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Rhodes College

Department of Philosophy

The Pragmatic Value of Philosophical Suicide  
A Study of the Absurd in the  
Works of Albert Camus

by

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## Introduction

I would like to begin by stating why the study of Camus and his concept of the absurd is of such great interest to me. Perhaps revealing my position from the outset will make this paper clearer and more interesting. First of all, I am intrigued by and drawn to Camus' philosophy because of its central concern with how to live in a world that lacks ultimate meaning. Camus assumes absurdity as the necessary human condition and then searches for a positive way that human beings can live out this truth. I was first attracted to Camus because he articulates and offers a reason behind disturbing thoughts and feelings I have often experienced. I too have suspected that my life--as well as the lives of others--lacks transcendental meaning and purpose; and I have wondered how it is possible to live in an irrational, meaningless world in which my only connection to it is the absurd. The fundamental question at the center of this project is thus a personal one: Can I live in an absurd world?

Camus' central effort is directed toward finding sufficient meaning and a basis for human action in our relationship to a sensorily experienced world stripped of ultimate meaning. My concern in this paper is with the pragmatic validity of Camus' philosophy and ethics. And

perhaps the best way to assess Camus' idea about how we should live is to go with him as far as it is possible--to seek out the ethic implicit in his philosophy, to consider its positive aspects and then to identify where the ethic is lacking, if it is indeed lacking at all, in its appraisal of the human condition.

My paper will be divided into three major sections. In the first, I will discuss Camus' concept of the absurd--his vision of the human condition, the experience of absurdity, the rejection of suicide as a response to the absurd, and the argument for conscious revolt. I shall discuss the philosophical views offered in The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus' most extensive treatment of the absurd as a concept. In the second section, I will look at three types of absurd heroes who are representative of the three general responses to the absurd found in Camus: Caligula, Mersault in The Stranger, and the characters of The Plague. These characters each offer a response to the absurdity of the human condition that has significant implications for human interaction. It is important to recognize that Camus' thought is not static; it changes and develops over the years. The Plague and The Rebel, for example, represent a development of earlier themes in Camus' thought. In this section, therefore, I will discuss The Rebel because it presents and elaborates the ethic implicit in The Plague while focusing specifically on the problem of murder. In the third and final section, I will assess the pragmatic validity of Camus' vision of the

human condition and the ethic it entails. In addition, I will argue in favor of what Camus deems "philosophical suicide", that is, for a leap of faith. Furthermore, I will assert that Camus himself takes such a leap when he argues for the ethic of solidarity and the value of human life.

## Part I.

### The Concept of the Absurd

The Myth of Sisyphus is an articulation of a culturally significant concept, the idea that life holds no ultimate meaning. This is not to say, of course, that it is the only or most pervasive idea in modern culture but instead that it was Camus' malady, as well as that of many of his contemporaries, and one for which he sought a resolution. Published in 1955, The Myth of Sisyphus presents Camus' most extensive treatment of the absurd.

Ostensibly, this essay is a consideration of the problem of suicide, which Camus considers the most important philosophical issue. Beyond superficial reasons for committing suicide lies a vision of the world--that life is not worth living. To die voluntarily is to suppose that one has recognized the derisive character of life, the absence of any profound reason for living, and the uselessness of suffering. Sisyphus is above all else an attempt to find a reason for living despite the lack of any transcendental or ontologically grounded meaning in existence. Camus is arguing for a perspective and ethic of what he calls "living with what I know." In the essay, Camus states his position on transcendent meaning:

I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms. And these two certainties--my appetite for the absolute

and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle--I also know that I cannot reconcile them. What other truth can I admit without lying, without bringing in a hope I lack and which means nothing within the limits of my condition? <sup>1</sup>

In this passage, Camus reveals that he must come to terms with life as it is given--as apparently lacking transcendental meaning. Here, he also makes reference to the absurd, which, for Camus, generally means the conflict between the mind's need for congruence and the incoherence of the world that the mind experiences. The absurd "is that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints, my nostalgia for unity, this fragmented universe and the contradiction that binds them together." <sup>2</sup> The absurd exists in the relationship between human beings and the world. We seek a meaning to our lives but the world remains silent; it offers no ultimate purpose, no hope for a better life.

In Sisyphus, Camus discusses how we may experience the absurd. The feeling of absurdity, according to the author, originates in both thought and action. It is a certain emotion, although most often confused, indeterminate, and sometimes only distantly present. Often, the underlying sensation can be ignored in everyday life. The initial experience, a sudden miserable feeling, usually happens unexpectedly because it surfaces in the most banal of everyday activities. Once experienced, either everything is changed, as we will see in the case of Caligula, or the experience is soon forgotten and takes its place among other

ill-received feelings in the subconscious. Camus believes that the experience must be accepted, remembered, and kept alive. One must explore the possibilities for meaning that life offers on its own terms. Camus insists that we must find out if it is possible to live without appeal.<sup>3</sup> In a refusal to deny his experience of the absurd, Camus states, "I want to know whether I can live with what I know and with that alone".<sup>4</sup> In his notebooks, he writes that "what [he] wants is awareness, not happiness."<sup>5</sup>

The experience of absurdity is personal and begins with the realization that everyday existence is mechanized, monotonous and seemingly without ultimate purpose. Camus describes the monotonous quality of existence: "Rising, streetcar, four hours of work in the office or factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm."<sup>6</sup> Our lives seem consumed by habit. What purpose lies behind the rituals we perform everyday? Suddenly, we experience the world as dense and foreign; we sense our separation from it. At the bottom of natural beauty is something inhuman that escapes our rational faculties--the world itself resists our appetite for rationality.

