this logic to the bitter end. With him, for the first time, revolution is going to be explicitly separated from love and friendship.⁹⁴

This is the sense in which logical crime and the loss of faith are concomitants of the apotheosis of reason; it is also the sense in which reason serves as a defense against absurdity.

Dostoevsky rejected secular ideologies as morally vacuous; they lacked the transcendent ground of Christianity and they were too abstract to bind a community or a country. As evidence of this, Dostoevsky pointed to the religious fervor with which Russian intellectuals embraced socialism.⁹⁵ For his part, this was a consequence of the collapse of faith and the desperate need for a binding idea.⁹⁶ In works such as *The Possessed*, therefore, socialist schemes are described as “new religions . . . coming to

⁹³ *The Rebel*, p. 3.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 160-61.

⁹⁵ In his study of Dostoevsky, Ellis Sandoz quotes the following passage from Belinsky, the leading socialist thinker of the time and a figure of enduring interest to Dostoevsky: “I am at a new extreme, which is the idea of socialism that has become for me the idea of ideas, the being of beings, the question of questions, the alpha and omega of belief and knowledge. It is the be all and end all. It is the question and its solution. It has engulfed history and religion and knowledge” (*Political Apocalypse*, p. 15). Here Belinsky expresses the essentially religious hue of Russian socialism during Dostoevsky’s era.

⁹⁶ Indeed, this is the guiding theme of Dostoevsky’s novel *The Adolescent* and, to a slightly less extent, *The Possessed*.

take the place of the old one.”⁹⁷ This was also the view of Nietzsche, in whose texts historical movements like Marxism are seen as frustrated religions or attempts to replicate the moral effects of Christianity (the equality of men under God, for example) while denying its transcendent justifications. This is quite clear in *Twilight of the Idols*, where Nietzsche insists that “When one gives up Christian belief one thereby deprives oneself of the right to Christian morality.”⁹⁸ Similarly in his attack on Hegel in *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche claims that “Christianity has been *naturalized* by historical treatment . . . until it has been resolved into pure knowledge and destroyed in the process.”⁹⁹ In *The Rebel* Camus adopts the same view. “Socialism,” he maintains, “is only a degenerate form of Christianity. In fact, it preserves a belief in the finality of history . . . which substitutes ideal ends for real ends.”¹⁰⁰ Camus even aligns himself specifically with Nietzsche, who “saw clearly that humanitarianism was only a form of Christianity deprived of superior justification, which preserved final causes while rejecting the first cause.”¹⁰¹ Camus thus follows both Dostoevsky and Nietzsche and equates humanitarianism with ideologies that justify action in the name of humanity.

For Camus, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche, the tendency to act in the name of some abstract love for humanity was a hallmark of ideologies. Indeed for each of them the Christian roots of secular doctrines (particularly socialism) were most apparent in this manifestation. As noted previously, the impossibility of loving mankind in the abstract

⁹⁷ *The Possessed*, p. 414.

⁹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 79.

⁹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. Anthony Ludovici (New York: Digireads, 2009), p. 118.

¹⁰⁰ *The Rebel*, p. 69.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, p. 78.

was a recurring theme in *The Brothers Karamazov*. But Dostoevsky also associates this sort of abstract love with socialism. In *The Idiot*, for instance, Dostoevsky dismisses the socialist's "abstract love of humanity" as nearly always love of self."¹⁰² Interestingly enough, Camus echoes this sentiment in *The Fall*, as Clamence repeatedly mocks the ideologue's "love of mankind" and implies that such men are moved primarily by "self-love."¹⁰³ And Clamence's failure to save the drowning woman is itself a sign of his shallow humanism. In *Diary of a Writer* Dostoevsky continues his critique of secular humanism, asserting that Russians, "having detached themselves from the people . . . and God," necessarily turn to reason for a justification for solidarity. Consequently, humanity is converted into an "abstract ideal," rooted in "logic" and "ideas."¹⁰⁴ It was inconceivable, Dostoevsky contended, to love one's fellow man this way; it was too disconnected, too theoretical. In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche makes essentially the same point:

To love mankind for God's sake has up to now been the most distinguished and far-fetched feeling that mankind has reached. That love for mankind, without some sanctifying reservation, is only one more stupidity and brutishness, that the impulse to such love must first get its proportion, its delicacy, its grain of salt and dash of ambergris from a *higher impulse*.

Although Nietzsche is not interested in defending Christianity, it is remarkable how similar his critique of humanism is to Dostoevsky's. Both hold that love of humanity is unsustainable without some higher inclination. Kroeker and Ward have emphasized this parallel in their study of Dostoevsky and Nietzsche: "Secular humanism," the authors claim, "is not tenable, according to Nietzsche, because it is driven by a fundamental

¹⁰² *The Idiot*, p. 443.

¹⁰³ *The Fall*, p. 67.

¹⁰⁴ *Diary of a Writer: Volume One*, p. 5.

theoretical contradiction: one cannot do away with the ideal of God while holding onto the ideal of humanity . . . the love of humanity depends on belief in God.”¹⁰⁵ As the authors also suggest, Nietzsche’s argument here mirrors that of Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*.¹⁰⁶ Camus similarly condemns socialists for failing to serve man in the concrete. In a 1944 essay for *Combat*, for example, Camus writes:

There is a certain form of socialist doctrine that we detest, perhaps even more than we detest the politics of tyranny. It is a doctrine that rests on optimism and invokes the love of humanity to exempt itself from serving human beings, the inevitability of progress to evade the question of wages, and universal peace to avoid necessary sacrifice. This kind of socialism relies mainly on the sacrifices of others. Those who preach it never commit themselves.¹⁰⁷

The Dostoevskyan hue of this passage is apparent. Indeed for Camus as much as for Dostoevsky, one either served man in the concrete or not at all. As Camus remarks in the final chapter of *The Rebel*, true rebellion begins with a peculiar form of love, which is “crowned with the heart-rending cry of Karamazov.”¹⁰⁸ However, rebellion betrays its noble origins the moment it prefers “an abstract concept of man to a man of flesh and blood.”¹⁰⁹ This moment of betrayal is marked by the shift from rebellion to revolution in which ideas – of man, of history, of justice – become the object of devotion.

Camus also argues that progressive ideologies mirror religions in their re-location of salvation at the end of history. This effort to preserve transcendence is for Camus the result of a misguided belief in “the enlightening powers of science.”¹¹⁰ Further, it is born of a Utopian fantasy, which seeks to “replace God by the future” and to “identify the

¹⁰⁵ *Remembering the End: Dostoevsky as Prophet to Modernity*, p. 145.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Camus at Combat*, p. 118.

¹⁰⁸ *The Rebel*, p. 304.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

future with ethics.”¹¹¹ This aspect of Camus’ critique is significant in this context for two reasons. First, it elucidates why Camus’ political thought is more aligned with Dostoevsky than Nietzsche. In *The Rebel*, for example, Camus suggests that Nietzsche’s philosophy (as well as Hegel’s) helped to justify a certain kind of political realism. “Nietzsche’s responsibility,” Camus writes, “lies in having legitimized, for reasons of method – and even if only for an instant – the opportunity for dishonesty of which Dostoevsky had already said that if once offered to people, one could always be sure of seeing them rushing to seize it.”¹¹² Here Camus is referring to the use of “great ends” to justify present action. Dostoevsky also warned against this sort of logic; indeed he insisted that belief in Christ, in the immortality of the soul, was essential to resisting it. For Dostoevsky, this was an existential imperative; it satisfied the irrepressible desire for salvation, for a final goal. But it also preserved the political order by uniting people around a common ideal. In the absence of such a belief, there was an ever-present danger of historical ideologies filling this vacuum and distorting the present in the name of some future Utopia. This Dostoevskyian insight is fundamental to Camus’ argument in *The Rebel*. In fact, Camus condemns such historical doctrines as Marxism and Nazism for positing visions of the future and recognizing only those values “which serve this particular future.”¹¹³

The second reason why Camus’ critique is important is that it reveals the extent to which Camus critically engages Nietzsche. As noted previously, Nietzsche enjoined men to embrace the earth and to find freedom in fate and creation. However, Camus was

¹¹¹ Ibid, p. 208.

¹¹² Ibid, p. 77.

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 208.

increasingly opposed to the affirmative implications of Nietzsche's philosophy. "With Nietzsche," he writes, "rebellion ends . . . in the exaltation of evil."¹¹⁴ While Camus understood that Nietzsche sought only to replace "the judge and the oppressor" with "the creator," he also believed that, for the majority of mankind, "the intoxication of freedom ends in biological or historical Caesarism."¹¹⁵ As his political novel *The Possessed* demonstrates, Dostoevsky was deeply troubled by this tendency as well, and his defense of faith cannot be understood apart from it.

Let us return to Hegel, a figure of considerable importance in the writings of Camus, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche. Dostoevsky traced much of Russia's political disorder to the influence of Hegel. So important, in fact, was Hegel to Dostoevsky that Dostoevsky remarked in a letter to a friend, from whom he was borrowing a copy of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, that "my whole future" depends upon a firm understanding of Hegel's philosophy of history.¹¹⁶ In *Diary of a Writer*, Dostoevsky specifically condemns the Hegelian roots of Russia's socialist movement, calling it a "distressing, pathological phenomenon . . . yet one that was inevitable by reason of its historical logic."¹¹⁷ Camus was also opposed to the totalizing logic of historical movements. He regarded Hegel's system in particular as an example of the modern apotheosis of reason. As Jeffrey Isaac notes, for Camus "the deification of man characteristic of Enlightenment thinking reaches its culmination in the writings of Hegel .

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p. 74.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p. 79.

¹¹⁶ Quoted in Andre Gide's *Dostoevsky*, p. 67.

¹¹⁷ *Diary of a Writer: Volume One*, p. 24.

. . . which . . . unites a modernizing historicism with a dangerous faith in reason.”¹¹⁸

Hegel’s secular philosophy, Camus argued, preserved the certainty of religious conviction by reducing man and history to reason. In this way, Hegel denied the ground of freedom by subordinating human agency to history. Camus suggests as much in a notebook entry in which he refutes both the existentialists and the Hegelians:

“Existentialism kept Hegelianism’s basic error, which consists in reducing man to history. But it did not keep the consequence, which is to refuse in fact any liberty to man.”¹¹⁹ Nietzsche rejected Hegel on similar grounds as Dostoevsky and Camus. In *The Use and Abuse of History*, Nietzsche claims that Hegel has put “history in the place of other spiritual powers, art and religion, as the one sovereign.”¹²⁰ This Nietzschean point is echoed in *The Rebel*. After Hegel, Camus argues, “The whole effort of German thought has been to substitute for the notion of human nature that of human situation and hence to substitute history for god and modern tragedy for ancient equilibrium.”¹²¹ In any case, the key point here is that Camus, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche all converge in their repudiations of Hegel. They reject not only Hegel’s system but also the living influence of his philosophy.

With Hegel, history supplants God and the real becomes indistinguishable from the rational. In effect, though, Hegel only reconciles the real and the rational by identifying one with the other. The result of this distortion of reality is a kind of blanket justification of present action. “Truth, reason, and justice,” Camus writes in *The Rebel*,

¹¹⁸ Jeffrey Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 80.

¹¹⁹ Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1942-1951*, trans. Justin O’Brien (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2010), p. 141.

¹²⁰ *Untimely Meditations*, p. 122.

¹²¹ *Notebooks 1942-1951*, p. 136.

are “abruptly incarnated in the progress of the world.”¹²² Values, in other words, are either supplanted by facts or “found at the end of history.”¹²³ And without independent principles to guide action, the task of shaping history falls to reason and force. This is what Camus means when he maintains that Hegel furnished “the decisive justification of the spirit of power in the twentieth century.”¹²⁴ In the case of Nazism, force is exalted and history is reduced to its purest form. The goal of evolution displaces the process itself. Such an attitude was expressed perfectly by Ernst Junger, the leading intellectual behind Nazism: “Evolution is far more important than living.”¹²⁵ For Camus, this is the culmination of a logic rooted in historical dynamism.

The fusion of power and historicism thus leads to an obsession with progress and motion. Camus speaks to this in a series of *Combat* articles, in which he argues that the leading ideologies of his time (capitalism and Hegelian-Marxism) were

based on the idea of progress . . . and convinced the application of their principles must inevitably lead to social equilibrium . . . They are extracting a very heavy price from us. In practical terms, it follows that the battle that will be waged in years to come will not pit the forces of utopia against the forces of reality. Rather, it will pit different utopias against each other as they try to gain a purchase on the real, and the only choice remaining will be to decide which form of utopia is least costly.¹²⁶

As implied here, Camus considered Hegelianism the culmination of idealism. This could be seen in its pretension to knowledge of the course of history, which is also a denial of absurdity. Recall that both Nietzsche and Camus believed the world was justifiable only as an aesthetic phenomenon. To imbue history (or the world) with some higher meaning, therefore, is to negate the absurd. Furthermore, by making idols of history and reason,

¹²² *The Rebel*, p. 134.

¹²³ *Ibid*, p. 142.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 137.

¹²⁵ Quoted by Camus in *The Rebel*, p. 179.

¹²⁶ *Camus at Combat*, p. 261.

Hegelianism elevates ideas over experience. The denial of experience is a crucial point for Camus. Indeed, it is here that Camus extends Dostoevsky and Nietzsche's ideas to contemporary politics.

For Camus, the elevation of ideas over experience was a byproduct of historical teleology; that is, of a linear and determined conception of history. "Confronted with the possibility that the idea may be realized in the future," he notes in *The Rebel*, human life can be everything or nothing."¹²⁷ Teleological thinking, of which Hegel is a prime example, helped to instantiate political realism and, consequently, to legitimize crime. Camus also addresses this in *Combat*: "terror can be legitimized only if one adopts the principle that the end justifies the means. And this principle can be embraced only if the efficacy of an action is taken to be an absolute end . . . as in philosophies that take history as absolute."¹²⁸ This passage distills Camus' argument against political realism. As an outgrowth of teleology, political realism is defined by its resistance to limits. Every encroachment upon reality is but a necessary step on the road to absolute freedom. Hence much of Camus' political thought aims at discrediting this approach to action. When he condemns communism in *Combat*, for example, he expresses his solidarity with the collectivist vision but says explicitly that "their adherence to a very consistent philosophy of history justifies their acceptance of political realism as the primary method for securing triumph of an ideal shared by many Frenchmen . . . We do not believe in political realism. Our method is different."¹²⁹ Fundamentally, Camus rejects political realism for the same reasons he rejects historical progressivism: it denies experience in

¹²⁷ *The Rebel*, p. 170.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 262.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 63.

defense of abstract truths. In this respect, Camus' position is indistinguishable from Nietzsche's. Nietzsche, for instance, writes that "We should serve history only so far as it serves life; but to value its study beyond a certain point mutilates and degrades life: and this is a fact that certain marked symptoms of our time make it as necessary as it may be painful to bring to the test of experience."¹³⁰ In a 1947 notebook entry, Camus similarly asks: "Being in history while referring to values that go beyond history – is it possible? Does not the value of ignorance itself cover a convenient refuge? Nothing is pure, nothing is pure – this is the cry that has poisoned our century."¹³¹ For Camus, then, history was a source of nihilism, not of values or limits.

Before continuing, it is worth noting that several commentators have questioned Camus' reading of Hegel.¹³² However, it is of little consequence to this study whether Camus' interpretation of Hegel was justified or not. Here it suffices to note the degree to which Camus' understanding of Hegel's philosophy (and its enduring influence) was informed by Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. Camus understood his century as one that "tried to live without transcendence."¹³³ For Camus, Nietzsche diagnosed the peculiar brand of nihilism that resulted from this effort. Modern nihilism, he concludes in a footnote in *The Rebel*, "is still nihilism in the Nietzschean sense . . . to the extent that it is a calumny of the present life to the advantage of a historical future in which one tries to believe."¹³⁴ The modern attempt to live without transcendence failed because it was still animated by

¹³⁰ *Untimely Meditations*, p. 96.

¹³¹ *Notebooks 1942-1951*, p. 159.

¹³² Notably Jean-Paul Sartre, who remarked in a series of exchanges to Camus that "At least I have this in common with Hegel, that you haven't read either one of us" (quoted in Olivier Todd's *Albert Camus: A Life*, p. 223).

¹³³ *The Rebel*, p. 143.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 144.

the “appetite for divinity,” which Camus considered the chief characteristic of the revolutionary mind. Nietzsche (along with Dostoevsky) helped to crystallize the origins of this for Camus. Dostoevsky’s contribution consisted more in his understanding of the political importance of foundations. Indeed Dostoevsky was arguably the first modern writer to articulate the consequences of replacing religion with politics, God with History. He also understood, perhaps more than Nietzsche, the social utility of shared traditions tied to a web of transcendent beliefs. While Nietzsche grasped this historical link, Dostoevsky (at least in Camus’ view) seems to have better understood the perils of egoism. In any event, Nietzsche and Dostoevsky both saw Hegelianism as a manifestation of the human need for clarity and transcendence of one form or another. With Hegel, however, the desire for transcendence is concealed and expressed in terms of the flow of history. That Camus also understands Hegel and his successors in this way shows to what extent he continued to develop his thought against the backdrop of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky.

Freedom and Despotism

There are sporadic references to Dostoevsky’s critique of despotic regimes in Camus’ fiction. On at least two occasions in *The Fall*, Clamence invokes the Grand Inquisitor’s ideas concerning man’s preference for slavery over freedom.¹³⁵

¹³⁵ Clamence, for example, insists that he is “for any theory that refuses to grant man innocence and for any practice that treats him as guilty. You see in me . . . an enlightened advocate of slavery. Without slavery, as a matter of fact, there is no definitive solution” (132). This more or less echoes Chigalev’s claim that slavery is the only solution to the social problem. Later, Clamence invokes the Grand Inquisitor’s view of freedom and slavery: “after having solemnly paid my respects to freedom, I decided on the sly that it had to be handed over without delay to anyone who comes along. And every time I can, I preach in my church of Mexico City, I invite the good people to

Commentators have also suggested that Chigalev's "system" was a kind of blueprint for Camus' *Caligula*.¹³⁶ Certainly there is evidence for this, but Dostoevsky's influence is arguably clearer in Camus' *State of Siege*. Performed in 1948, *State of Siege* is a theatrical exploration of totalitarianism. Set in the Spanish city of Cadiz, it begins as the town is besieged by a mysterious plague. Unlike Camus' novel *The Plague*, however, *State of Siege* is not so much about the individual as it is the state. Camus describes his intention thus:

I did not seek to flatter anyone in writing the *State of Siege*. I wanted to attack directly a type of political society which has been organized or is being organized, to the right or to the left, on a totalitarian basis. No spectator can in good faith doubt that this play takes sides with the individual, in that which is noble in the flesh, in short, with terrestrial love, against the abstractions and the terrors of the totalitarian state, whether this be Russian, German, or Spanish.¹³⁷

The Plague is primarily about the ineradicability of evil and suffering in an absurd world. In *State of Siege*, however, the plague is human; it is born of ideas and reason.¹³⁸ Hence a despot personifies the plague and the regime itself is seen as an organizational manifestation of absurdity. *The Plague*, moreover, deals with lapses of attention and the tendency of individuals to retreat into routine. *State of Siege* addresses this as well, but here such failures are worse because they perpetuate an evil that is human and therefore preventable.

submit to authority and humbly to solicit the comforts of slavery, even if I have to present it as true freedom" (137).

¹³⁶ Most notably, R. Batchelor (1975) has argued that "Camus' *Caligula* may be construed as the theatrical extension of the Chigalev system" (*Dostoevsky and Camus: Similarities and Contrasts*, p. 114). Given *Caligula*'s emphasis on logic and his transition from freedom to murder, there are good grounds for Batchelor's claim.

¹³⁷ Quoted in Thomas Hanna's *The Thought and Art of Albert Camus*, p. 157.

¹³⁸ Indeed, Camus makes clear in the preface to *State of Siege* that the play "is in no sense an adaptation of my novel *The Plague*. To be sure, I gave that symbolic name to one of my characters. But since he is a dictator, that appellation is correct" (*Caligula and three other Plays*, p. viii).

In any event, there are some important parallels between the inquisitor's social doctrine and the authoritarian regime in *State of Siege*. To begin, in *State of Siege* the protagonist (named The Plague) functions as a theoretical defender of despotism. He is opposed to the play's hero, Diego, who leads the revolt against the regime. The dramatic tension revolves around these two characters, and it is in their exchanges that The Plague reveals himself as a modern inquisitor. For example, The Plague promises to simplify life by bringing "order, silence, and total justice."¹³⁹ Instead of uncertainty and "cheap emotion," he offers "organization" and freedom from the irrational.¹⁴⁰ He aims, moreover, to substitute the uncertainty of life with a self-imposed tyranny that is amenable to human control. Even death, the ultimate symbol of absurdity, is made orderly and rational.¹⁴¹ The Plague also absolves the people of their thirst for answers by abolishing inquiry altogether. We will "do all the thinking" for them, he proclaims.¹⁴² The Grand Inquisitor adopts this approach as well: "The most painful secrets of their conscience, all, all they will bring to us, and we shall have an answer for all."¹⁴³ Also like the inquisitor, The Plague imagines himself a savior, a benevolent dictator who brings peace and stability to his subjects. He says to the citizens of Cadiz that "I don't ask you to thank me for this; it's only natural, what I am doing here for you."¹⁴⁴ This is

¹³⁹ Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), p. 173.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 171-72.

¹⁴¹ "There will be no more dying as the fancy takes you," the plague remarks, "Lists will be kept up and we shall fix the order of your going . . . So line up for a decent death, that's your first duty. On these terms you will enjoy my favor" (172). The inquisitor makes a similar promise regarding death. He insists that people will die "peacefully" because they have been relieved of the "curse of the knowledge of good and evil" (269).

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 214.

¹⁴³ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 269.

¹⁴⁴ *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, p. 173.

reminiscent of the inquisitor, who “vanquishes freedom” in order to “make men happy.”¹⁴⁵ In this way, the false and paternalistic humanism for which Dostoevsky and Camus condemned socialists appears in these works at the root of totalitarian regimes.

Dostoevsky’s influence on *State of Siege* can also be seen in the related theme of social isolation. The Plague, for example, tries to atomize the populace, to destroy the bonds between people. This is accomplished in several ways, most of which are prefigured in *The Brothers Karamazov*. This is most apparent in the political use of hunger to stifle the seeds of revolt. For instance, the inquisitor chastises Christ for the gift of freedom and says

Thou wouldst go into the world, and art going with empty hands with some promise of freedom which men in their simplicity and their natural unruliness cannot even understand, which they fear and dread . . . But seest Thou these stones in this parched and barren wilderness? Turn them into bread, and mankind will run after Thee like a flock of sheep, grateful and obedient, though forever trembling, lest Thou withdraw Thy hand and deny them Thy bread.¹⁴⁶

Near the end of the second act, Diego reproaches The Plague for precisely this sort of tactic:

It’s true that you are lying and that you will go on lying until the end of time. Yes, I’ve seen through your famous system. You have imposed on men the pangs of hunger and bereavement to keep their minds off any stirrings of revolt. You wear them down, you waste their time and strength so that they’ve neither the leisure nor the energy to vent their anger . . . which is what you want, isn’t it? Great as their numbers, they are quite as much alone as I am.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 260.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 262.

¹⁴⁷ *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, pp. 205-06.

For The Plague and the inquisitor, then, cultivating dependency helps to shatter solidarity.¹⁴⁸ However, in *State of Siege*, when Diego refuses to submit, The Plague proposes an inquisitor-like exchange. Diego's love, Victoria, falls ill. The Plague offers to spare both of their lives if only he would cease revolting. "Don't you realize," he urges, "that ten years of this girl's love are worth far more than a century of freedom for those men?"¹⁴⁹ The inquisitor also works to undermine communal bonds. "Miracle, mystery, and authority," he proclaims, suffice to "conquer and hold captive . . . the conscience of these impotent rebels."¹⁵⁰ For The Plague, the principal instrument of division is authority. As the outbreak spreads, therefore, he issues a series of bizarre edicts that are designed to isolate. The first edict forbids citizens from helping "any person stricken with the disease."¹⁵¹ He then demands that each citizen "keep permanently in his mouth a pad soaked in vinegar." The stated purpose of these decrees is to teach "discretion and the art of silence."¹⁵² But more fundamentally, they destroy dialogue and, consequently, the possibility for shared meaning and collective action. I seek "to fix things up in such a way," The Plague says, "that nobody understands a word of what his neighbor says . . . [Then] we shall be well on the way to that ideal consummation – the triumph of death and silence."¹⁵³ The Grand Inquisitor's effort to diminish thoughtfulness and deconstruct the subject is thus apparent in the actions of The

¹⁴⁸ For example, at the first sign of solidarity, the plague immediately responds by having his secretary turn the people against each other. Among other things, they are forced to write down their private grievances with others in notebooks for the purpose of releasing them to the public. All of this, as David Sprintzen (1988) points out, is designed to encourage "the citizens to fall upon each other" (113).

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 221.

¹⁵⁰ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 264.

¹⁵¹ *Caligula and three other Plays*, p. 167.

¹⁵² Ibid, p. 169.

¹⁵³ Ibid, p. 183.

Plague. In the place of individual choice and freedom, moreover, both despots substitute the twin virtues of duty and obedience. The Plague insists that what he desires of the people “isn’t comprehension but execution of their duties.”¹⁵⁴ As seen above, the inquisitor similarly sought to stupefy the masses through the contrived use of “miracle, mystery, and authority.”

In *State of Siege* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, alienating the populace also prepares the way for the rationalization of existence. Isolated and deprived of community, the state becomes the sole locus of meaning and order for the individual. Totalitarian regimes capitalize on this need for direction by applying the principles of reason to the mechanization of society. This can be seen in the use of ants as a kind of political model for humanity. The inquisitor, for instance, aspires to reduce humanity to one “unanimous and harmonious ant-heap.”¹⁵⁵ The bureaucrat in *State of Siege*, Nada, similarly announces The Plague’s efforts to ensure that the “world acquires that neat, nicely ordered layout whose template is the gibbet,” and is “shared between well-drilled ants and the placid dead.”¹⁵⁶ In both texts, then, ants are exalted on account of their efficiency and order. An ant-heap consists not of people but of parts, which act without regard for motive but which nevertheless fulfill their role. To condition human action in this way is the chief aspiration of all totalitarian states. Camus and Dostoevsky suggest that such an aspiration follows naturally from the fusion of nihilism and reason; that is to say, nihilism abolishes human *telos*, reality is seen as infinitely malleable, and reason emerges as the ultimate instrument of human mastery.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 181.

¹⁵⁵ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 267.

¹⁵⁶ *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, p. 186.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to understand the process by which reason and ideology emerged as totalizing political forces in the modern world. In terms of Camus' broader dialogue with Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, several developments are worth noting. First, Camus brings to his political analysis a fundamental lesson he absorbed from Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, namely the psychological significance of guiding principles. In earlier absurdist inquiries, Camus affirmed man's inability to justify traditional sources of meaning. From a political perspective, however, transcendent beliefs acquire a new significance; they are standards through which man gleans meaning and on the basis of which he acts. As Camus deconstructs historical ideologies, this lesson pervades his thought; specifically, Camus identifies scientism, which Dostoevsky and Nietzsche both understood as an extension of the will to totality, as the means by which such metaphysical aspirations are realized. This is the sense in which Camus understood progressive ideologies, and in Camus' analysis of Hegel's revolutionary legacy, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche's influence was apparent.

Owing in part to Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, then, Camus approached reason (in his political thought, at least) not as an epistemological phenomenon but as an extension of metaphysical drives. But Camus also appears to develop Dostoevsky's thesis concerning the link between individual crime and societal disorder. For Dostoevsky, political nihilism was the inevitable result of metaphysical nihilism. As the previous chapter argued, Camus' absurdist literature affirms this at the level of the individual. In *The Rebel*, however, Camus uses the destructive legacy of Nietzsche's philosophy to corroborate Dostoevsky's political hypothesis. Dostoevsky's fiction, for example,

anticipates the nihilism of political systems founded wholly on reason. In his account of Marxism in particular, Camus implies Dostoevsky's prophetic vision has been fulfilled. In this way, Camus uses Dostoevsky's art as a framework for understanding the modern phenomenon of logical crime. Indeed Camus extends the logic of Dostoevsky's nihilists to account for the excesses of historical revolt. Without foundations, Camus finally concludes, limits are abolished, expediency is exalted, and belief in the progressive power of reason guides action. These developments defined the modern era, and Camus rightly identifies Dostoevsky as its leading political prophet.

The foregoing analysis also points to the increasing tension of Camus' thought. In many ways, Camus is suspended between Nietzsche and Dostoevsky's thought. Nietzsche, for instance, is a philosopher of freedom and doubt; he denies absolutes and urges acceptance of untruth. Despite his ethical reservations, Camus is persuaded by Nietzsche's epistemological critiques. On the other hand, Dostoevsky appears to understand everything Nietzsche does, but insists on the moral necessity of transcendence and the Christ-ideal. Dostoevsky argues that the loss of transcendent values will disturb the individual and upend the political order. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus defines absurdity in Nietzschean terms; transcendence is rejected and man is charged with creating value and meaning in this life. In *The Rebel*, there is a subtle shift. Camus does not abandon his absurd position, but he is forced to acknowledge the consequences of a world without God. While Nietzsche was aware of the metaphysical struggles that would follow in the wake of God, his solution is politically inadequate in Camus' view. Rather than affirm values on individual terms, as Nietzsche hoped, men made a divinity of history and the future. As Camus put it, sensing the absence of transcendence, men

decided to kill “so that it might exist.”¹⁵⁷ With this insight, Camus aligns himself more with Dostoevsky than Nietzsche.

In the following chapter, Camus’ problematization of transcendence is seen as the impetus for his philosophy of revolt. As Camus develops his conception of revolt, the tensional relation to Nietzsche and Dostoevsky is preserved, but Dostoevsky’s claims concerning transcendence remain paramount. Camus refuses to adopt Dostoevsky’s religious hypothesis, but the need to affirm something beyond one’s self undergirds Camus’ thought. The difference is that Camus replaces Dostoevsky’s Christ-ideal with the image of the rebel. In doing so, Camus posits something experiential (and symbolic) in the name of which men can act and judge. On his view, this undercuts the theoretical justifications for crime and violence – or at the very least imposes limits on action

¹⁵⁷ *The Rebel*, p. 166.

CHAPTER FIVE THE POLITICS OF REVOLT

“Man can master in himself everything that should be mastered. He should rectify in creation everything that can be rectified. And after he has done so, children will still die unjustly even in a perfect society. Even by his greatest effort man can only propose to diminish arithmetically the sufferings of the world. But the injustice and the suffering of the world will remain, and no matter how limited they are, they will not cease to be an outrage. Dimitri Karamazov’s cry of “Why?” will to continue to resound” - Camus

Following the positivist revolution in science, religious authority waned and ideologies emerged as the dominant forces in political life. For Camus, the result of this shift was a new kind of politics, one in which abstract ideologies replaced religions as sources of identity and meaning. As an artist, Camus struggled constantly against these sources of immoderation. Indeed, this was the defining theme of his revolt writings. In *The Rebel*, for example, Camus reacts against the nihilism of his age by seeking to re-locate the ground for action in the realm of experience. However, the theoretical basis of Camus’ philosophy of revolt can also be seen in his fiction, particularly in the evolution from *The Stranger* to *The First Man*.

Beginning with *The Stranger*, Camus develops an increasingly broader conception of revolt, in which consciousness extends outward from the individual to the collective. In *The Plague* and *The Growing Stone*, this collective consciousness has the potential to create a community of revolt as well as a basis for solidarity and limits. And in his final novel, Camus represents the experience of revolt through the myth of the first man. The aim here is to follow these movements as they unfold in Camus’ texts. Additional attention is paid to the role of antinomies in Camus’ thought. In addition to clarifying the links between Camus’ absurd and revolt writings, this will allow for a clearer distinction between Camus’ mature thought and that of Nietzsche and

Dostoevsky. I begin, however, with a brief explication of the problem of foundations, as conceived by Dostoevsky and Camus.

One of the fundamental problems raised by Dostoevsky is that of foundations. Nietzsche grasped the critical link between foundations and values, but his aim was always to affirm the individual as the creative locus of meaning. For Dostoevsky, individual meaning and social values could not be separated in this way; they were rooted in a common idea, and the cost of divorcing them was disorder. Hence Dostoevsky addressed the problem of foundations in terms of the inseparability of values and transcendence. Camus sensed the importance of foundations, but he opposed foundationalism as such. Despite his admiration for Dostoevsky, then, Camus remained ambivalent towards Christianity. At the same time, Camus was equally dissatisfied with the ideological alternatives to Christianity, particularly Communism. In a letter to his mentor, Jean Grenier, Camus expresses his frustration:

And as for me, am I so confident? If there are no eternal values, Communism is right and nothing is permitted, human society must be built whatever the price. If it is wrong, then the Gospel and Christianity must be followed. Never before has this dilemma been given an image more distressed and insistent than today. And men like myself who dream of an impossible synthesis, who refuse violence and lies without having to justify their opposite, and who, nevertheless, cannot keep from screaming, are going crazy.¹

Camus is thus torn between Christianity and Communism, both of which denied the primacy of experience. But Camus was similarly troubled by postmodernism, which eschewed foundations altogether. As Cecil Eubanks has noted, Camus hoped to avoid

¹ Albert Camus, *Correspondence, 1932-1969*, trans. Jan F. Rigaud (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), p. 93.

“the essentialism of metaphysical thinking” while speaking “to a politics of value.”² This captures Camus’ project well, and illustrates the sense in which he sought foundations without foundationalism. For Camus, values and justifications for action had to be rooted in experience. Jeffrey Isaac makes a similar point with regard to Camus’ project. Camus, Isaac claims, asserted human values in non-essentialist terms and denied unequivocally that reason could “apprehend the historical absolute.”³ To accept the relativity of values while affirming the dignity of human life was therefore a key tension in Camusian revolt.

The focus on foundations points to an important convergence between Dostoevsky and Camus, particularly as it relates to the link between order and ideas. As mentioned, Dostoevsky refused to defend faith on epistemological grounds; instead he emphasized the centrality of ideas to human living. For Dostoevsky, in fact, the loss of God (or more precisely, the loss of the idea of God) meant the loss of the source of order – at both the individual and the social level.⁴ The nihilists of *The Possessed*, for example, are preoccupied with new “ideas” in proportion to their uprootedness from God and tradition. This is evident in a key passage in the text:

"Not a single nation," he went on, as though reading it line by line, still gazing menacingly at Stavrogin, "not a single nation has ever been founded on principles of science or reason. There has never been an example of it, except for a brief moment, through folly. Socialism is from its very nature bound to be atheism, seeing that it has from the very first

² Cecil L. Eubanks, epilogue to *Eric Voegelin's Dialogue with the Postmoderns*, ed. Peter A. Petrakis and Cecil L. Eubanks (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004).

³ Jeffrey Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 109.

⁴ Here Dostoevsky is remarkably close to Nietzsche, who also argues in his essay on history that human beings require a conception of life for their survival. A thinking being requires a horizon of meaning, Nietzsche claims, and “if it is unable to draw one around itself . . . it will come to an untimely end” (*Untimely Meditations*, p. 101).

proclaimed that it is an atheistic organization of society, and that it intends to establish itself exclusively on the elements of science and reason. Science and reason have, from the beginning of time, played a secondary and subordinate part in the life of nations; so it will be till the end of time. Nations are built up and moved by another force which sways and dominates them, the origin of which is unknown and inexplicable: that force is the force of an insatiable desire to go on to the end, though at the same time it denies that end. It is the force of the persistent assertion of one's own existence, and a denial of death. It's the spirit of life, as the Scriptures call it, 'the river of living water,' the drying up of which is threatened in the Apocalypse. It's the aesthetic principle, as the philosophers call it, the ethical principle with which they identify it, 'the seeking for God,' as I call it more simply. The object of every national movement, in every people and at every period of its existence is only the seeking for its god, who must be its own god, and the faith in Him as the only true one. God is the synthetic personality of the whole people, taken from its beginning to its end. It has never happened that all, or even many, peoples have had one common god, but each has always had its own. It's a sign of the decay of nations when they begin to have gods in common.⁵

The character Shatov utters these words, but they are consistent with Dostoevsky's personal views. In a very literal sense, then, as Bruce Ward has suggested, Dostoevsky held that "the *sine qua non* of human order is the possession of an idea of life."⁶ To Dostoevsky, Christ was an idea in precisely this way. Christ preserved order in society by presupposing the purpose of life. Consequently, people were able to live by the light of a common idea, and to judge action by a common standard. This is the sense in which Dostoevsky preferred Christ to truth and thought religion the foundation of societal order.

Although he rejects the church as a source of societal order, Camus' search for foundations and values was prompted in part by Dostoevsky's defense of faith.⁷ To

⁵ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), p. 396.

⁶ Bruce Ward, *Dostoevsky's Critique of the West* (Ontario, Canada: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1986), p. 36.

⁷ Although he does not examine it at length, Phillip Rein points to this connection in his study of Camus. "In much the same way that Dostoevski proves through Christianity that values do exist," Rein argues, "Camus sets out to prove that revolt in its true meaning is man's only recourse in a world void of religious faith" (*Albert Camus*, p. 79).

begin, part of Camus' resistance to Christianity was practical. He did not think it was possible to reconcile faith with modern knowledge. To uphold the doctrines of Christianity, he wrote in a 1942 notebook entry, "we should have to act as if our acquired knowledge had ceased to exist, as if we had learned nothing, and pretend in short to erase what is ineradicable."⁸ Camus does not therefore reject the substance of Dostoevsky's religious vision. On the contrary, he argued, much like Nietzsche, that reason undermined faith and that such beliefs have consequently lost their motive force. However, viewed in conjunction with works such as *The Fall*, Camusian revolt can be seen as a foundational construct in much the same way the Christ-ideal was for Dostoevsky.⁹ That is to say, both function as guides for action and experiential sources of order – although Camus is concerned more with limits than order.

The emphasis on experience is particularly significant. At first glance, Dostoevsky's Christ-ideal seems divorced from experience. However, to understand Christ in this way is to miss Dostoevsky's point altogether. Dostoevsky held that one's experience of reality was inextricably linked to one's ideas concerning reality. What one regards as real, in other words, is often a function of one's ideas or beliefs. Ward elucidates this Dostoevskian concept nicely in the following passage:

For Dostoevsky . . . human order . . . depends upon an idea of the ultimate meaning or purpose of existence – an idea which is not consciously perceived as 'idea' but is simply and unquestioningly accepted as 'reality' itself. In the ordered human being this fundamental, though largely implicit, idea of life seeks and finds outward expression in the concrete world. The human need for order is thus a two-fold need for an ideal of the

⁸ Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1942-1951*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2010), pp. 15-16.

⁹ See chapter three, pp. 15-36 for comparative analyses of *The Fall*, *The Possessed*, and *Notes from Underground*. In *The Fall*, Camus largely affirms Dostoevsky's link between uprootedness and disorder.

ultimate meaning of life, and a way of living out one's daily life in accord with this idea.¹⁰

Christ is thus not so much an idea as a mechanism by which to experience reality; through it one's orientation to others and the world is fundamentally altered. The idea of Christ is therefore secondary to the living faith made possible by belief in Christ.

Dostoevsky's experiential account of belief is best expressed through Father Zossima of *The Brothers Karamazov*. In a series of exhortations, Zossima laments the loss of foundations as well as the subsequent efforts to replace Christ with reason. Russian aristocrats, he claims, "want to base justice on reason alone, but not with Christ, as before, and they have already proclaimed that there is no crime, that there is no sin. And that's consistent, for if you have no God what is the meaning of crime?"¹¹ Here Zossima is implicitly referring to Ivan, whose internal love of mankind and justice founders without God. Having lost the idea that bound him to others, Ivan's experience of reality is marred by doubt and contradiction. Zossima describes the torment of such thus:

Unable to love . . . they live upon their vindictive pride . . . they are never satisfied, and they refuse forgiveness, they curse God who call them. They cannot behold the living God without hatred, and they cry out that the God of life should be annihilated, that God should destroy Himself and his own creation. And they will burn in the fire of their own wrath forever and yearn for death and annihilation.¹²

Ivan Karamazov's inertia thus follows from the absence of an idea concerning the meaning of life. Affirming only what he can empirically verify, Ivan remains unable to understand himself as part of a whole.

¹⁰ Dostoevsky's *Critique of the West*, pp. 36-37.

¹¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Randomhouse, 1996), p. 244.

¹² Ibid, pp. 338-39.

In its essentials, Camusian revolt closely resembles Zossima's active love. Indeed both aim at the same thing, namely human solidarity. There are, however, two key differences. First, Camus replaces the symbol of Christ with the image of the Rebel and, second, as Avi Sagi claims, revolt aims at creating "a just world instead of a world of divine grace."¹³ This is significant because, as Sagi also notes, divine grace requires an active God whereas "creating a just world is a human task."¹⁴ Camus' Rebel also represents the shared nature of experience. In this way, Christ and the Rebel are symbols grounded in the reality of human experience. They merely justify human solidarity and love in different ways. In the case of Christ, solidarity is the result of man's equality before God. In the case of revolt, solidarity is born of a simultaneous denial and affirmation. On the one hand, man protests his condition; at the same time, he affirms his desire to live. In *The Rebel* Camus insists that the choice "to live is, in itself, a value judgment."¹⁵ Furthermore, because the affirmation of life is a "collective experience," revolt reveals a transcendent (and worldly) ground for value.

Zossima's active love is thus different from Camusian revolt primarily in its religious dimension. Yet it can be argued that Zossima's ethical injunctions do not require external compulsion. This is suggested in Zossima's own remarks, which are cloaked in divine language but amount essentially to a worldly call to action. Zossima, for example, holds that all love is but a reflection of divine love. "Love a man in his sin," he says, "for that is the semblance of Divine Love and is the highest love on earth. Love

¹³ Avi Sagi, *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd* (New York: Rodopi, 2002), p. 156.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 8.

all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it."¹⁶ Later, however, he urges men to

Seek no reward, for great is your reward on this earth: the spiritual joy which is only vouchsafed to the righteous man. Fear not the great nor the mighty, but be wise and ever serene. Know the measure, know the times, study that . . . Love to throw yourself on the earth and kiss it. Kiss the earth and love it with an unceasing, consuming love. Love all men, love everything. Seek that rapture and ecstasy.¹⁷

Zossima's decree contains nothing of the otherworldly and, in fact, is reminiscent of Camus' momentist affirmations of nature. Zossima says only that loving and acting is its own reward. His statements reflect his (and presumably Dostoevsky's) belief that God leads to an awareness of the reciprocal contact of things. Since acknowledgment of such interconnections is the basis of Zossima's active love, God is central to his vision; while Camus does not invoke God, he nonetheless appropriates much of Zossima's ethos. Indeed both seem to affirm the interdependence of experience, self-transcendence, and value.

The question we must ask is whether Camus achieves Zossima's (Dostoevsky's) aims on purely experiential terms. For Zossima, divine love (symbolized by Christ) is manifested through individual acts of love. In this way, the act of love is itself creative of value.¹⁸ Camusian revolt can be seen as a worldly extension of Zossima's vision. Just as Christ's love becomes a basic reality through affirmative acts, in Camus' thought the choice to side with man and life reveals the existence of a common value. In an important study of Camus, Jean Onimus argues that transcendence is achieved through

¹⁶ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 334.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 337.

¹⁸ Maurice Friedman (1963) has similarly noted that, by Zossima's logic, to love all things equally is to move "toward a whole and genuine way of life, a reciprocally confirming relationship with other men and with nature" (*Problematic Rebel*, p. 275).

the act of revolt itself, which “plays the role of the absolute.”¹⁹ By absolute Onimus does not mean dogmatic; rather, he means something akin to universality. On this interpretation, universal value emerges out of the individual’s metaphysical revolt. Following Onimus, then, I trace the movement from individual to collective revolt in Camus’ fiction. This will help to clarify two points. First, it speaks to the broader development of Camus’ thought. The sensual individualism of his early period is never refuted, but there is a clear shift towards a more inclusive, intersubjective reality. Second, it shows how Camus tries to locate a ground for solidarity and limits in the realm of concrete experience. Before proceeding, however, it is important to explain the additional ways in which Camus engages Nietzsche and Dostoevsky in his formulation of the problems inherent in the act of revolt.

Freedom and Morality Without God

One of the core problems Camus’ theory of revolt sought to resolve was the conflict between the individual and the community (or between subjectivity and intersubjectivity). More precisely, Camus struggled to reconcile Nietzsche’s individualist calls to self-affirmation with his desire to impose limits on action. Camus’ engagement with Nietzsche on this front unfolds largely in his fiction, particularly in works such as *Caligula*, *The Plague*, and *The Just Assassins*. In his non-fiction, Camus explores this problem in terms of values and limits. In *The Rebel* in particular, Camus regards Nietzsche’s individualism as antithetical to communal life, which requires mutual understanding and dialogue. Nietzsche, for example, enjoins the individual to create for himself, to become a lawgiver. By empowering the individual in this way, however,

¹⁹ Jean Onimus, *Albert Camus and Christianity* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1976), p. 80.

Nietzsche undermines the basis for shared values. This was a central concern as Camus began to develop his philosophy of revolt. In a 1946 letter to his mentor Jean Grenier, Camus states openly that his essay on revolt is in part a response to the destructive legacy of Nietzsche's thought:

I will use my essay on revolt to say that this cult of history and the will to power in which we live is both an insanity and a theoretical error. It's time to start the critique of Nietzscheanism (in its Hegelian aspect), not from the traditional viewpoint, but from a contemporary one. Out of nostalgia, no doubt, I am turning more and more toward that side of mankind that does not belong to history. If it's true that we live in history, I know that we die outside history.²⁰

This passage is remarkable for at least two reasons. First, it shows the extent to which Camus remains engaged with Nietzsche. Even as Camus begins to diverge from Nietzsche, he is still confronting the implications of Nietzsche's thought. Second, it highlights Camus' increasing concern with values and foundations. As mentioned, Camus thinks Nietzsche is fundamentally right about nihilism and the limits of human knowledge. But Nietzsche's ideas, Camus concludes, helped to usher in the age of political nihilism. This was partly a consequence of Nietzsche's desire to hasten the crisis of nihilism, which was inevitable in any case. As Alexander Nehamas and many other commentators have noted, it was this negative aspect of Nietzsche's project that accounted for his unusually hyperbolic style.²¹ Nietzsche, of course, was well aware of

²⁰ Albert Camus and Jean Grenier, *Correspondence, 1932-1960*, trans. Jan F. Rigaud (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), p. 90.

²¹ Nehamas (1985), for instance, emphasizes the centrality of inflammatory language to Nietzsche's larger project: "By insisting so strenuously on his unique position in the history of thought, essential as this may be to his project, Nietzsche may actually have done himself a great disservice, for he has made it easier to attribute to him views that are often impossible to accept and then either to defend them without good reason as views whose time has not yet come or to dismiss them without proper attention as the thoughts of someone more interested in shocking than in teaching" (*Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, p. 141-42).

this, and consequently referred to himself as “dynamite.”²² Nietzsche expresses his intent quite clearly in one his final works, *Ecce Homo*:

I am by far the most terrible man that has ever existed; but this does not alter the fact that I shall become the most beneficent. I know the joy of annihilation to a degree which is commensurate with my power to annihilate. In both cases I obey my Dionysian nature, which knows not how to separate the negative deed from the saying of Yea. I am the first immoralist, and in this sense I am essentially the annihilator.²³

Nietzsche’s goal is thus to force a confrontation with nihilism.²⁴ Camus finds this problematic, however. By questioning the origins and foundations of prevailing values, Nietzsche comes perilously close to embracing a narrow and radical kind of limitless freedom. With Nietzsche, Camus writes in a 1946 notebook entry, “liberty is an exaltation” – there is no concern whatsoever for limits.²⁵ Camus is even more direct about this in his discussion of Nietzsche in *The Rebel*.

From the moment that it is admitted that the world pursues no end, Nietzsche proposes to concede its innocence, to affirm that it accepts no judgment since it cannot be judged on any intention, and consequently to replace all judgments based on values by absolute assent, and by a complete and exalted allegiance to this world. Thus from absolute despair will spring infinite joy, from blind servitude, unbounded freedom. To be free is, precisely, to abolish ends.²⁶

²² In the introduction to *Twilight of the Idols*, for example, Nietzsche says “This little book is a grand declaration of war; and as regards the sounding-out of idols, this time they are not idols of the age but eternal idols which are here touched with the hammer as with a tuning-fork” (1990, p. 32).

²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. Anthony Ludovici (Barnes & Noble Publishing, 2006), p. 89.

²⁴ Camus also understood this to be Nietzsche’s primary task. Camus writes in *The Rebel*, for example, that “Nietzsche’s supreme vocation . . . is to provoke a kind of crisis and a final decision about the problem of atheism” (1991, p. 66).

²⁵ Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1942-1951*, trans. Justin O’Brien (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2010), p. 149.

²⁶ Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage International, 1991), p. 72.

Camus' discussion of Nietzsche in *The Rebel* highlights the importance of Nietzsche to Camus' search for values and limits. Camus makes clear in several notebook entries during the years in which he wrote *The Rebel* that Nietzsche, whatever his intentions may have been, provoked a crisis that could no longer be ignored.²⁷ In this way, Camus' philosophy of revolt can be seen as a response to Nietzsche; it is Camus' attempt to go beyond Nietzsche. Camus hints at this in *The Rebel* when he writes that "Nietzsche did not formulate a philosophy *of* rebellion, but constructed a philosophy *on* rebellion [*italics mine*]." ²⁸ Camus appears to do precisely the opposite: he uses a philosophy on rebellion (Nietzsche's) to construct a philosophy of rebellion.

If Nietzsche helps to frame the conflict between the individual and community for Camus, Dostoevsky forces Camus to deal with the political problem of values without God. In *The Rebel*, Camus examines this problem in terms of the evolution of revolt. He begins by drawing a distinction between metaphysical revolt and historical revolution, at the center of which is Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov. Camus describes metaphysical revolt as "the movement by which man protests against his condition and against the whole of creation."²⁹ Metaphysical revolt is best understood as the individual's reaction against meaninglessness as the essence of life. It is also, Camus suggests, an impulse for order that manifests itself politically in the refusal to submit. In the context of this discussion, metaphysical revolt is significant for two reasons. First, it is universal. It is

²⁷ For example, after referring to Nietzsche's exaltation of liberty in the abovementioned 1946 notebook entry, Camus concedes that "Ours is the era which, having carried nihilism to its extreme conclusion, has accepted suicide. This can be verified in the ease with which we accept murder, or the justification of murder" (*Notebooks 1942-1951*, p. 149).

²⁸ *The Rebel*, p. 68.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 23.

common to all human beings who seek affirmation or resist oppression.³⁰ Second, it is a step towards self-transcendence. Metaphysical revolt, at its core, is “not an egoistic act.”³¹ It may, as Camus concedes, have egoistic motives, but its expression signals a demand for respect that transcends the individual. Hence it begins the moment the individual “identifies himself with a natural community.”³²

For Camus, Ivan Karamazov marks a turning point in the history of revolt.³³ Like Voltaire, Ivan challenges God’s moral sovereignty.³⁴ But more importantly, Ivan subordinates truth to justice; he sums up his rebellious ethos to his brother Alyosha in a key passage:

Is there in the whole world a being who would have the right to forgive and could forgive? I don’t want harmony. From love for humanity I don’t want it. I would rather be left with the unavenged suffering. I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, *even if I were wrong*. Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony; it’s beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It’s not God that I don’t accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return Him the ticket.³⁵

The novelty of Ivan’s rebellion is apparent here. Ivan does not refute the possibility of truth or God; rather, he is compelled to face the reality of human suffering first, which

³⁰ Camus claims, for example, that metaphysical rebellion points to a common human nature. An “analysis of rebellion,” he writes, “leads at least to the suspicion that, contrary to the postulates of contemporary thought, a human nature does exist, as the Greeks believed” (*The Rebel*, p. 16).

³¹ Ibid, p. 16.

³² Ibid.

³³ In *The Rebel*, Camus writes that with Ivan “rebellion goes a step farther . . . he does not absolutely deny the existence of God. He refutes him in the name of a moral value” (55).

³⁴ Ivan “affirms that the death sentence which hangs over mankind is unjust,” Camus writes in *The Rebel* (55).

³⁵ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 254.

exists independent of God.³⁶ This is critical for Camus because it is fundamentally an expression of solidarity. “Ivan,” Camus writes, “is the incarnation of the refusal to be the only one saved.”³⁷ Ivan’s refusal to accept salvation alone alters the dynamics of revolt. Revolt, which begins as a response to absurdity, becomes a kind of humanism; and although Ivan’s humanism remains vague and abstract, his defiance represents the initial “no” of Camusian revolt.³⁸ It is therefore the impetus of Ivan’s refusal that interests Camus. As Ray Davison writes, Ivan asserts the dignity of man and thereby “legitimizes the ultimate metaphysical rebellion: to murder God in the name of human justice and solidarity and to begin the work of building man’s kingdom on earth.”³⁹ It is true that Ivan’s rebellion lacks positive content, but this does not diminish its significance. His exaltation of justice over grace, whatever else it leads to, is a crucial step in expanding the consciousness of revolt.

Again, Ivan matters to Camus because he problematizes morality in the absence of God. Thus it is with Ivan’s “everything is permitted” that “the history of contemporary nihilism really begins.”⁴⁰ Ivan also anticipates Nietzsche’s prophetic

³⁶ Camus claims that “Ivan does not say that there is no truth. He says that if truth does exist, it can only be unacceptable” (*The Rebel*, 56).

³⁷ *The Rebel*, p. 56.

³⁸ Camus writes that metaphysical rebellion is defined, first, by a “no,” a refusal to accept tyranny or oppression. But at the same rebellion involves an affirmation of limits, a point beyond which the rebel will not submit. Camus describes rebellion as “founded simultaneously on the categorical rejection of an intrusion that is considered intolerable and on the confused conviction of an absolute right which, in the rebel’s mind, is more precisely the impression that he “has the right to . . .” (*The Rebel*, p. 13).

³⁹ Ray Davison, *Camus: The Challenge of Dostoevsky* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 1997), p. 125.

⁴⁰ *The Rebel*, p. 57.

warning in *The Gay Science* about the consequences of losing God.⁴¹ The implications of such a loss appear to Ivan in a dream in which the devil warns that “As soon as men have all of them denied God . . . the old conception of the universe will fall of itself without cannibalism and what’s more the old morality, and everything will begin anew.”⁴² This realization is what lends Ivan’s revolt its moral seriousness. On the one hand, Ivan’s rejection of God in the name of man creates the possibility of moral value; however, it can also result, as Fred Willhoite notes in his study of Camus, in “deification of the total rejection of what exists.”⁴³ This concern with negation animated much of Camus’ thinking on rebellion. Ivan’s inability to avoid this temptation helped to crystallize Camus’ conception of revolt – as well as his burgeoning opposition to Nietzsche.

In his biography of Camus, Olivier Todd notes a key disagreement between Camus and Dostoevsky. Camus, he writes, “did not agree with Dostoevsky that if God did not exist, all was possible. Certain acts, which are crimes, must be rejected.”⁴⁴ Ivan’s dilemma clarifies this dispute. Ivan reasons fallaciously that without absolutes there is nothing to justify virtue. There is “nothing in the world,” he claims, “to make men love their neighbors . . . no law of nature that men should love mankind, and that, if

⁴¹ Nietzsche similarly warns that losing God means losing not just our worldview but our morality as well: “Whither is God?” he cried; I will tell you. We have killed him – you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? . . . Who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? Is not the greatness of this deed to great for us?” (*The Gay Science*, p. 181).

⁴² *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 688.

⁴³ Fred Willhoite, *Beyond Nihilism: Albert Camus’ Contribution to Political Thought* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), p. 108.

⁴⁴ Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), p. 145.

there had been any love on earth hitherto, it was not owing to a natural law, but simply because men have believed in immortality.”⁴⁵ Here Ivan articulates a (perhaps distorted) view of man’s fallen nature in the traditional Christian sense, which Camus refused to countenance.⁴⁶ Ivan’s view of human nature appears to have been shared by Dostoevsky as well. In *Diary of a Writer*, for instance, Dostoevsky asserts that “love of mankind in general, as an idea, is one of the most incomprehensible ideas for the human mind.”⁴⁷ This is largely why Dostoevsky defended Christianity. God existed because He must, because men require an object of eternal love.⁴⁸ There is little doubt that Camus was sympathetic to Dostoevsky’s religious impulse. Camus, in fact, made no attempt to conceal his admiration for Christian thought.⁴⁹ But as many commentators have noted, particularly Thomas Hanna, Camus believed critical reason (as well as absurdity) had

⁴⁵ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 69.

⁴⁶ In a notebook entry dated November 145, Camus explains why he refuses to identify himself as a Communist or a Christian: “If Christianity is pessimistic as to man, it is optimistic as to human destiny. Marxism, pessimistic as to human destiny, pessimistic as to human nature, is optimistic as to the progress of history. I shall say that, pessimistic as to the human condition, I am optimistic as to mankind” (*Notebooks 1942-1951*, p. 124).

⁴⁷ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Diary of a Writer*, trans. Boris Brasol (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1949), p. 541.

⁴⁸ This sentiment can be found throughout Dostoevsky’s writing. A prominent character in *The Possessed*, Stephan Trofimovitch, perhaps says it most clearly: “My friends . . . God is necessary to me, if only because he is the only being whom one can love eternally” (673).

⁴⁹ As Camus’ biographer Todd notes, “Camus had sympathy for Christianity – without God – which encouraged commitment in the world, but he preferred the Greek philosophers’ view of the world” (1997, p. 43). In his fiction as well, Camus sought a religious disposition in a world without God. In *The Plague*, for instance, the character Tarrou asks Rieux if “one can be a saint without God?” (255). Camus’ own view of this can be seen in a March 1942 notebook entry in which he writes that the “secret of his universe” was “imagining God without human immortality” (*Notebooks 1942-1951*, p. 12).

effectively undermined belief in Christianity.⁵⁰ Camus is most forceful on this point in an early 1942 notebook entry:

Modern intelligence is in utter confusion. Knowledge has become so diffuse that the world and the mind have lost all point of reference . . . But the most amazing things are the admonitions to turn backwards. Return to the Middle Ages, to primitive mentality, to the soil, to religion, to the arsenal of worn-out solutions. To grant a shadow of efficacy to those panaceas, we should have to act as if our acquired knowledge had ceased to exist, as if we had learned nothing, and pretend in short to erase what is ineradicable.⁵¹

Camus thought it too late, then, to return to Christianity or to any transcendent source of meaning.

For Camus, Ivan's value problem also points to Dostoevsky's failure to see the creative potential of rebellion. Contra Dostoevsky, Camus approaches Ivan's "everything is permitted" as a point of departure. Hence he remarks in a notebook entry that "we must follow out all the consequences of his [Ivan's] remark."⁵² To declare that God is dead neither permits nor forbids anything. Ivan's declaration is only a beginning. As Camus writes in *The Rebel*, the absence of eternal laws authorizes nothing, as "there must also be values and aims in order to choose another course of action."⁵³ Ivan carries us to a moral precipice of sorts, but that is all he does. Camus' task was to find an experiential alternative to Ivan that defended human dignity and supplied a ground for rebellious action. To the extent that Camus formulates such an alternative, he does so in *The Rebel* and *The Plague*. It is therefore to these texts that I now turn.

⁵⁰ Hanna argues that Camus' revolt effectively "counters the Christian view-point" and holds that "the expanded understanding which critical reason has brought to the world destroys the foundations of the Christian worldview" (1958, p. 93).

⁵¹ *Notebooks 1942-1951*, pp. 15-16.

⁵² Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1935-1942*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), p. 95.

⁵³ *The Rebel*, p. 71.

From Solipsism to Revolt

In *The Rebel* Camus understands historical revolution as a form of collective action, but one in which action is divorced from experience. For Camus, if revolt is to remain authentic, it must transition from the individual to the social sphere without denying its experiential origins. Giving form to this transition is the aim of Camus' *The Plague*. Indeed, Camus indicated this in an interview shortly after *The Plague* was published:

“Compared to *The Stranger*, *The Plague* does beyond any possible discussion, represent the transition from an attitude of solitary revolt to the recognition of a community whose struggles must be shared. If there is an evolution from *The Stranger* to *The Plague*, it is in the direction of solidarity and participation.”⁵⁴

Viewed in conjunction with *The Stranger*, then, *The Plague* crystallizes the evolution from metaphysical protest to participatory action, and it presents a concrete extension of the theoretical account of revolt in *The Rebel*. This section begins, therefore, by contrasting the opposing images of revolt in *The Stranger* and *The Plague*.

First, it is important to situate *The Plague* in the larger context of Camus' thought. Published in 1947, *The Plague* occupies a central place in the arc of Camus' career; it is the point at which Camus the artist and Camus the moralist merge. Camus' biographer, Olivier Todd, points to this in his observation of *The Plague*'s significance: “With *The Plague* the reader can observe the novelist's changing attitude toward the absurd . . . Camus and his characters in *The Plague* would distance themselves from the absurd in order to find the pathway to revolt.”⁵⁵ As Todd suggests, *The Plague* marks a shift in

⁵⁴ Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 339.

⁵⁵ *Albert Camus: A Life*, p. 167.

Camus' thought. In previous works like *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, absurdity was the dominant theme. In *The Plague* absurdity persists, but it is examined from an ethical standpoint, and so there is a greater emphasis on responsibility. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, moreover, the guiding question is, how does one live in spite of the absurd? In *The Plague* the principal question is, how does one wrest a moral imperative out of the absurd? For this reason, *The Plague* is the first work of fiction in which the problems of revolt are dramatized.

The Plague is pervaded by two themes: death and suffering. Set in the Algerian city of Oran, it follows a small group of citizens as their town is beset by a plague. As an allegory, the novel operates on a number of levels. According to Camus, *The Plague* can be read in three different ways. "It is at the same time a tale about an epidemic, a symbol of Nazi occupation, and, thirdly, the concrete illustration of a metaphysical problem, that of evil."⁵⁶ The third interpretation is particularly important in this context. For Camus, the problem of evil was essentially the problem of suffering. It was critical to move beyond absurdity because the absurd, as Camus wrote in his notebooks shortly after *The Stranger* was published, "teaches nothing" concerning suffering and evil.⁵⁷ The question for Camus was thus how to conceive of suffering as a shared experience and, in so doing, give birth to a collective consciousness of revolt.

The hero of *The Stranger* is a rebellious but solitary figure.⁵⁸ In *The Plague*, Camus departs from this image of revolt. Indeed through the protagonist Rieux, Camus seems to counter the failed revolts of Mersault and Ivan Karamazov. For example,

⁵⁶ Camus quoted in Todd's *Albert Camus: A Life*, p. 168.

⁵⁷ Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1942-1951*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2010), p. 24.

⁵⁸ See chapter two (pp. 20-23) for a more extensive character study of Mersault.

Rieux's moral outrage rivals Ivan's, but Rieux is able to channel that outrage into action because, as Camus writes in *The Rebel*, "Ivan's drama . . . arises from the fact that there is too much love without an object."⁵⁹ For Ivan, humanity's suffering is an abstraction rather than an immanent problem founded in a concrete other. In a private letter to Grenier, Camus emphasizes his attitude toward suffering:

Thank you also for what you wrote me about *The Plague*. But I believe less and less that man is innocent. The thing is, my basic reaction is always to stand up against punishment. After the Liberation I went to see one of those purge trials. The accused was guilty in my eyes. Yet I left the trial before the end because I was with him and I never again went back to a trial of this kind. In every guilty man, there is an innocent part. This is what makes any absolute condemnation revolting . . . Man is not innocent and he is not guilty. How to get out of that? What Rieux means is that we must cure everything we can cure while waiting to know, or see. It's a waiting situation and Rieux says, "I don't know." I came a long way to reach this admission of ignorance.⁶⁰

Two things distinguish Rieux from Ivan: his acceptance of ignorance and his devotion to action. It is this devotion to action that I want to contrast with Mersault in particular. A key theme of *The Plague* is the conflict between individual happiness and moral obligation. Each character in *The Plague*, as Robert Solomon suggests, struggles "to come to terms not so much with imminent death as with their own happiness in conflict with their sense of obligation."⁶¹ Rieux exemplifies the spirit of revolt because, unlike Martha of *The Misunderstanding*, he refuses happiness on individual terms; instead he devotes himself to resisting the plague and achieving solidarity with its victims. Rieux's happiness, in other words, consists in shared struggle and sacrifice.

As a model of revolt, Rieux resembles Camus' absurd hero, Sisyphus. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, for instance, Camus writes that Sisyphus is heroic because he finds joy

⁵⁹ *The Rebel*, pp. 18-19.

⁶⁰ *Correspondence, 1932-1960*, p. 112.

⁶¹ See *Dark Feelings, Grim Thoughts*, p. 118.

in futility. “Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He concludes that all is well . . . The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”⁶² In the case of Rieux, however, the futile struggle is against the reality of evil and suffering. Rieux’s revolt is thus Sisyphean insofar as it entails commitment without promise of reward. This is apparent in the final passage of *The Plague*:

And, indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperiled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.⁶³

Rieux’s revolt is meaningful precisely because he knows it is a losing struggle. Just as Sisyphus raises himself above his condition by becoming “stronger than his rock,”⁶⁴ Rieux transcends his individual destiny by declaring his solidarity with those who share his fate. Acknowledging the futility of one’s struggle is thus a critical step for Camus; it entails acceptance of suffering and a renewed commitment to the present. *The Stranger* similarly explores questions of meaning and happiness, but from an individualist perspective. Moral obligation is not problematized in this text, as Mersault’s awareness, much like Ivan’s, never extends beyond private experience. With Rieux, however, the solipsism of Sisyphus and Mersault is transcended, and consciousness itself is changed.

⁶² Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1991), p. 123.

⁶³ Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage International, 1965), p. 308.

⁶⁴ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 121.

The Cartesian “I,” as Sagi rightly notes, gives way to an “interpersonal we.”⁶⁵ As I argue below, this shift in consciousness is a consequence of Rieux’s revolt. Mersault’s indifference also helps to illustrate the ethical significance of human volition, which is a point of emphasis in *The Plague*. Here, as Roger Quilliot argues, “characters are revealed to us as the scourge comes to them or they go to meet it.”⁶⁶ By defining the characters in this way, Camus suggests that everything turns on our conscious response to absurdity. As the characters eventually discover, no one escapes the torments of the plague. But those who actively revolt against it, who reduce the suffering of others, are able to find meaning in their struggles. Those who yield to diversions or abstractions or self-interest, on the other hand, only exacerbate matters.

Camus also uses events in *The Plague* to awaken the collective consciousness of the Oranais. Sagi has made a similar point regarding *The Plague*. For this first time in this work, Sagi writes, Camus explicitly suggests that a “solipsistic description of human experience does not exhaust the human condition, which is intersubjective by definition.”⁶⁷ This is a critical point. Confronted by crisis, the citizens of Oran suddenly understand their shared fate. But the plague dramatizes a permanent (and universal) truth about the human condition, namely its susceptibility to suffering and death. In *The Plague*, in fact, it is identification with the other’s suffering that leads to solidarity.⁶⁸ Like Dostoevsky, Camus sought to harness the power of pathos; he used the absurd

⁶⁵ Avi Sagi, *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd* (New York: Rodopi, 2002), p. 168.

⁶⁶ Roger Quilliot, *The Sea and Prisons* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1970), p. 140.

⁶⁷ *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, p. 2.

⁶⁸ Insofar as the rebel is called upon to act by the suffering of the other, Camus seems to anticipate Levinas’ ethical thought.

(symbolized by the plague) to communicate the proper orientation toward suffering.⁶⁹ Indeed as Camus notes in the foreword to his theatrical adaptation of *The Possessed*, it is “the thread of suffering and affection that makes Dostoevsky’s universe so close to us.”⁷⁰ As a symbol, then, the plague emphasizes the contingent character of human existence.⁷¹ This is equally clear at the biological level. A man is not responsible for his genes or intelligence, yet these factors shape much of his life. To grasp this is to see man as a victim, rather than a cause, of his condition. The ethical implications of this are significant. First, it arouses compassion and a sense of the contingency of human life, which in turn points to a basic human equality.⁷² As Camus writes in his notebooks for *The Plague*, “People live according to different systems. The plague abolishes all systems.”⁷³ The plague is thus an equalizer. Second, it stresses the importance of choice. Robert Zaretsky has referred to this as Camus’ “ethics of attention.”⁷⁴ Zaretsky’s description is apt. For Camus, the only meaningful choice one can make concerns the proper response to absurdity. Indeed this is the principal lesson of *The Plague*. Acting

⁶⁹ Pete Petrakis has also emphasized this aspect of Camus’ thought. Concerning Camus’ use of sacred Western symbols, Petrakis argues that “Camus attempts to reawaken humans to the communicative power of pathos by evoking the symbols of exile, judgment, and kingdom” (*Exile, Judgment, and Kingdom*, p. 281).

⁷⁰ *The Possessed*, vi.

⁷¹ For this reason, the plague also functions as a metaphor for the absurd.

⁷² In a revealing notebook entry from October 1946, just before *The Plague* was published, Camus references this aspect of the absurd: “My effort: show that the logic of revolt rejects blood and selfish motives. And that the dialogue carried to the absurd gives a chance to purity – through compassion (suffer together)” (*Notebooks 1942-1951*, p. 125).

⁷³ *Notebooks 1935-1942*, p. 193.

⁷⁴ Robert Zaretsky, *Albert Camus: Elements of a Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), p. 86.

justly is the work of attention and care.⁷⁵ Rieux accepts the reality of the plague and *consciously* stands “with the defeated.”⁷⁶ Mersault, on the other hand, has no concept of solidarity. He pursues his happiness alone. Consequently, he undermines the possibility of true revolt, which is fundamentally a collective experience. As Camus concludes in *The Rebel*, “the first step of a mind overwhelmed by the strangeness of things is to realize that this feeling is shared with all men.”⁷⁷ Mersault fails to do this, and as a result his revolt does not go beyond the bounds of the absurd.

To further distinguish Rieux’s revolt, let us return to *The Brothers Karamazov*. This will help to clarify the dispute between Camus and Dostoevsky on the question of transcendence. To begin, there is a shared impulse at the root of Ivan and Rieux’s revolt. Ivan, for example, rejects God on account of the injustice of innocent suffering, particularly the suffering of children:

But then there are the children, and what am I to do about them? That’s a question I can’t answer. For the hundredth time I repeat, there are numbers of questions, but I’ve only taken the children, because in their case what I mean is so unanswerably clear. Listen! If all must suffer to pay for the eternal harmony, what have children to do with it, tell me, please! It’s beyond all comprehension why they should suffer, and why they should pay for the harmony.⁷⁸

Rieux likewise invokes the imagery of children suffering. “I refuse to love a scheme of things,” he tells Father Paneloux, “in which children are put to torture.”⁷⁹ The impetus for Ivan and Rieux’s revolt is thus hatred of suffering. By pointing to the suffering of children, they highlight human innocence. But the capacity to identify with another’s

⁷⁵ Zaretsky also helps to elucidate Camus’ ethical attitude by comparing it to that of Simone Weil. “Like Weil’s notion of attention,” he writes, “it is an active watchfulness in regard to the humanity of others as well as oneself” (177).

⁷⁶ *The Plague*, p. 255.

⁷⁷ *The Rebel*, p. 22.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p. 253.

⁷⁹ *The Plague*, p. 218.

suffering is paramount, and in fact becomes a precondition for the creation of a community of revolt.

Although his ethical posture resembles Ivan's, Rieux is not an abstract humanitarian. Suffering is always a concrete problem for Rieux, not a theoretical paradox. In this sense, Rieux is closer to Zossima, whose living faith inspires by example. Ivan, however, appears to hate suffering more than he loves life. Despite his moral outrage, Ivan's rebellion remains internal and static. This dichotomy between Ivan and Zossima is central to *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan and Zossima present two ways of being. Zossima goes the way of grace and love; Ivan revolts and condemns. But the choice between Zossima and Ivan is crude. It implies, as Maurice Friedman argues, that one must "choose between rebellion and submission, social and spiritual freedom, social and spiritual equality, individual consciousness and cosmic solidarity."⁸⁰ In the figure of Rieux, Camus destroys this dichotomy; that is, Rieux combines the moral outrage of Ivan with the living love of Zossima.

Rieux thus presents an alternative to Dostoevsky's binary choice. It is common of Dostoevsky's rebels, for example, to either deny transcendence altogether or to become mired in internal confusion. Rieux is different in this regard. He does not agonize over the existence of suffering; he accepts it without resigning himself to it, and he has no desire to anchor his actions in some higher metaphysical order. Further, Rieux resists the attempts of others (notably Father Paneloux) to make a virtue of suffering. For his part, this is an abnegation of one's responsibility to heal and to pay attention to the sick. Here Camus' anti-Christian sentiment is most discernible. Indeed Camus remarks in *Carnets*

⁸⁰ Maurice Friedman, *Problematic Rebel* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 444.

that “there is an intoxication which is two thousand years old,” as a result of which men “are exasperated by evil or resigned to it, which amounts to the same thing.”⁸¹ For Rieux, one is obliged to engage and resist. More importantly, though, Rieux implies that one can go the way of Christ (as Dostoevsky urges) without transcendent injunctions. His fellowship with men is rooted instead in the reality of human suffering and in his sympathy for the living. To quote Friedman once more:

In Doctor Rieux....Camus offers us a third alternative to his own - and to Dostoevsky's - god-man and man-god. Rieux neither submits to reality as objectively meaningful, as does Paneloux, nor rebels against it on the ground of pure subjectivity, as does Tarrou. His rebellion is neither that of the Modern Promethean nor of the Modern Sisyphus, but of the Modern Job.⁸²

Rieux's decision to act suggests that morality (and by extension, revolt) is neither a metaphysical nor a religious precept but rather an experiential injunction arising naturally out of life with others. This can be seen in the following exchange between Rieux and Tarrou:

It comes to this,” Tarrou said almost casually; “what interests me is learning how to become a saint.”
“But you don't believe in God.”
“Exactly! Can one be a saint without God? – that's the problem, in fact the only problem, I'm up against today.” Tarrou said in a low voice that it was never over, and there would be more victims, because that was in the order of things.”
“Perhaps,” the doctor answered. “But, you know, I feel more fellowship with the defeated than with saints. Heroism and sanctity don't really appeal to me, I imagine. What interests me is being a man . . . Yes, we're after the same thing, but I'm less ambitious.”⁸³

The desire to be only a man is especially important. In Camus' thought, to be a man means to live an absurd life and to share this condition with others. Rieux is an authentic

⁸¹ Quoted in Olivier Todd's *Albert Camus: A Life*, pp. 229-30.

⁸² *Problematic Rebel*, p. 430.

⁸³ *The Plague*, p. 255.

rebel because he “knows it’s an absurd situation,” but insists that “we’re all involved in it, and we’ve got to accept it as it is.”⁸⁴ Ivan falters because he deifies what he rejects. Rieux avoids the abyss of negation by focusing on the concrete and the immediate; the contradictions of an absurd existence are immaterial. By means of this affirmation, Rieux moves beyond the exile of Ivan and Mersault’s individual revolt.

The foundational implications of *The Plague* have been recognized by several commentators. Most notably, David Sprintzen has argued that the outbreak of plague in Oran symbolizes “the social order” being put “to the metaphysical rack.”⁸⁵ The people of Oran were “no longer able to take tradition as a self-evident guide to action, they had to reconstitute their sense of the meaningful . . . they were forced to attend to the present.”⁸⁶ Sprintzen makes an important point. By dramatizing the universality of the human condition in experiential terms, Camus points to the primacy of the present. The future and the past are dismissed as abstractions and only the present is seen as real and shared. Suffering, in turn, is removed from the theoretical realm and made concrete. As a result of this shift in orientation, new values are born and solidarity emerges organically. Finally, as Cecil Eubanks has suggested, by grounding revolt in the realm of experience, Camus posits “a prototype for a politics of foundations without foundationalism.”⁸⁷ Eubanks is correct to emphasize the undeveloped nature of Camus’ vision; however, insofar as *The Plague* represents Camus’ search for a secular alternative to Dostoevsky’s

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 118.

⁸⁵ David Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1988), p. 90.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Eric Voegelin’s *Dialogue with the Postmoderns*, p. 178.

religious foundationalism, it marks an important development in the authors' dialogic relationship.

The Growing Stone

The image of revolt depicted in *The Plague* is extended roughly a decade later when Camus released a collection of short stories entitled *Exile and the Kingdom*. Here the exile of absurdity becomes the basis of a worldly kingdom, and solidarity emerges out of isolation. Published in 1957, *The Growing Stone* is the concluding story in Camus' *Exile and the Kingdom*. The hero is D'Arrast, a French civil engineer who has been commissioned to build a dam in a remote Brazilian village. Upon arriving in the village, D'Arrast befriends a young cook. In a series of cryptic exchanges, the cook tells D'Arrast of a promise he made to God. Having survived a recent shipwreck, the cook vowed to "carry a hundred-pound stone" to the church at the center of town.⁸⁸ Though it is not clear that D'Arrast understands, he tells the cook that "a man has to do what he has promised."⁸⁹ Surprised by his response, the cook asks D'Arrast if he has ever made a similar promise in a moment of desperation. When D'Arrast says "no," the cook insists that tomorrow "you are going to help me keep my promise, and it's as if you had made it yourself."⁹⁰ The conversation ends as the two men part with something like a silent agreement.

The next day the procession proceeds as planned. Seated on a balcony beside the church, D'Arrast awaits the cook. As he approaches, the cook collapses in exhaustion. D'Arrast immediately tries to help him the rest of the way. They walk together until, just

⁸⁸ Albert Camus, *Exile and the Kingdom*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), p. 183.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 184.

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 187.

short of the church steps, the cook collapses again. In a pivotal scene, D'Arrast then takes the stone onto his shoulders and continues marching toward the church. Suddenly, however, he turns

away from the church, forcing the pilgrims to face. Behind him, he heard someone running . . . He didn't understand what they were shouting . . . Suddenly Socrates appeared before him, rolling startled eyes, speaking incoherently and pointing out the way to the church behind him . . . Yet D'Arrast continued in the direction in which he was launched . . . He settled the stone firmly on its cork base and went down with a cautious but still steady tread toward the huts. When he reached them, his breath was beginning to fail, his arms were trembling under the stone. He hastened his pace, finally reached the little square where the cook's hut stood, ran to it, kicked the door open, and brusquely hurled the stone onto the still glowing fire in the center of the room.⁹¹

The interaction between D'Arrast and the cook can be interpreted in several ways. Most significant in this context is the theme of solidarity. In an insightful study of *The Growing Stone*, Irina Kirk points to the implicit link between solitude and solidarity. "By taking up the burden of a man with whom he can have no possible communion," Kirk writes, "D'Arrast saves himself from isolation." "Out of this seeming futility," she concludes, "man creates his own meaning; and out of his inherent isolation, man creates solidarity among other isolated beings. In the face of universal exile, the very basis of human solitude becomes the means for union."⁹² Kirk's emphasis on shared meaning is certainly justifiable. But equally important is the experiential context. Unlike *The Plague*, there are no crises in *The Growing Stone*. Instead two men, divided by culture and language, encounter one another under mostly ordinary circumstances. What they share is a common experience (exile) and a common desire for salvation. This is a significant point for Camus. In his universe," as Lev Braun writes, "all differences –

⁹¹ Ibid, pp. 211-12.

⁹² Irina Kirk, *Dostoevsky and Camus* (Germany: Wilhelm Fink Verlag Munchen, 1974), p. 62.

racial, cultural, social – could be remedied if only the flickering light of human communion was preserved.”⁹³ Though somewhat naïve, Camus persisted in his conviction that such communion was achievable through openness to shared experience. D’Arrast, then, may not understand the cultural significance of the stone or the church, but he can understand the experiential impetus behind it as well as the sense of honor attached to it. Camus suggests that this suffices (or must suffice) as a means to cross-cultural solidarity.

The experiential context of *The Growing Stone* is central to its thematic intent. As we have seen, Camus regards ideologies and even language itself as inherently divisive.⁹⁴ Indeed anything abstracted from experience has the potential to separate action from meaning or, more importantly, symbols from their experiential origins. In *The Growing Stone*, therefore, much like *The Plague*, individual as well as cultural differences are transcended through awareness of a common condition. As a symbol, then, the stone represents the burdens of an absurd life, which everyone must bear in their own way. It may be true, Camus implies, that exile follows from absurdity, but it is also true that an earthly kingdom is forged through acts of solidarity. The cook carries his stone just as Sisyphus takes up his rock. D’Arrast merely accepts the responsibility of the absurd man to ensure that no one carries his stone alone.⁹⁵ Thus D’Arrast willingly takes

⁹³ Lev Braun, *Witness of Decline* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1974), p. 240.

⁹⁴ Camus’ suspicion of language represents another key overlap with Nietzsche, who similarly argued that language tends to falsify and distort concrete experience. In “The Enigma,” for example, as Avi Sagi has noted, “Camus adopted Nietzsche’s view” writing that “When things have a label, aren’t they lost already?” (*Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, p. 52).

⁹⁵ Pete Petrakis has similarly emphasized the Sisyphean nature of D’Arrast’s action. “Sisyphus,” Petrakis writes, “is recast by D’Arrast . . . who shares the burden” by

on the yoke of another, just as Christ or Father Zossima would do. That he takes the stone not to the church but to the cook's hut is also symbolically important; it reflects the true locus of revolt, namely the community. As Camus emphasizes in *The Rebel*, revolt "acts on behalf of life . . . That is why it relies primarily on the most concrete realities – on occupation, on the village, where the living heart of things and of men is to be found."⁹⁶ This is consistent with *The Plague*, which similarly points to fellowship and shared suffering as the foundation of revolt. In *The Growing Stone*, the hut represents "the living heart of things." It is a symbol of poverty. By placing the stone there, D'Arrast expresses his solidarity with the villagers.

The vision of solidarity and revolt expressed in *The Plague* and *The Growing Stone* is further developed in Camus' last known work, *The First Man*. *The First Man* occupies a unique place in Camus' corpus. Incomplete at the time of his death, the manuscript was not released until 1995. As an unfinished text, it is difficult to make definitive claims about Camus' intent. However, as his most autobiographical work, it offers a rare glimpse into the author's life and mind.⁹⁷ It also helps to clarify the general direction of Camus' thought. Camus insisted that each of his works must be seen as "stages on the way to unrewarded perfection."⁹⁸ Each text must therefore be understood as part of a larger whole. This is particularly true of *The First Man*. Though incomplete, the meaning of the text becomes clearer when viewed alongside Camus' previous works. In conjunction with *The Stranger*, *The Plague*, and *The Growing Stone*, *The First Man*

"participating in a way that preserves his individuality yet reduces the suffering of others" (*Exile, Judgment, and Kingdom*, p. 281).

⁹⁶ *The Rebel*, p. 298.

⁹⁷ In her preface to the work, Camus' daughter, Catherine, confirms its autobiographical quality. It is the text, she writes, in which "one can most clearly hear my father's voice."

⁹⁸ *Notebooks 1942-1951*, p. 20.

presents a fuller picture of Camusian revolt. For this reason, it warrants a brief examination here.

The First Man

The hero of *The First Man* is Jacques Cormery, a French Algerian whose father died in combat shortly after he was born. The novel begins as Jacques searches for his father's burial site. When he discovers it, Jacques is overwhelmed with compassion. But his compassion is not for his father, a stranger for whom "he could not muster a filial devotion."⁹⁹ Instead, Jacques senses the larger injustice of a world in which the young and innocent die. Camus describes the experience thus:

And the wave of tenderness and pity that at once filled his heart was not the stirring of the soul that leads the son to the memory of the vanished father, but the overwhelming compassion that a grown man feels for an unjustly murdered child – something here was not in the natural order and, in truth, there was no order but only madness and chaos when the son was older than the father.¹⁰⁰

The sensation described above signals Jacques' encounter with absurdity. As Avi Sagi points out, "the confrontation with his father's tomb forces Jacques to experience the limits of existence and its collapse."¹⁰¹ Sagi's account is confirmed in the text, particularly in the emphasis on disorder and chaos. It can also be seen in the link between absurdity and finitude, a consistent theme in Camus' absurd works, particularly *Caligula* and *The Stranger*. But more importantly, Jacques' experience at the graveyard symbolizes the movement from absurd awareness to conscious revolt. This is evident in

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 24.

¹⁰⁰ Albert Camus, *The First Man*, trans. David Hapgood (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 26.

¹⁰¹ *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, p. 31.

Jacques' initial reaction. Confronted by the spectacle of death, Jacques' first thought is not of himself or his father but of the finitude he shares with all men:

He looked at the other inscriptions in that section and realized from the dates that this soil was strewn with children who had been the fathers of graying men who thought they were living in the present time. For he too believed he was living, he alone had created himself, he knew his own strength, his vigor, he could cope and he had himself well in hand. But, in the strange dizziness of that moment, the statue every man eventually erects and that hardens in the fire of the years, into which he then creeps and there awaits its final crumbling.”¹⁰²

Rather than revolt angrily against the absurd, as Ivan and Martha of *The Misunderstanding* do, Jacques affirms the universality of his experience. As Camus writes in *The Rebel*, “the first step of a mind overwhelmed by the strangeness of things is to realize that this feeling is shared with all men.”¹⁰³ Revolt begins, therefore, with awareness, and Camus dramatizes this experience in the graveyard scene.

It is essential to understand Jacques – and his experiences – as symbolic of the human condition. This is suggested in a crucial passage in which Camus implies that the first man is like all men in that “he had to bring himself up, without a father . . . and he had to grow alone, in fortitude, in strength, find his own morality and truth, at last to be born a man.”¹⁰⁴ This reading also finds support in a concurrent notebook entry: “*The First Man* repeats the entire journey in order to discover his secret: he is not the first. Every man is the first man, nobody is.”¹⁰⁵ Viewed in this light, Jacques' indifference to his father is more intelligible. Initially the reader understands Jacques' reaction at his father's grave as a function of the distance between them. But this misses the symbolic

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ *The Rebel*, p. 22.

¹⁰⁴ *The First Man*, p. 195.

¹⁰⁵ *Notebooks 1951-1959*, p. 125.

intent of *The First Man*, which is to understand Jacques not as a self but rather as a manifestation of the spirit of revolt. Hence as the story progresses, it is increasingly unclear who is speaking or to whom the narrator is referring; indeed Camus' larger aim does not crystallize until the text transitions from a historical narrative to a memoir.

The shift to a memoirist account occurs as Jacques begins to reconstruct his father's past. Henceforth it is apparent that Jacques is based on fragments of Camus' own life and that, more importantly, Jacques' father is a symbolic representation of Camus' ideal rebel. The father, for example, is described as an attentive man who is both aware of absurdity and devoted to the values of revolt. This can be seen in the exchanges between Jacques and various people who knew his father. Describing an incident in which their patrol group encountered a desecrated body, a soldier recalls the moral outrage of Jacques' father:

But Cormery shouted as if crazed with anger: No, a man doesn't let himself do that kind of thing! That's what makes a man, or otherwise . . . I'm poor, I came from an orphanage, they put me in this uniform, they dragged me into the war, but I wouldn't let myself do that.¹⁰⁶

The demand for limits and humanity is implied here. Later, however, it is emphasized. "He submitted to everything that could not be avoided," the man continues, "but had preserved some part of himself where he allowed no one to trespass."¹⁰⁷ A recurring theme in Camus' writings is that absurdity fails as a guide for action and a source of limits.¹⁰⁸ For Camus, this was akin to Ivan's "everything is permitted." That Jacques' father refuses to transgress certain limits, even in war, is continuation of this same theme.

It is also, as Robert Zaretsky suggests, a reflection of "Camus' loyalty to the visceral

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 65.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 66.

¹⁰⁸ Camus' absurdist works, particularly *The Stranger* and *Caligula*, dramatize the consequences of basing one's actions on the absurdity of things.

ethics expressed by his father – the intuitive conviction that humankind, if it wishes to preserve this status, must obey certain limits on its freedom.”¹⁰⁹

The First Man has received comparatively little attention in the literature, which is unsurprising given the incomplete nature of the text as well as its delayed publication. Most recently, Ronald Srigley has argued that *The First Man* is Camus’ account of man before the fall. It depicts human nature, Srigley writes, “before or in the absence of the corruption of the religious dogmas that have guided the west for some two thousand years.”¹¹⁰ Srigley’s account is partially true; here, however, I regard the first man as a kind of proto-rebel. The image Camus crafts is one of man as he can and should be: honest, measured, attentive, compassionate, and grounded in experience.¹¹¹ This is clearly the posture of Camus’ authentic rebel. In his notebooks, Camus also emphasizes the theme of intersubjectivity. Against the individual’s “desire for power,” he writes, the first man exalts the virtues of solidarity and self-transcendence.¹¹² In the text Jacques’ solidarity can be seen in his denial of moral distinctions between men; instead all are regarded as “victims.”¹¹³ And the transcendence to which he aspires is not otherworldly; instead it is achieved the moment man imagines himself “reborn in the eyes of others.”¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ Robert Zaretsky, *Life worth living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 118.

¹¹⁰ Ronald Srigley, *Albert Camus’ Critique of Modernity* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2011), p. 126.

¹¹¹ The commitment to experience can be seen in Jacques’ hatred of intellectuals, who make a problem of morality by stuffing their writings with “cultural allusions and humanist subtleties” (254). “Those intellectuals who theorize” about morality, he says, render “it utterly unintelligible” (254). Earlier in the story, moreover, Camus hints that morality need not be taught; that understanding right and wrong is innate and requires only the experience of “daily life in a working-class family” (88).

¹¹² *Notebooks 1951-1959*, pp. 132-33.

¹¹³ *The First Man*, p. 123.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 216.

This act of imagination, because it makes identification with the suffering of others possible, is for Camus the ground of revolt.

From *The Stranger* to *The First Man*, then, there is a linear progression from solipsism to revolt. In the course of this movement, men find something in the name of which to act and on the basis of which to judge. In each of these texts, moreover, consciousness extends outward, culminating in a community of revolt. And the impetus for revolt becomes increasingly commonplace. In *The Plague* it is a mass epidemic; in *The Growing Stone* it is a man under duress; and in *The First Man* it is simply awareness of death. These stories are linked, moreover, by a concern with alienation and beginnings. In each case, by virtue of circumstance, men are alienated either from themselves, their loved ones, or the world. Each time, however, their exile becomes an opportunity for renewal. Absurdity remains a source of alienation, but the barriers between men give way. And revolt becomes the mechanism through which the metaphysical demand for unity is transformed into an earthly kingdom. This is what Camus means when he describes revolt as “a fabricator of universes.”¹¹⁵

So far I have delineated the experiential origins of revolt. To illustrate the foundational implications of revolt, the role of antinomies must be examined as well. Beginning with his sensualist period, Camus’ writings are replete with antagonisms. Be it the tension between means and ends or between thought and action, Camus is constantly preserving tragic paradoxes. This endures in his theory of revolt, which is similarly grounded in contradiction.¹¹⁶ At bottom, revolt seeks to balance competing claims – freedom and justice, immanence and transcendence, being and becoming.

¹¹⁵ *The Rebel*, p. 255.

¹¹⁶ See remarks above (p. 6) as well as Camus’ additional remarks in *The Rebel*, p. 286.

Reconciliation between these demands is impossible, Camus insists; they must instead find their limits in each other. The way to absolute unity is always through the “suppression of all contradiction.”¹¹⁷ Revolt resists the excesses of revolution through the preservation of this tension; to abandon it, to drift too far in either direction, is to exceed the limits of revolt – this is the danger to which Camus refers above. Thus Camus insists that revolt “is nothing but pure tension.”¹¹⁸

Revolt as Tension

In many ways, tension is the crowning concept of Camus’ thought. Indeed as Camus’ thought progressed, he understood life in increasingly dialectical terms. He refers to this in the final chapter of *The Rebel*:

Where could one perceive essence except on the level of existence and evolution? But nor can it be said that being is only existence. Something that is always in the process of development could not exist – there must be a beginning. Being can only prove itself in development, and development is nothing without being. The world is not in a condition of pure stability; nor is it only movement. It is both movement and stability.¹¹⁹

Camusian revolt is a reflection of this dialectic. Just as the world is suspended between being and becoming, revolt is the resulting tension between man’s assertion of value (life) on the one hand and the silence of the world on the other. Camus describes this tension as “an irregular pendulum, which swings in an erratic arc because it is looking for its most perfect and profound rhythm.”¹²⁰ Revolt is rhythmic because it is neither pure flux nor constant stability; instead it is a harmony of opposites. On the basis of this logic, Camus holds that there are no absolutes; “there are only limits.”¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p. 288.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p. 296.

¹²⁰ Ibid, p. 295.

¹²¹ *Notebooks 1942-1951*, p. 185.

Acceptance of contradiction remains a dominant theme in Camus' work from the absurdist period onward. As argued below, Camus' contradictory thoughts concerning the legitimacy of violence is a notable example of this. The concept of absurdity is also rooted in contradiction. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus makes no effort to resolve this paradox; on the contrary, he asks whether one can live with or in spite of it. In *The Rebel* Camus accepts the relativity of values and the necessity of limits precisely because the contradictions of life demand it. This is a significant point of contrast between Camus, Nietzsche, and Dostoevsky. As noted, for Nietzsche relativity is liberating. In a world of pure becoming, values are impermanent and thus non-binding. Hence Camus argues that Nietzsche's philosophy eschews limits.¹²² Dostoevsky similarly associated relativism with the loss of limits. The logic of this is best expressed through Ivan's "everything is permitted." For Camus, however, "the absurd does not liberate; it binds."¹²³ If anything, by revealing the tension between man and the world, absurdity demands the assertion of human value. At the same time, it commands moderation, as the absence of eternal values sanctions nothing. "There must also be values and aims," Camus argues, "in order to choose another course of action."¹²⁴ Camus maintains, furthermore, that if man decides to live, it is because he has judged life valuable. By extension, "if we decide to rebel, it must be because we have decided that a human society has some positive value."¹²⁵ Revolt is thus a natural progression from absurdity in that it makes a universal value of the individual's affirmation of life. But revolt does not supply definitive rules for action; rather, it marks a limit. To revolt is to agree to live in tension, and to

¹²² See *The Rebel*, pp. 65-80.

¹²³ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 110.

¹²⁴ *The Rebel*, p. 71.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, p. vii.

continually re-affirm the dignity of human life.¹²⁶ The moderating values of revolt are therefore held together by a tension born of man's contradictory condition.¹²⁷

Before continuing, it is essential to explain in what sense revolt (and its conception of tension) crowns Camus' thought. As the quote above demonstrated, Camus conceived of his work as a series of "stages on the way to an unrewarded perfection." The best way to track the development of Camus' thought is to correlate the symbols he uses with their corresponding themes and cycles. As Robert Zaretsky recently noted, Camus was constantly mining symbols and Greek myths "not only to make sense of his life, but also to make sense of our lives."¹²⁸ In an important study of Camus, Pete Petrakis focuses exclusively on this aspect of Camus' work, identifying exile, judgment, and kingdom as the defining symbols of his thought. "Exile," argues Petrakis, "is a more personal and evocative experience of the absurd; judgment is the fundamental ground of revolt; and kingdom building . . . embraced the limits of human endeavors."¹²⁹ Exile, judgment, and kingdom are thus correlated with the themes of absurdity, revolt, and limits. Petrakis' thesis is consistent with the evolution of Camus' thought, and Camus seems to corroborate it in a 1947 notebook entry, in which he associates these themes with the first three stages of his work.¹³⁰ In the context of this study, Camus' conception of limits is significant for two reasons. First, it speaks to the larger coherence of Camus' thought. In his transition to absurdity, Camus does not

¹²⁶ To emphasize this, Camus argues that "murder and rebellion are contradictory" precisely because life is the founding value of revolt (*The Rebel*, p. 281).

¹²⁷ In *The Rebel*, Camus explicitly links moderation to tension. "Moderation," he writes, "is nothing but pure tension" (301).

¹²⁸ *Life worth living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning*, p. 95.

¹²⁹ *Exile, Judgment, and Kingdom*, p. 132.

¹³⁰ See *Notebooks 1942-1951*, p. 158.

negate his early sensualist commitments; instead they are subsumed under his absurdist thought.¹³¹ Likewise, as Camus progresses from absurdity to revolt, he is careful not to abandon previous insights. Hence when he seeks a ground for value in *The Rebel*, he does not exceed the bounds (existentially or epistemologically) marked by absurdity. Having acknowledged the impossibility of absolute certainty, he looks to common experience as a ground for revolt. And because absurdity imposes limits on reason, he turns to symbols as means of examining contemporary life and of universalizing the truths of experience.

Camus' call to moderation can also be seen as the culmination of his dialogue with Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. To begin, Camus' philosophical disposition was largely a product of his rootedness in Mediterranean culture.¹³² A native of Algeria, Camus tried constantly to reconcile what he considered the defining conflict of the century, namely the battle between "German dreams and Mediterranean traditions."¹³³ This was a conflict between ideas and experience, between divine nostalgia and an active love of life. The origins of this internal struggle could be seen already in Camus' early sensualist literature. Camus' biographer, Herbert Lottman, refers to Camus' dilemma in a key passage:

Camus explained that the Mediterranean divided him from most of his fellow French writers, who had been nourished on German literature while he had been raised on Greek. Plato was more important to him than Hegel. But he admitted the influence of Pascal, Tolstoy, and Nietzsche: 'This choice will seem strange to you, and I myself agree that they don't go together. To tell the truth I haven't managed to work out my own internal contradictions.'¹³⁴

¹³¹ For a more extensive analysis of this transition, see chapter two (pp. 25-26).

¹³² See *The Rebel*, pp. 294-306

¹³³ Ibid, p. 299.

¹³⁴ *Albert Camus: A Biography*, p. 548.

Camus' uneasiness with his European and Mediterranean roots is important because it helps to explain his tensional relation to Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. Camus is clearly influenced by these thinkers, but he remains suspended between their incompatible visions. With his philosophy of limits, however, Camus comes closest to striking a middle path. As we have seen, Nietzsche and Dostoevsky disagree about the proper response to the human condition. Nietzsche's solution springs from his ontology of power; Dostoevsky's to his understanding of the sources of order in society. Although Camus diverges from both of these solutions, his theory of revolt is fundamentally a product of both.

The Nietzschean roots of Camusian revolt can be seen in its Hellenic antecedents. Near the end of *The Rebel*, for example, Camus invokes Heraclitus as a model for his dialectical view of experience:

Heraclitus, the discoverer of the constant change of things, nevertheless set a limit to this perpetual process. This limit was symbolized by Nemesis, the goddess of moderation and the implacable enemy of the immoderate. A process of thought which wanted to take into account the contemporary contradictions of rebellion should seek its inspiration from this Goddess.¹³⁵

It was thus within a Heraclitian framework that Camus developed his conception of tension and limits. However, Camus likely borrowed his interpretation of Heraclitus from Nietzsche. As Samantha Novello has noted, Camus consumed Nietzsche's writings on the Greeks between the years of 1938 and 1941, and "Nietzsche's early pages on Heraclitus are likely to have captured Camus' attention and to have been interpreted in light of the criticism of reason that the German philosopher expresses in his later

¹³⁵ *The Rebel*, p. 296.

works.”¹³⁶ Novello’s claim is more than justified, particularly her emphasis on reason. Camus embraces contradiction, in part, because he was convinced of the fundamental unintelligibility of the world. When he develops his notion of revolt, tension is posited as a concomitant of this disunity. A close reading of Nietzsche’s texts also supports Novello’s claim. In *Twilight of the Idols*, for instance, Nietzsche identifies Heraclitus as the first philosopher to understand the importance of “plurality and change” as well as the illusoriness of “duration and unity.”¹³⁷ While Camus clearly departs from Nietzsche, it is significant that he sought to ground revolt within this Nietzschean and Heraclitian framework.¹³⁸ And in light of the broader importance of Nietzsche’s metaphysics to Camus, I regard Camus’ emphasis on tension as emblematic of Nietzsche’s enduring influence.¹³⁹

To the degree that Dostoevsky influences Camus, he often does so at the expense of Nietzsche. This is particularly true on the subject of limits.¹⁴⁰ In many of his writings, Camus articulated the problem of limits in terms of foundations. Rather than embrace the

¹³⁶ Samantha Novello, *Camus as Political Thinker* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 83

¹³⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 46.

¹³⁸ It is worth noting that Nietzsche’s cosmology is entirely aligned with Heraclitian thought. Indeed Nietzsche understood himself as a philosophical descendant of Heraclitus. By perceiving that “being is an empty fiction,” Nietzsche writes, Heraclitus was the first to show that “reason is the cause of our falsification of the evidence of our senses” (*Twilight of the Idols*, p. 46). For this reason, Heraclitus anticipated much of Nietzsche’s thought.

¹³⁹ For an extended analysis of the early importance of Nietzsche’s metaphysics (particularly his emphasis on becoming) to Camus, see chapter two (pp. 8-15).

¹⁴⁰ This is especially clear in one of Camus’ most important essays concerning limits and modernity, *Helen’s Exile*. Although the essay spans only six pages, Camus references Nietzsche once and Dostoevsky twice, and in one instance the spirit of Dostoevsky’s thought is directly opposed to the pernicious influence of Nietzsche (see *Myth of Sisyphus*, pp. 187-193).

religious foundationalism of Dostoevsky, however, Camus tries to establish foundations on his essentially Nietzschean edifice. Camus' aim is to reconstruct the experience of limits by reinvigorating the classic Greek symbol of moderation, Nemesis. In a critically important essay, *Helen's Exile*, Camus contrasts the Greek sense of balance with the modern thirst for totality: "The Greeks, who for centuries questioned themselves as to what is just, could understand nothing of our idea of justice. For them equity implied a limit, whereas our whole continent is convulsed in its search for a justice that must be total."¹⁴¹ Camus uses the symbol of Nemesis to represent the Greeks refusal to carry "anything to extremes, neither the sacred nor reason, because it negated nothing, neither the sacred nor reason."¹⁴² This fidelity to limits, Camus argues, has been lost in the modern world, and can only be recovered by a return to nature and lived experience. Camus even links Nietzsche and the absence of God to the total embrace of "history and power."¹⁴³ At the same time, however, Camus insists that we must live in the world of uncertainty unmasked by Nietzsche while also cultivating a sense of the sacred as Dostoevsky constantly urged. In this way, Camus tries to avoid the religious transcendentalism of Dostoevsky while preserving his sense of order and limits. Similarly, Camus remains committed to Nietzsche's anti-essentialism but he condemns Europe's Nietzschean rejection of values. "Nietzsche is outdistanced," he writes, "Europe no longer philosophizes by striking a hammer, but by shooting a canon."¹⁴⁴

For Camus, the only way to communicate the core and eternal truths of experience is to evoke them through myth. "Myths," he wrote, "have no life of their own

¹⁴¹ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 188.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, p. 187.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 190.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

. . . They wait for us to give them flesh.”¹⁴⁵ As a symbol, Nemesis represents not just moderation but also the dangers of excess. In his notebooks, Camus refers to Nemesis as “the goddess of measure . . . All those who have overstepped the limit will be pitilessly destroyed.”¹⁴⁶ For the Greeks, moreover, Nemesis was a distributor of divine retribution. She exemplified the resentment aroused in men by those who disrupted the natural equilibrium. As a foundational symbol of limits, then, Nemesis was ideal.

Camus does not reference Dostoevsky in his brief discussions of Nemesis, so there is no explicit connection in that sense. However, Nemesis was the symbol Camus correlated with the third phase of his work, which was unfinished at the time of his death. What little Camus did write, then, was incomplete. Had Camus lived to develop this phase of his thought, Dostoevsky would likely have figured prominently. In any event, given Dostoevsky’s more general influence, Camus’ initial concern with limits likely stemmed from his intense reading of Dostoevsky. As noted previously, Camus’ view of the nihilistic consciousness was deeply influenced by Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Possessed*. In these works, Dostoevsky traced political nihilism to its origins in human consciousness; there is little doubt that Camus’ political thought was transformed as a result of this. Along with the political crises of his time, moreover, Dostoevsky’s art illuminated the Promethean excesses of Nietzschean rebellion. Camus explains in *The Myth of Sisyphus* why he sides with Nietzsche over Dostoevsky on the philosophical question of transcendence.¹⁴⁷ Despite

¹⁴⁵ *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, p. 141.

¹⁴⁶ *Notebooks 1942-1951*, p. 156.

¹⁴⁷ As discussed briefly in chapter one, Camus accuses Dostoevsky of a “complete metaphysical reversal” (110). Dostoevsky, he claims, poses the absurd problem and then posits the immortality of the human soul. For Camus, transcendence of this kind is

his refusal “to conjure away one of the terms” of the absurd problem, however, Dostoevsky’s existential defense of the transcendent loomed large in Camus’ subsequent thought.¹⁴⁸ By grounding revolt in tension and by symbolizing the experiential source of foundations, Camus bridges – or at the very least aspires to bridge – the gap between Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. This is the sense in which revolt both crowns Camus’ early thought and represents the culmination of his dialogue with Nietzsche and Dostoevsky.

Thus far the practical implications of Camusian revolt remain unclear. Previously I concluded that revolt does not admit of definitive standards for action. The question is therefore what would an ethics of revolt look like without such standards? What, in other words, does Camus concretely advocate? Furthermore, if the act of revolt is creative of value, in what sense are those values universal or binding? If Camus’ thought is to have any practical relevance, these questions must be answered in the clearest of terms. Here I present a provisional response by first addressing some of the common objections to Camus’ political theory and then looking to Camus’ fiction for illustrations of authentic revolt. To help clarify the practical import of Camus’ conception of limits, I also delineate his notion of legitimate political violence.

Revolt in Practice

Several commentators have suggested that Camus’ thought is too vague or unsystematic to guide action in the world. Ronald Srigley, for example, recently argued that Camus’ “methodological skepticism” constrained his analysis because it prevented

contrary to the absurd, and cannot be accepted without negating it altogether; as a philosopher and an artist, Camus refuses to do this.

¹⁴⁸ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 31.

him from exploring “experiences that went beyond the limits they prescribed.”¹⁴⁹ Srigley is right to emphasize Camus’ skepticism, but it is untrue that Camus was prevented from exploring such experiences. Camus does not go beyond the limits of his presuppositions because that would exceed the bounds of absurdity. Again, Camus’ aim is to impose limits on political action.¹⁵⁰ He advocates an epistemological skepticism because it is ideas (of God, of history, of human nature) that give intellectual cover to violent actions. Hence he resists all claims to ultimate truths concerning reality or purpose. But this does not mean that Camus was closed to experiential truths. Instead he sought to reinvigorate those truths through the medium of art and fiction.

Critics have also claimed that Camus’ unwillingness to commit politically rendered his thought practically insignificant. A recent example of this critique can be found in Tony Judt’s *The Burden of Responsibility*, which treats Camus as an important but largely unpolitical thinker. “Not unconcerned with public affairs or uncaring about political choices,” Judt writes, Camus was nevertheless “by instinct and temperament an unaffiliated person.”¹⁵¹ For Judt, then, Camus’ reluctance to take sides reflected the ambiguity of his thought. Camus’ most vociferous critic, Jean-Paul Sartre, condemned Camus on similar grounds. Following the publication of *The Rebel*, Sartre dismissed Camus’ thought as unclear and ahistorical. On Sartre’s view, a political philosophy that failed to address historical conditions amounted to “an abstract, introspective search for

¹⁴⁹ Ronald Srigley, *Albert Camus’ Critique of Modernity* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2011), p. 82.

¹⁵⁰ “If rebellion could found a philosophy,” Camus writes in *The Rebel*, “it would be a philosophy of limits, of calculated ignorance, and of risk” (289).

¹⁵¹ Tony Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron and the French Twentieth Century* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 104.

principles to solace our metaphysical unhappiness.”¹⁵² Whereas Camus looked to the metaphysical origins of revolt, Sartre approached the problem from the perspective of the worker. Against Camus’ metaphysical analysis of revolt, Sartre argued: “The circumstances which bring about the crystallization of the masses into revolutionary mobs can with good reason be called historical: they arise from the social, economic and political transformations of the continent.”¹⁵³ Sartre rejected Camus’ call for limits because of the rebel’s asymmetrical relation to the power structure.¹⁵⁴ Indeed, for Sartre, a moderate revolt was a contradiction in terms. By virtue of his circumstance, the rebel confronts an order he cannot defeat conventionally. Andre Breton, a prominent poet and surrealist of the era, proffered a similar objection to Camus:

What is this phantom of revolt that Camus is trying to credit, and behind which he takes shelter, a form of revolt into which moderation has been introduced? Once the revolt has been emptied of its passionate substance, what could possibly remain? I have no doubt that many people will be duped by this artifice: it is a case of keeping the word and eliminating the thing itself.¹⁵⁵

Though hyperbolic, Breton’s (and Sartre’s) appraisal raises an important question.

Without a willingness to take extraordinary action, what becomes of revolt? Is it possible to retroactively impose upon revolt the kinds of unclear limits Camus propounds in *The Rebel*?

¹⁵² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), p. 36.

¹⁵³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Communists and Peace*, trans. Phillip R. Berk (New York: George Braziller, Inc, 1968), p. 209.

¹⁵⁴ Political rebels, Sartre argues, cannot so much as “budge without shaking society . . . they are revolutionary by virtue of their objective situation” (*The Communists and Peace*, p. 226).

¹⁵⁵ Andre Breton, “The Second Surrealist Manifesto,” in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 178.

To begin, it must be remembered that Camus' concern was to undermine theoretical justifications for violence. As the discussion of Hegel demonstrated, Camus was sensitive to the totalizing tendencies of movements obsessed with change and justice; and he was particularly disturbed by the capacity of intellectuals to justify crime on ideological grounds. Critics like Sartre and Breton misunderstand (or deliberately neglect) this aspect of Camus' thought. Revolt should not be seen as an attempt to explain reality or prescribe political action.¹⁵⁶ Camus was drawn to figures like Ivan Karamazov because he understood metaphysical revolt as a negation of reality. However, as Eubanks and Petrakis observe, such negation can lead "to a form of exile in which human beings are fundamentally unable to make judgments."¹⁵⁷ This inability to make judgments (impose value) was the cardinal problem of revolt for Camus. To historicize action, as Sartre urges, is to separate it from immediate experience; it also divorces the rebel from absurdity – indeed it forces him into a position in which his rebellion is contingent upon his non-recognition of reality; he must live in and constantly reorder the false world he has created. This has disastrous consequences for human life. It sets up a conflict between reality and the system purporting to explain it; and too often, Camus believes, it is reality that must give way. This is the point at which "rebellion,

¹⁵⁶ Nor should it be seen as ignoring material circumstances. In *The Rebel*, for instance, Camus writes that "if rebellion exists, it is because falsehood, injustice, and violence are part of the rebel's condition" (304). Contrary to the objections of Sartre and others, then, it is not true was oblivious to these realities. The question for Camus was always how best to respond to these conditions; their existence or justness was never in dispute.

¹⁵⁷ Cecil Eubanks and Peter Petrakis, "Reconstructing the World: Albert Camus and the Symbolization of Experience," *Journal of Politics* 61 (1999): 310.

forgetful of its origins . . . denies life, dashes toward destruction, and raises up the grimacing cohorts of petty rebels.”¹⁵⁸

Camus is thus not so much interested in defining revolt as he is in moderating its effects. He begins with the observation that revolt, whatever its origins, can lead either to solidarity or suffering.¹⁵⁹ In defense of solidarity, Camus sought a proximate form of rebellious politics that acknowledged the limits of human action. Jeffrey Isaac has offered what seems to me a much better understanding of Camus’ political aims. According to Isaac, it is a mistake to accuse Camus of ignoring history or of treating revolt as a purely metaphysical undertaking. Responding to critics who charge Camus with misrepresenting the nature of political struggle in *The Plague*, Isaac writes

They correctly saw that the rebellion depicted in *The Plague* is not a class struggle, that it involves no political parties or mass movements and has neither grandiose ideological ambitions nor any deep interest in state power. But they were wrong to conclude that it therefore represents a kind of pristine and moralistic political withdrawal. Rather, it depicts new kind of politics . . . In no way does it abandon history. But it refuses any kind of grand historical justification like that found in Marxism . . . Rieux lives thoroughly in the present. This does not make him indifferent to consequences. It is just that he chooses his ends and means soberly, and justifies them not in terms of a grand narrative but in terms of an active solidarity.¹⁶⁰

Here Isaac captures the essence of Camusian revolt. From an ethical perspective, Camus aims only to establish a pluralistic framework within which actions can be measured and judged.¹⁶¹ It lacks the certainty of metaphysical systems because this is what life with

¹⁵⁸ *The Rebel*, p. 304.

¹⁵⁹ Eubanks and Petrakis (1999) make this point well in their abovementioned article. If appropriately moderated, they claim, revolt “may serve to dignify and enhance human existence and even to evoke a community of shared pathos” (293). If it is not moderated, it leads instead to the rejection of life and living man.

¹⁶⁰ *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion*, pp. 156-57.

¹⁶¹ Sprintzen (1988) has also described Camus’ ethical thought in terms appropriate to Camus’ intent. Within Camus’ framework, he explains, “we do not deduce rules of

others demands. Values are self-constituted products of a political community; to be binding they must emerge from and be guided by dialogue and experience. This is what it means to participate in political life, and Camusian revolt cannot be understood apart from this fact.

The Just Assassins

In the play *The Just Assassins*, Camus offers a practical example of political action guided by a rebellious ethics. Here revolt is seen from the perspective of the revolutionary. Camus draws on historical events to show that even under extreme circumstances, we cannot speak of just and unjust action but only of action that recognizes limits. *The Just Assassins* is not a paean to pacifism, however. Violence is accepted as a necessary and indefensible reality. But at the same time Camus tries to establish a sense of measure and illustrate how the totalizing impulses of revolutionary action can be moderated by an authentic politics of rebellion.

Performed for the first time in 1949, *The Just Assassins* is the story of an insurrectionist group that aims to assassinate the Russian grand duke. It includes a small cast of three characters, each of whom represents a different rebellious attitude. Stephan is the absolutist; his devotion is total and he refuses to impose limits on action.¹⁶²

action; ethics is not mathematics or even law. Rather, we grasp limits to humane action and recognize that certain commitments cannot go together with others. This approach reveals limitations intrinsic to the realm of values, establishing binding hypotheticals, constraints of action within particular frameworks. Thus value claims should take an *if-then* form: *if* that is wished, *then* this must be taken into view. But the need to act in accordance with any specific ethical or human framework – with the *if*-clause of the hypothetical – can never be deduced” (131).

¹⁶² Stephan represents the ethic of efficacy, which I discussed in chapter two. He embodies the kind of means-ends thinking that Camus constantly opposed. This can be seen in the ease with which Stephan is willing to kill. “I don’t suffer from a tender heart,” he proudly claims, “that sort of nonsense cuts no ice with me . . . Not until the day comes

Kaliayev is the compassionate and authentic rebel; he opposes all attempts to rationalize murder. “When we kill,” he says, “we’re killing so as to build up a world in which there will be no more killing. We consent to being criminals so that at last the innocent . . . will inherit the earth.”¹⁶³ Kaliayev is continually troubled by the potential consequences of his actions.¹⁶⁴ Dora is the conscience of the characters; she is perpetually reminding them that there are moral limits that cannot be transgressed.¹⁶⁵ The tension that results from the interactions of these characters reflects the dynamic between rebellion and revolution; that is, it highlights the balance the rebel must strike between his demand for justice and his refusal to justify murder.

The key struggle in the play revolves around Stephan and Kaliayev. These men exemplify the opposing attitudes of rebellion and revolution. Stephan is the cocksure revolutionary. His world is simple and free of ambiguity. Exasperated by the group’s unwillingness to sacrifice children, Stephan explains his philosophy in clear terms:

There are no limits! The truth is that you don’t believe in the revolution, any of you. No, you don’t believe in it. If you did believe in it sincerely, with all your hearts; if you felt sure that, by dint of our struggles and sacrifices, some day we shall build up a new Russia, redeemed from despotism, a land of freedom that will gradually spread out over the whole earth; and if you felt convinced that then and only then, freed from his masters, and his superstitions, man will at last look up toward the sky, a god in his own right – how, I ask you, could the deaths of two children be weighed in the balance against such a faith? Surely you would claim for

when we stop sentimentalizing about children will the revolution triumph, and we be masters of the world” (256).

¹⁶³ *Caligula and three other Plays*, p. 245.

¹⁶⁴ “I want to be a doer of justice,” he proclaims, “not a man of blood” (259).

¹⁶⁵ Dora’s attitude is best expressed when she tells the group that Stephan is eager to kill the Grand Duke because “His death may help to bring nearer the time when Russian children will no longer die of hunger. That in itself is none too easy for him. But the death of the Grand Duke’s niece and nephew won’t prevent any child from dying of hunger. Even in destruction there’s a right way and a wrong way – and there are limits” (258).

yourselves the right to do anything and everything that might bring that day nearer!¹⁶⁶

There are several things worth noting here. First, Stephan has no regard for the present. When Camus speaks of revolutionary ideologies as “frustrated religions,” this is precisely what he has in mind.¹⁶⁷ Stephan rejects God but he cannot let go of transcendence. For him “the future is the only transcendent value.”¹⁶⁸ Stephan devalues life by using the nobility of his ends as justification for murder. Second, he eschews limits. At no point does Stephan consider the consequences of his actions. He is prepared to sacrifice anything in service to the revolution. Stephan is the sort of pseudo-humanist that Camus often associated with socialism: he “rejects the man of today in the name of the man of the future.”¹⁶⁹ Finally, Stephan’s aspirations are utopian. Against an absolute despotism he seeks to impose an absolute freedom, which is as undesirable as it is unattainable. Stephan’s actions reflect the “all or nothing” attitude of which Camus writes in *The Rebel*.¹⁷⁰ Interestingly, Stephan’s attitude is mirrored in *The Possessed* by Verkhovensky, who issues an analogous defense of unlimited action:

I ask you which you prefer: the slow way, which consists in the composition of socialistic romances and the academic ordering of the destinies of humanity a thousand years hence, while despotism will swallow the savory morsels which would almost fly into your mouths of themselves if you’d take a little trouble; or do you, whatever it may imply, prefer a quicker way which will at last untie your hands, and will not let humanity make its own social organization in freedom and in action, not on paper.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, pp. 258-59.

¹⁶⁷ See *The Rebel*, p. 167.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 166.

¹⁶⁹ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 209.

¹⁷⁰ *The Rebel*, p. 251.

¹⁷¹ *The Possessed*, p. 415.

Verkhovensky exhibits the same revolutionary mindset as Stephan; both advocate unlimited action in the name of a future freedom.

If Stephan is defined by certainty, Kaliayev is defined by doubt. Kaliayev affirms life and is prepared to act, but he will not blindly accept murder. In a revealing exchange with Stephan, Kaliayev says

Quite likely you are right. But those I love are the men who are alive today, and walk this same earth. It's they whom I hail, it is for them I am fighting, for them I am ready to lay down my life. But I shall not strike my brothers in the face for the sake of some far-off city, which, for all I know, may not exist. I refuse to add to the living injustice all around me for the sake of a dead justice . . . Killing children is a crime against a man's honor. And if one day the revolution thinks fit to break with honor, well, I'm through with revolution.¹⁷²

Kaliayev's desire to act is moderated by his conscience. Unlike Stephan, Kaliayev is not immersed in utopian fantasies of absolute freedom and justice. To be sure, he recognizes injustice, but he is faithful to the impulses of rebellion in a way that Stephan clearly is not. Rebellion remains for him both a declaration of human innocence and a protest against death. "I have chosen death," he declares, "so as to prevent murder from triumphing in the world."¹⁷³ Hence he will not consent to crime unless it can be justified in present experience. Kaliayev's revolution is only a means – to justice, to peace, to life. He refuses to countenance Stephan's rationalizations of murder.¹⁷⁴ Kaliayev is constantly questioning himself and the group as to their motives and aims. "Kaliayev doubted to the end," Camus writes, "but this doubt did not prevent him from acting; it is for that reason that he is the purest image of rebellion."¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² *Caligula and three other Plays*, p. 260.

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 261.

¹⁷⁴ In *The Rebel*, Camus writes that "Kaliayev proves, on the contrary, that though the revolution is a necessary means, it is not a sufficient end" (172).

¹⁷⁵ *The Rebel*, p. 173.

The third character, Dora, mediates the moral struggle between Stephan and Kaliayev. Her insistence on limits helps to balance the tension between them. She is the embodiment of Camus' ethical attitude. Like Kaliayev, Dora is continually burdened by the necessity of violence. Mindful of what they have done, she wonders whether their actions will ultimately prove self-defeating. "Nobody," she worries, "will want to look justice in the face again."¹⁷⁶ Dora is willing to adopt violence but only up to a certain point. She believes that to go too far, to try to achieve too much, is to betray the people in whose name they fight. Just as Ivan thinks the acceptance of suffering too high a price for salvation, Dora deems the acceptance of murder too high a price for justice. If you are willing to accept this, she says, it means "you have gone about it too fast . . . you are no longer men."¹⁷⁷ At its core, rebellion is an affirmation of life; to unconditionally accept murder is to abandon the entire project. This is the moral measure of revolt for Camus, and Dora's duty is to ensure that her fellow rebels do not exceed it.

Conclusion

Let us conclude by restating Camus' aims during this final period of thought. Camus is seeking a philosophy of politics that imposes limits and is consistent with the demands of absurdity. By this measure, his conception of revolt is perfectly coherent. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, for example, Camus invokes absurdity to establish the impossibility of absolute knowledge. He then rejects suicide as a consequence of the absurd.¹⁷⁸ In doing so, Camus lays the groundwork for a meaningful response to absurdity. Life is said to have meaning and value if it is lived within the limits of the

¹⁷⁶ *Caligula and three other Plays*, p. 296.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ Camus, preface to *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. v.

human condition. The ethical implications of this, while initially unclear, are quite significant. For one, Camus' absurdism nullifies the epistemological basis of ideologies. As I argued above, this undercuts the ideologue's moral certitude. The absurd is also a declaration of human innocence; as the discussion of *The Plague* suggested, it defines the human condition. For Camus this is a source of communion as well as an imperative to serve those with whom this condition is shared.¹⁷⁹

In *The Rebel* Camus extends his absurdist vision to include a positive philosophy of revolt. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, suicide was rejected, but murder was not. At this stage, Camus' metaphysics remain solipsistic, and there is not yet an ethics of responsibility and solidarity. This is no longer the case in *The Rebel* and *The Plague*. In these texts, Camus maintains his concept of the absurd, but, as Sagi notes, he develops "a metaphysics of human unity" within that very framework.¹⁸⁰ The limits marked by the absurd, moreover, are transferred to the political realm and action is constrained by experiential factors. Such grounds for action are hardly definitive, but again this is precisely Camus' point. Foundations must maintain their relative and provisional character, as they exist only insofar as they are continually re-affirmed in experience. Camus' meaning here is perhaps better expressed by the French sociologist Raymond Aron, who claimed that "Relativism is the authentic experience of politics."¹⁸¹ At any rate, to criticize Camus for failing to offer a practical guide to revolutionary action is to misunderstand his intent. After all, Camus is responding to the plague of nihilism. In his

¹⁷⁹ Thomas Hanna (1958) has similarly pointed to the humanist implications of absurdity. The absurd, Hanna says, affirms the "unique value of human life in a world which does not call man its own" (8).

¹⁸⁰ *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, p. 113.

¹⁸¹ Aron, Raymond. *Opium des intellectuals* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 169.

view, it was important to, first, reclaim the value of human life and, second, to establish moral limits on the basis of that claim. This is what the specter of nihilism in the twentieth century demanded. “The world that people like me are after,” Camus wrote, “is not a world in which people don’t kill each other . . . but a world in which murder is not legitimized.”¹⁸²

In terms of Camus’ interaction with Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, the revolt period is arguably the most significant. During his sensualist and absurdist periods, Camus is largely converging with Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. In his revolt works, Camus develops their insights in an effort to move beyond them. The worldliness of Nietzsche is translated into an experiential ground. Indeed because of its rootedness in reality, Camus writes, revolt “tries to realize itself . . . from bottom to top.”¹⁸³ The primacy of experience and the denial of transcendentals are thus key Nietzschean influences on Camus. At the same time, Nietzsche’s rejection of idealism (as well as his exaltation of becoming) committed him to a philosophy of action without apparent limits; as we have seen, Camus reacts strongly against this. Hence as Camus’ conception of revolt progresses from *The Stranger* to *The First Man*, there is an increased concern with limits. These limits were marked in *The Rebel*, but the medium of fiction allows Camus to concretize them in dramatic fashion.

Although it is never explicit, Camus’ critique of revolution seems to follow directly from his critique of Nietzsche.¹⁸⁴ Camus objects to Nietzsche’s emphasis on becoming because it negates being and therefore the source of living tension. Deprived

¹⁸² *Camus at Combat*, p. 260.

¹⁸³ *The Rebel*, p. 298.

¹⁸⁴ However, Camus’ critique of revolutionary action is preceded by his analysis of Nietzsche in *The Rebel*. There are thus textual grounds for making this connection.

of a moral counter-force, Nietzsche's world is propelled perpetually by affirmations of power and will. The result of this is a kind of circularity without limits or direction.¹⁸⁵ In the political realm, this circularity imperils the course of revolution. Here, as Camus writes, "the word revolution retains the meaning that it has in astronomy. It is a movement that describes a complete circle."¹⁸⁶ Revolutionary action thus turns endlessly upon itself as it seeks to impose form on the world. In this way, it begins in the realm of ideas and ends by translating those ideas onto the historical plane. Revolt is distinct from revolution in that it reverses this movement; that is to say, "it leads from individual experience into the realm of ideas."¹⁸⁷ Well beyond his sensualist and absurdist periods, then, Camus continues to take his philosophical bearing from Nietzsche. That Camus does so while rejecting Nietzscheanism only confirms the fundamental importance of Nietzsche to Camus' thought.

Lastly, one of the primary claims of this study is that Camus' thought is often suspended between Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. This is most evident in Camus' revolt period. In *The Rebel*, for instance, Camus' divergence from Nietzsche is almost inversely proportional to his convergence with Dostoevsky. Indeed Camus invokes Ivan Karamazov's "everything is permitted" in order to highlight the problematic nature of Nietzsche's logic.¹⁸⁸ Thus when Camus announced to Grenier that he would use his essay on revolt to "start the critique of Nietzscheanism," it was in part because of

¹⁸⁵ To be sure, conflict and tension are central to Nietzsche, but often his dialectic is divided between the weak and the strong, between the creative and the uncreative, and between the slave and the master. Camus may find truth in this aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy, but he rejects it as potentially destructive of political order.

¹⁸⁶ *The Rebel*, p. 106.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ See *The Rebel*, p. 71.

Dostoevsky.¹⁸⁹ This juxtaposition suggests, furthermore, that Dostoevsky's arguments concerning values and foundations influenced Camus' mounting concern for limits. In *The Rebel*, therefore, there is a sustained emphasis on foundations, and the agonism of revolt functions as a tensional source of order. While it is not clear that Camus is able to preserve the unifying force of Dostoevsky's Christ-ideal, he does posit an experiential basis for limits, values, and solidarity. In view of Camus' resistance to essentialism, this is the most his political thought could hope to accomplish.

¹⁸⁹ *Correspondence, 1932-1960*, p. 90.

CHAPTER SIX CONCLUSION

“If the duration of history is not synonymous with the duration of the harvest, then history, in effect, is no more than a fleeting and cruel shadow in which man has no more part. He who dedicates himself to this history dedicates to nothing and, in his turn, is nothing. But he who dedicates himself to the duration of his life, to the house he builds, to the dignity of mankind, dedicates himself to the earth and reaps from it the harvest and sows its seed and sustains the world again and again.” – Camus

Camus was never content with theorizing about justice and suffering. Indeed he was one of the few French intellectuals to risk his life in service to the resistance. This won him a considerable amount of praise and admiration. It also exasperated his contemporaries, many of whom decried his high-mindedness. But Camus’ commitment to action was quite sincere. He tried desperately to avoid the ideological posturing on all sides. Instead he sought to serve justice at the most concrete level. In the ideological climate of post-World War II Europe, this was extraordinarily rare.

Despite the criticism he endured in the latter part of his life, Camus’ humanist legacy has grown steadily since his early death in 1960. In France and much of the world his works are continually published and consumed. In addition to his literary success, many of Camus’ political ideas, particularly his insights into ideology and revolt, have proven increasingly prescient. The task of this final chapter is threefold: to summarize what Camus takes from his dialogue with Nietzsche and Dostoevsky; to explain how he transforms these insights; and to clarify the lasting significance of his project.

Camus’ dialogue with Nietzsche and Dostoevsky orbited around two problems: nihilism and foundations. During his early sensualist period, Camus’ ideas on these matters are latent or undeveloped. His writings are highly stylized and his concerns are mostly aesthetic and existential. However, Nietzsche’s influence is already apparent. As chapter three demonstrated, Camus’ sensualist works engage a number of Nietzschean

themes, including aestheticism, foundationalism, and worldly affirmation. Although the absurd dilemma is not formally articulated, Camus is clearly interested in the problems of an absurd existence. And while he has not yet considered the political implications of absurdity, he is already exploring its significance at the level of the individual. This is evident in Camus' early essays and notebooks, where happiness in an absurd world is the central theme. In *Nuptials*, for example, Camus praises sensual living and denounces other-worldliness in explicitly Nietzschean terms. The Nietzschean roots of these convictions are confirmed in Camus' notebooks, where Nietzsche is often quoted and referenced.¹

In Camus' early fiction, Nietzsche's influence persists. In *A Happy Death*, Nietzsche's doctrines of eternal recurrence and *amor fati* are dramatized and affirmed. In *Caligula*, however, which was completed near the end of Camus' sensualist period, there is a tonal shift. Whereas in *A Happy Death* Camus seems to echo Nietzsche's momentism, in *Caligula* a tension emerges between absurdity and sensualism. The kind of self-affirmation Nietzsche advocated is carried to its logical conclusion and the result is political nihilism. *Caligula* is thus the first work in which Camus begins to explore the social consequences of Nietzsche's affirmative response to nihilism.

When Camus' absurdist period begins around 1942, the dialogue with Nietzsche continues, but the primary focus is meaning and values. This is first apparent in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Here Camus grapples with the epistemological implications of absurdity and appears to embrace Nietzsche's perspectivism. Nietzsche's account of truth also forms the basis of Camus' metaphysics of ideology, which is not fully

¹ See chapter two (pp. 5-8) for an extensive analysis of Camus' interaction with Nietzsche during this period.

developed until *The Rebel*.² As suggested above, *The Myth of Sisyphus* is also the text in which Camus' dialogue with Dostoevsky emerges in earnest. Although he does not abandon Nietzsche's anti-essentialism, Dostoevsky's critique of nihilism (in works such as *The Possessed* and *The Brothers Karamazov*) problematizes absurdity in new ways for Camus. The connections Dostoevsky draws between absurdity and alienation awaken Camus to the individual's struggle for meaning in a world without transcendence. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus engages Dostoevsky directly and examines suicide. For Camus, in fact, suicide emerges as an absurd theme in Dostoevsky's works.³ While Camus challenges Dostoevsky's claim that absurdity renders life meaningless, the force of Dostoevsky's arguments seem to undermine the worldliness of Camus' early writings.

Another problematic in Camus' mature thought concerns the tension between nihilism and transcendence. This question recurs throughout Camus' absurdist writings. As the dialogue between nihilism and transcendence is personified by Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, these are the works in which Camus' dialogue with both thinkers begins to crystallize. Having adopted Nietzsche's perspectivism in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus remains committed to an anti-essentialist position. However, by the time he publishes *The Plague* and *The Rebel*, Camus appears to question the logical outcome of Nietzsche's radical skepticism. In particular, Nietzsche's individualist calls to self-affirmation conflict with Camus' burgeoning desire to impose limits on action.⁴ Initially appealing,

² As chapter five argues, Dostoevsky's account of historical nihilism and logical crime is also inform Camus' understanding of totalizing ideologies.

³ See *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 108.

⁴ As I argue in chapter four (pp. 8-10), this conflict is at the center of Camus' play *Caligula*.

Nietzsche's individualism is now seen as antithetical to communal life, which demands a shared basis for values.

Camus' critique of Nietzsche reaches its climax in *The Rebel*. Here Camus clarifies his rejection of Nietzscheanism and the implicit link between metaphysical angst and political nihilism is articulated. For the first time, moreover, Camus applies Dostoevsky's psychological insights to his analysis of revolt, and the connections Dostoevsky makes between individual and societal disorder (notably in *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Possessed*) are affirmed. This is most apparent in Camus' engagement with Dostoevsky's literary character, Ivan Karamazov. As mentioned, with Ivan metaphysical revolt leads to a moral impasse, and the problem of individual meaning becomes a question of virtue for society as such. Using Ivan as a model, Camus traces the movement from metaphysical revolt to historical revolution. Although Ivan's revolt gives way to nihilism, his example shaped Camus' subsequent thought in two ways. First, Ivan poses the problem of relativity and limits without God. For Camus, this clarified the political implications of a world without transcendent standards. Second, Ivan's subordination of truth to justice as well as his concern for human suffering constituted a positive ground for human solidarity. Indeed much of Camus' revolt-era fiction articulates an experiential alternative to nihilism and transcendence on the basis of Ivan's moral declaration.

Camus' dialogue with Nietzsche and Dostoevsky culminates during the revolt period. As the previous chapter concluded, Camus' political thought ends with a call to dialogue and moderation. This is informed in different but equally important ways by Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. On the one hand, Camus' commitment to uncertainty,

present experience, and creative engagement are functions of his early embrace of Nietzsche. These are principles which emerge in Camus' youthful writings and which appear to follow from Camus' initial encounter with Nietzsche's works. On the other hand, Dostoevsky's emphasis on foundations, guiding principles, and order are preserved in Camus' politics of revolt. From at least *The Plague* onward, Camus defines these problems in distinctly Dostoevskian terms, and there is little doubt that his solutions are informed by Dostoevsky's literature. The question we must now ask is to what extent does Camus succeed in his synthesis of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky? And what, if anything, does Camus' success or failure suggest about the possibilities for an authentically absurd politics?

Between Nihilism and Transcendence

Much of Camus' political thought seeks to bridge the gap between nihilism and transcendence. This work has argued that Nietzsche and Dostoevsky personify Camus' dialogue with these phenomena. As a diagnostician, Nietzsche identifies nihilism as the crisis of modernity; he traces its origins to various human pathologies and points a way forward for the creative individual. However useful it may have been, Nietzsche insisted that the positing of transcendent ideals was no longer justifiable. The metaphysical suppositions on which those ideals were based had collapsed, and the consequences of this were already apparent. Hence he urges mankind (philosophers in particular) to create new values rooted in worldly affirmations of life and will.

Dostoevsky seems to understand all that Nietzsche does (particularly at the level of the psyche), but Dostoevsky defends transcendence on existential grounds. Unlike Nietzsche, Dostoevsky regards transcendence as essential for human flourishing. On his

view, belief in a higher idea of life was both a moral and a political imperative. The metaphysical and epistemological foundations of faith were always secondary to its practical benefits. For Dostoevsky, moreover, a shared conception of the meaning of life was the true locus of order in society. Divorced from such a conception, individuals became alienated from their communities and the result was political nihilism.

Camus' thought is properly situated between these two poles. Fundamentally, Camus agrees with the spirit of Nietzsche's "God is dead" remark. That is to say, he agrees that God as a source of meaning and value has lost its motive force. He also concedes and laments that enlightenment thought has emptied the world of transcendent meaning. For Camus, in fact, the nihilism of twentieth century politics is a consequence of this loss of meaning, and Nietzsche was among the first to awaken him to this fact. Indeed Nietzsche's diagnosis is the starting point for Camus' absurdist inquiries.

Despite agreeing with Nietzsche, Camus appears to be influenced (if not convinced) by Dostoevsky's affirmation of the *idea* of God. As mentioned in chapters four and five, Camus' references to Dostoevsky as well as his choice of literary motifs suggest that Camus grappled constantly with Dostoevsky's defense of transcendence. This was not apparent until his revolt period, but from *The Plague* onward Camus is in constant dialogue with Dostoevsky in this regard. We have seen the complicated form this takes in Camus' works, now we can evaluate Camus' broader thought in terms of this struggle between nihilism and transcendence.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus appears to reject a transcendent ground for values. As noted, Camus even criticizes Dostoevsky for betraying the absurd by holding forth on transcendence. In *The Rebel*, however, Camus notes the persistence of the

transcendent impulse in the various ideologies and scientific systems that followed “the theological era.”⁵ In historical Marxism and Auguste Comte’s system in particular, Camus sees models of “the horizontal religions of our times.”⁶ Although it is never explicit, Camus’ analysis implies that the hunger for transcendence (of which religions and ideologies are manifestations) is perhaps irrepressible in the human soul. Nietzsche reached a similar conclusion in his thought, which is why he insisted that we must choose our mask of transcendence wisely. Likewise for Camus, the question was how to satisfy this desire for transcendence without sacrificing the truth of absurdity.

Camus’ experiential alternative emerges in his revolt-era writings, particularly *The Rebel* and *The Plague*. Together these works locate a ground for values that is beyond the individual but not transcendent in the conventional or religious sense. This ground is experiential insofar as it begins with the act of revolt; it is transcendent in the sense that it affirms life and value while also imposing limits on action. The kind of transcendence that Camus seeks, therefore, is neither vertical (religious) nor horizontal (historical); it is a universal experience that transforms the isolated individual into a member of a community of revolt. As the preceding chapter explained, Camusian revolt is about awareness – of the value of life, of the universality of suffering, and of the absurd condition which all men share. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*, transcendence is said to escape the problem of life by giving it a false solution. Worse still, it removes human beings from concrete sources of meaning – nature, suffering, friendship, and the kinds of individual action that lead to a sense of community; these are

⁵ Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage International, 1991), p. 195.

⁶ Ibid, p. 196.

the sources of an earthly kingdom in Camus' works. Ultimately, Camus sees revolt as the basis for an intersubjective consciousness; it uses experience-symbolizations to inspire a kind of imaginative identification with others. At bottom, Camus tries to cultivate man's capacity to think from the standpoint of another. Hence the movement from individual to collective revolt in Camus' novels (notably *The Stranger* and *The Plague*) is marked by the outward expansion of the individual's consciousness.

Although sympathetic to Dostoevsky's Christ-ideal, Camus rejects it as a product of man's metaphysical rearing; it is tethered to what Nietzsche often called "idols." Perhaps because of his Nietzschean roots, Camus never wavers in his commitment to anti-essentialism. Thus Camus does not conceive of revolt as an ideal in the traditional sense; rather, it is an experiential symbol that points to man's embeddedness in a common situation. Participation in the community of revolt does not require adherence to particular doctrine, nor does it demand that one commit to the absolute truth of an idea. For Camus it is essential to adhere to values and practices that are both contingent and binding. The values born of revolt (life, limits, compassion, dialogue), though relative, are affirmed continually through collective action.

In many ways, Camus rejects the language of absolutism and relativism, as both categories presuppose that values require foundations in the traditional sense. Indeed, as Nietzsche often noted, nihilism was an inevitable consequence of this model. Camus' philosophy of revolt escapes this problem by carrying Nietzsche's perspectivism to its proper conclusion. That is to say, Camus relinquishes the idea of absolute truth and advocates an experiential pragmatism in which values are collectively acknowledged and mutually reinforced. The source of limits and values, he insists, cannot be reduced to a

unified principle. For this reason, a community of revolt is held together not by a common conception of truth but rather by a commonly recognized experience and a commitment to active dialogue. In the end, Camus sought a ground for solidarity that recognized distinctions and embraced the tensional quality of human existence. This is why Camus does not so much resolve the problem of foundationalism as reject its underlying assumptions.

In *On Human Conduct*, Michael Oakeshott argues that a “morality is neither a system of general principles nor a code of rules . . . It is not a device for formulating judgments about conduct or for solving so-called moral problems, but a practice in terms of which to think, to choose, to act, and to utter.”⁷ Revolt is a political morality in precisely this sense; it eschews abstractions and embraces the tensions of a shared and absurd life. Rather than demand unity, revolt tolerates difference and affirms those things which all human beings share, namely a desire to live and an aversion to suffering. In this way, revolt is above all a reorientation toward the world, a renewed commitment to present experience.

The question of whether Camus succeeds in his synthesis of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky is difficult to answer. To address it we might also ask whether Camus successfully bridges the gap between nihilism and transcendence. Even the most astute critics, such as David Sprintzen, have argued that Camus’ alternatives are vague and “tend to be little more than moralisms.”⁸ Like Sartre and others, Sprintzen claims that Camus fails to appreciate the individual’s relation to historical processes and,

⁷ Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 79.

⁸ David Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1988), p. 278.

consequently, fails to understand humans “as the product of their own natural, historical, collective self-creation.”⁹ As illustrated in chapter five, however, it is untrue that Camus ignored man’s historical situation.¹⁰ Indeed Camus was deeply attuned to the historical and institutional origins of human suffering. As to the claim that revolt is impractical and unappreciative of humanity’s “collective self-creation,” I believe this error arises from a failure to understand the radical nature of Camus’ project. As the Oakeshott quote above suggested, the ethics of revolt are non-prescriptive by design. Camus’ goal is not to posit a definitive ground for judging and deciding; for that is what foundationalist systems have done. Instead he tries to identify the preconditions for a new kind of intersubjective politics, one in which the body and the present moment are supreme. Experience and authentic communication are fundamental because they provide a general framework within which to judge action, but only on a provisional basis. The acceptance of uncertainty is a product of Camus’ desire to impose limits on action. Given the eruption of nihilistic violence in Europe, it is not surprising that Camus thought imposing limits the most urgent problem of his time. As Roger Quilliot observes, Camus believed the best way to do this was to purge politics of “the prophetic spirit and the romantic sense of mission” which came to dominate revolutionary politics in the twentieth century.¹¹ Judged in this light, Camus’ notion of revolt is of greater value than many of his critics suggest, particularly Sprintzen and Sartre.

It is also inaccurate to claim that Camus fails to account for the role of “collective self-creation.” Indeed the mythology of the rebel and the first man are attempts to re-

⁹ Ibid, p. 277.

¹⁰ See pp. 38-42.

¹¹ Roger Quilliot, *The Sea and Prisons* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1970), p. 201.

interpret the meaning of metaphysical revolt, to transform it into a collective experience. By collective experience I do not mean collective action involving the use of a party or movement to effect political change; this is precisely the sort of action against which Camus is reacting. In Camus' writings, particularly his late fiction, individual revolt is based upon and brings about a collective sense of the human condition. Out of this collective sense a genuine community of revolt can emerge. Revolt is thus a creative act whose symbolic significance transcends the individual. Camus does not, therefore, deny that historical conditions shape human life and consciousness; rather, he is evoking the classical symbols of exile, judgment, and kingdom to awaken human beings to the reality of suffering and loss. For Camus, these symbols have the capacity to alter human consciousness, even in the face of historical necessity and material scarcity. To be sure, Camus does not present a scheme whereby political institutions or decisions can be categorically judged. However, as Pete Petrakis concludes, Camus' "analysis does allow for a thorough evaluation of social, cultural, and ethical foundations."¹² This is all Camus intends to do with his theory of revolt, and its significance must be judged on this basis alone.

It is easier to grasp what Camus is trying to accomplish if it is seen in the larger context of his thought. Fundamentally, Camus sees nihilism and transcendence (be it religious or historical) as equally problematic. Nihilism either obliterates standards altogether or it leads to the exaltation of power. In novels like *The Possessed*, Dostoevsky illustrates this problem with astonishing clarity. Alternatively, because they are often rooted in abstractions, transcendentals divorce judgment (theory) from

¹²*Exile, Judgment, and Kingdom*, p. 282.

experience (*praxis*) such that any action is in principle justifiable. This is more or less the problem of idealism as defined by Nietzsche – although Nietzsche was concerned with the life-denying implications of idealist thought. For Camus, transcendent foundations are beyond the realm of human understanding. More importantly, because they are divorced from experience, they often fail to impose limits on action.

In the final analysis, Camus' philosophy of revolt seeks to accomplish two things. First, it establishes a ground for human judgment beyond metaphysics or transcendentals. By doing so, Camus avoids the epistemological traps of nihilism and transcendence. Second, revolt identifies ethical boundary conditions on the basis of which certain actions (murder, for example) can be deemed illegitimate. Camus' success on these two fronts is a matter of legitimate debate, but that debate must begin by acknowledging the impetus and intent of Camus' political project. Here I have defined this project in terms of Camus' dialogue with Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. In addition to crystallizing the problems against which Camus was reacting, this approach has also clarified the novelty of Camus' efforts. Whereas many political thinkers have sought to establish what human beings can and cannot know, Camus rejects this epistemological method. Instead he accepts the impossibility of certainty and tries to reconnect knowledge and meaning to its proper ground in experience. In this sense, Camus posits something akin to virtue ethics, according to which the question is not what shall I do, but who shall I be?

That there are limitations to Camus' approach is undeniable; however, this is not surprising given the scale of his ambitions. Ultimately Camus wants to modify our expectations of politics and truth. This process begins in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where the limits of human knowledge are marked by absurdity. In *The Rebel*, Camus builds a

political philosophy on the basis of these absurd revelations. Untruth and doubt are affirmed, but meaning is preserved (and nihilism is rejected) on account of human volition. In his fiction, Camus aims to evoke a sense of solidarity and limits. His efforts may not achieve the sense of awe that can be inspired by foundationalist pleas, but this is a necessary concession Camus makes to absurdity. A witness to the political horrors of the twentieth century, Camus believed that rejecting doctrinaire thinking required that we also reject the consolations of transcendent meaning. To compensate for this loss and to resist nihilism, Camus engaged various experience-symbolizations in order to recover a sense of value and community in the modern world. While this effort does not achieve the explanatory depth or prescriptive power of historical ideologies or transcendent religions, it does address the alienation and excesses of modern life. For Camus, this was a necessary first step in the pursuit of an authentic politics of revolt.

Camus' Legacy

Camus' controversial position on Algeria reflects his lasting concern with suffering and limits. The choice between competing certainties was anathema to his thinking, mostly because it neglected the complexities of political life and discouraged productive discourse. This is no less true today. Further, while Camus' moderation was condemned by many of his contemporaries, his obstinacy now seems remarkably prescient. In the case of Algerian War of Independence, for example, Camus was widely criticized for his inability to side either with France or the Algerian rebels. Yet Camus' silence was not the result of paralysis. Indeed he worked feverishly behind the scenes on behalf of many political prisoners. Camus refused to choose sides because he believed that neither faction had a monopoly on justice. "I want Arab militants to preserve the

justice of their cause by condemning the massacre of civilians,” he wrote, “just as I want the French to protect their rights and their future by openly condemning the massacres of the repression.”¹³

Fundamentally, Camus was not interested in a meaningless victory for France or the Algerian independence movement; that is, one that failed to break the cycle of violence and retaliation plaguing Algeria. Hence, as a recent article concludes, Camus continued to hold that “a third way between colonial oppression and Algerian independence was possible.”¹⁴ This third way involved a commitment to dialogue and non-violent resolution. In “Letter to an Algerian Militant,” Camus explains his reasoning quite well:

But I know from experience that to say these things today is to venture into a no-man’s-land between hostile armies. It is to preach the folly of war as bullets fly. Bloodshed may sometimes lead to progress, but more often it brings only greater barbarity and misery. He who pours his heart into such a plea can expect only laughter and the din of the battlefield in reply. And yet someone must say these things, and since you propose to try, I cannot let you take such an insane and necessary step without standing with you in fraternal solidarity . . . The crucial thing is to leave room for whatever dialogue may still be possible, no matter how limited. It is to defuse tensions, no matter how tenuous and fleeting the respite may be. To that end, each of us must preach peace to his own side. The inexcusable massacres of French civilians will lead to other equally stupid attacks on Arabs and Arab property.¹⁵

Camus thus foresaw that a victory – for either side – won through terror would result not in freedom but in further destruction.¹⁶ Such was the cyclical nature of violence without

¹³ Albert Camus, *Algerian Chronicles*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 142.

¹⁴ Thomas Meaney, “The Colonist of Good Will: On Albert Camus,” *Nation Magazine*, September 2013, p. 41.

¹⁵ *Algerian Chronicles*, pp. 114-15.

¹⁶ The post-war history of Algeria suggests that Camus’ concerns were more than justified. For instance, as soon as Algeria won its independence in 1962, the new

limits.¹⁷ Instead Camus pushed for a more pragmatic and peaceful resolution, one that secured political and economic justice for Algerians and respected the rights of the French settlers. In another letter on the crisis, Camus issues a final plea:

I therefore propose that both camps commit themselves publicly and simultaneously to a policy of not harming civilian populations, no matter what the circumstances. For the time being, such a commitment would not change the situation. Its purpose would simply be to make the conflict less implacable and to save innocent lives.¹⁸

These are not the words of a disconnected moralist. Camus was never blind to the political realities in Algeria; on the contrary, he accepted the necessity of violence and struggle. He merely enjoined each side to recognize certain limits, and to do so not for moral reasons but because the alternative was interminable conflict. “How can one condemn the excesses of the repression,” he argued, “if one ignores or says nothing about the extremes of the rebellion?”¹⁹ Camus’ moderation was thus a response to the poverty and hopelessness of either-or approaches to political conflicts. In his writings on Algeria, it is clear that Camus’ intent was to end the escalation and to establish the basis for a third way. Unlike so many of his contemporaries, Camus’ fidelity to a measured justice prevented him from adopting the totalizing attitudes that defined his historical moment. This is evident in his comments on Algeria just as it is in his critique of historical revolt in *The Rebel*. While this position alienated Camus from many of his intellectual peers,

president Ahmed Ben Bella began violently purging the FLN of elements he believed were willing to negotiate with the French during the war.

¹⁷ Camus elaborates on this time in a speech he gave in Algiers on January 22, 1956: “The hideous face of this solidarity can be seen in the infernal dialectic according to which what kills one side also kills the other. Each camp blames the other, justifying its own violence in terms of its adversary’s. The endless dispute over who committed the first wrong becomes meaningless. Because two populations so similar and yet so different, and each worthy of respect, have not been able to live together, they are condemned to die together, with rage in their hearts” (*Algerian Chronicles*, p. 153).

¹⁸ *Algerian Chronicles*, p. 138.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 142.

his moral clarity continues to resonate in our own time, particularly with those seeking justice in a world without apparent meaning.

Camus' enduring significance can also be attributed to his understanding of the incompatibility of violence and dialogue and, more generally, to his critique of ideology. In a controversial speech in Algeria, Camus explains his view of the former in the clearest terms:

The struggle has taken on an implacable character that arouses on both sides irrepressible rage and passions that can be slaked only by escalation. 'No further discussion is possible.' This is the attitude that kills any chance of a future and makes life impossible. What follows is blind struggle, in which the French decide to ignore the Arabs, even if they know deep down that the Arab demand for dignity is justified, and the Arabs decide to ignore the French, even though they deep down that the French of Algeria also have a right to security and dignity on the land we all share. Steeped in bitterness and hatred, each side finds it impossible to listen to the other. Every proposal, no matter what is nature, is greeted with suspicion and immediately twisted into a form that renders it useless. Little by little we become caught in a web of old and new accusations, acts of vengeance, and endless bitterness, as in an ancient family quarrel in which grievances accumulate generation after generation to the point where not even the most upright and humane judge can sort it out. It becomes difficult to imagine how such an affair can end.²⁰

Certainly Camus is not the first to draw this connection. As an artist, however, Camus was able to articulate these ideas using traditional symbols and *pathos* in a far more powerful way. Indeed that Camus resisted injustice via art is itself an important part of his legacy. In his fiction, Camus describes in existential and symbolic terms what is often inexplicable in historical or empirical terms. In "The Growing Stone," for example, he shows how language conceals important commonalities between individuals and cultures. While reason often fails to bridge these divisions, Camus uses various symbolisms to emphasize their origins in a common experience. Thus in "The Growing

²⁰ Ibid, p. 154.

Stone” and other works, authentic dialogue begins paradoxically with a silent recognition of a shared fate and condition. This dialogic communion is impossible, Camus suggests, when men seek either to submit or persuade each other. Perhaps there is a naïveté to this aspect of Camus’ thought, but it points to a deeper truth, namely that solidarity must be grounded in experience, not in ideas or a misguided belief that differences are to be reconciled rather than affirmed.

Camus understood intuitively that human beings are often divided not by reality itself but by their ideas concerning reality. He does not deny that there are just material reasons for conflict, however. Camus is quite clear about this in *The Rebel*. Instead he points to the uncertainty of our knowledge to emphasize the need for limits. It is the fusion of unchallengeable principles and legitimate material grievances that typically produces the most bloodshed. “For what strikes me amid all the polemics, threats, and eruptions of violence,” he writes, “is everyone’s good intentions. Everyone . . . believes that his truth is likely to make men happy. And yet the conjunction of all these good intentions leads to this infernal world, in which men are still being killed.”²¹ For Camus, extremism takes hold when people cease to doubt their “own certitudes and knowledge.”²² This is tied to the larger problem of ideology. Ideologies are destructive not because of their content but because of their justificatory power. Absolutely certain of his convictions, the ideologue sacrifices present life and experience in service to some future end. This is a peculiar form of nihilism, which Camus often referred to as political

²¹ Albert Camus, *Camus at Combat*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New Jersey, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 260.

²² *Algerian Chronicles*, p. 24.

realism. “The errors of both the Right and the Left,” he lamented, “define the nihilism of our times.”²³

Despite its utility, Camus did not think critical reason a reliable check against such ideological distortions. As conceptual tools, Camus believed that reason and logic were too often handmaidens to ideology. Owing to Nietzsche’s early influence, Camus viewed reason as a prop used to rationalize a particular perspective or narrative. Hence Camus sought to close the gap between theory and action. Human action had to be justified in terms of values rooted in experience and awareness, not in ideas concerning history or the future. Whatever his theoretical shortcomings, this is a valuable contribution. That Camus was able to formulate these concerns in such universal terms only adds to his continued importance.

Camus’ aversion to ideological abstractions is related to his broader concern with the monologic quality of political disputes. As explanatory narratives, ideologies are quite useful; they order the world; they situate an individual or a group within a larger historical context; and they justify interpretations of reality. For Camus, however, ideologies also undermine authentic communication. To bind one’s political identity to a particular ideology is to be invested in the truth of that ideology. This determines how individuals interpret the world and, more importantly, how they interact with one another. In the political realm, this carries enormous implications.

²³ Ibid, p. 32.

Most obviously, it reduces political discourse to a struggle amongst competing and irreconcilable worldviews. Camus spoke directly to this in an article for *Combat*:

We have witnessed lying, humiliation, killing, deportation, and torture, and in each instance it was impossible to persuade the people who were doing these things not to do them, because they were sure of themselves and because there is no way of persuading an abstraction, or, to put it another way, the representative of an ideology.²⁴

For Camus, then, ideologues are not engaged in honest conversation about reality; they are defending fixed doctrines. In *The Rebel*, Camus describes this as the vain attempt “to fit the world into a theoretic frame.”²⁵ Facts matter only insofar as they correspond to a pre-determined narrative. As a result, political exchanges are monologic rather than dialogic, and reality itself is an ancillary concern. Camus felt that the consequences of this were truly calamitous. Besides diminishing the role of experience, it obscured the origins of political disputes and denied the fundamental commonalities among human beings. To the extent that Camus was able to identify this aspect of ideology, his writings remain vitally important.

Taken together, Camus’ thought and art offers a nascent picture of our political natures, the origins of which recent scholarship has begun to illuminate.²⁶ To begin, as a philosopher of the absurd, Camus develops a psychology of revolutionary politics, according to which ideologies are reactions against meaninglessness. Like the religions they replaced, ideologies impose order onto the world. But this is precisely why absurdity is essential to Camus’ political thought. One has to accept the absence of given

²⁴ Camus at *Combat*, p. 118.

²⁵ *The Rebel*, p. 106.

²⁶ Avi Tuschman’s *Our Political Nature* (2013) is a particularly good example of this. In this work, Tuschman utilizes recent findings across disciplines to unearth the dynamics at the root of our political convictions. Summarizing Tuschman’s research is beyond the scope of this study, but it is worth noting that Camus’ existential insights anticipate many of Tuschman’s core findings.

meaning in order to appreciate the responsibility of human beings to act and judge on their own terms. This responsibility includes the imperative to create and affirm ethical values. By undermining the metaphysical origins of ideology, Camus also reorients human beings to experience. While Camus does not suppose that inherent political differences can be reconciled, he argues persuasively that sustained awareness of their common roots is a critical first step. Dr. Rieux's cry that "there are more things to admire in men than to despise" is an expression of this theme; it implies that there is a nobility to human life that transcends our deepest divisions. But only an extraordinary mindfulness is capable of grounding the sort of virtue ethics advocated by Camus. Finally, Camus points to the need for an experiential politics of revolt. Far from advocating a Utopian scheme in which human solidarity trumps concrete differences, Camus demands only that we think differently about the world and others. His choice to articulate this via the symbolism of revolt may indeed limit him as a political scientist. As an artist, however, he remains among the most important moral voices of his and our time. And although Camus does not ground any fixed or transcendent values, he does, as Lev Braun notes, provide "an incentive to those who have preserved the integrity of the rebel's initial experience."²⁷

Camus' thought is best seen as a reaction against the extremism of ideological politics. This is most powerfully expressed in his essay, *Helen's Exile*. In a passionate defense of moderation, Camus praises the Greek sense of beauty and measure: "Admission of ignorance, rejection of fanaticism, the limits of the world and of man, the

²⁷ Lev Braun, *Witness of Decline* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1974), p. 191.

beloved face, and finally beauty – this is where we shall be on the side of the Greeks.”²⁸

Camus admires this attitude for two essential and related reasons. First, he thinks it more humane. Only a fidelity to limits (epistemological and otherwise) can resist the totalizing temptations of nihilism and foundationalism. Second, as an artist, Camus finds the Greek conception of limits and balance more beautiful. Acknowledging the antimonies of nature and life, Camus argues, the Greeks “could understand nothing of our idea of justice,” which is necessarily total.²⁹ For Camus, the modern historical spirit stands in opposition to the Greek spirit, which was fundamentally artistic. Modernity, on the other hand, preferring history to beauty, “steels itself to attain the absolute and authority; it wants to transfigure the world before having exhausted it.”³⁰ This view is consistent with Camus’ early embrace of Nietzsche as well as his appreciation for Plotinus, which is expressed in his dissertation and reaffirmed in *Helen’s Exile*. In the end, Camus’ moral vision was inseparable from his aestheticism. To see the world from the perspective of the artist was, in some sense, to see it as both impermanent and as an invitation to create within the limits of the human condition. Hence he writes in the final passage of *Helen’s Exile* that the future of humanity “lies in the struggle between creation and inquisition.”³¹

Ultimately, Camus’ honesty and eloquence have established him as an important figure in the rich tradition of French moralism. His popularity beyond France is no less surprising. Camus’ works confront humanity’s most enduring questions and concerns. However problematic his solutions may be, Camus offers critical guidance to those who

²⁸ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1991), p. 192.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 188.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 191.

³¹ Ibid, p. 192.

want to live and act justly in an absurd world. Camus also matters because he appeals to our noblest impulses. He enjoins us to share our struggles insofar as we can, and to reduce the suffering of others at all costs. Undoubtedly these are lofty aims, but for Camus they are the preconditions for a humane politics.

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