A direct result of the absurd experience, though it may be short lived, is consciousness, or more specifically, discovered consciousness. The individual is lifted out of the monotony of existence. He or she encounters the



irrationality of the world and senses his or her isolation from the cosmos and, similarly, from any transcendent principle that could provide a basis for human values. It is this consciousness that Camus defends in and by The Myth of Sisyphus. Consciousness is presented as the summum bonum. Consciousness forces one to realize the human condition as absurd and to live life according to its implications. This follows because the absurd arises out of the confrontation between consciousness and its desire for clarity and the world's irrationality. Without consciousness the absurd disappears.

The value of consciousness is central to Camus' argument against suicide. The right response to the absurd, he argues, must take into account all the elements of the experience: consciousness, on the one hand, the irrationality of the world, on the other, and the incongruent relation between them. Suicide, although Camus considers it to be a compelling response to a world without ultimate meaning (i.e. if life has no meaning, then I shall kill myself), is not the correct response because it eliminates one of the terms, namely, consciousness. But the absurd is born in consciousness and must live as truth. Because consciousness must remain, the response of suicide is inadequate.

A second alternative is hope, or what Camus refers to as "philosophical suicide." Here, consciousness, in its confrontation with the world's irrationality, looks for a way out--an answer to the "why" of human consciousness. The

answer of hope is more or less the affirmation that all will be explained one day, that everything has a reason for being, even the irrational. Camus considers religious faith as philosophical suicide. He encounters the movement of hope particularly in the work of thinkers such as Kierkegaard and Chestov. But like suicide, hope is not an adequate response to the absurd because it causes the irrational element in the human-world relationship to disappear; it assigns a rational order to a world in which, according to Camus, there apparently is none. With the irrational element removed, Camus argues, the human consciousness falls once again into the dreamless sleep of everyday existence.

Having rejected the alternatives of suicide and hope, Camus asserts "conscious revolt" as the most appropriate response to the absurd. Conscious revolt means choosing life in the face of the absurd. Revolt forcefully affirms both terms of the experience of absurdity: consciousness and the irrationality of the world. Both of these terms must be maintained, argues Camus, because consciousness is our only companion in a world foreign to us, a companion that makes us superior to our fate. The irrational must be similarly maintained because it is indispensable to the life of consciousness. Revolt alone preserves these two terms and, moreover, assures their confrontation. Confrontation occurs because revolt is directed toward the absurd; it throws consciousness toward it. In Sisyphus, Camus argues that authentic living is "keeping the absurd alive" and that "keeping it alive is above all contemplating it...The absurd

dies only when we turn away from it. One of the only coherent philosophical positions is thus revolt....The revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it." <sup>7</sup> Revolt is courageous because it meets the inevitability of death with a will to go on. The life of the absurd hero is not a joyous life without shadows because the absurd carries with it a constant vision of death. Revolt is lucid--lucidity being another supreme value for Camus--because it is a clear vision of the absurd.

The experience of the absurd and the response of conscious revolt furnishes the pathway from what Camus sees as the old slavery of service to principles, prejudices, and goals to a new freedom. This experience has an especially important effect on one's goals. After the absurd experience, all goals lose their meaning: the vision of death serves to detach an individual from his or her plans for the future. For the absurd individual, there is no tomorrow. Life is no longer lived in the future or dreamt about. Instead, life becomes a succession of presents--this is the absurd ideal.

A significant consequence of the freedom obtained through conscious revolt is indifference. This freedom and the indifference that accompanies it open the way for extreme value-relativism and a world in which all is permitted. Camus struggles with the implications of this freedom in several of his works which I will discuss in the following section. His basic position is that in a world

without God we must seek values in the revolt. Whether or not these values will be adequate is an issue that must be addressed.

Thus, in The Myth of Sisyphus (as well as the other works I will discuss), Camus' principal philosophical endeavor is to discover a reason and way to affirm life in a world devoid of ultimate meaning. He argues that the human task is to live out the absurd situation, remaining constantly conscious of it, keeping it alive through repeated revolt against it, and directing one's life according to its implications. Just what this means is yet to be seen.

In the essay, Camus offers the mythical figure Sisyphus as an archetype of the absurd individual. As Camus interprets the myth, Sisyphus has been condemned by the gods to push a large boulder to the top of a mountain for all eternity. It is truly a terrible punishment due to the utter futility of Sisyphus' task: each time he reaches the mountain's summit, the rock rolls back down to the valley due to its own weight. One can imagine the despair induced by such futile and endless labor. But why is Sisyphus an absurd hero? Sisyphus' plight--the monotonous mechanical journey to the mountaintop again and again--is, for Camus, symbolic of the human condition. Our lives are like the hard labor of Sisyphus: they are mechanical, monotonous, and without ultimate purpose. In his description of Sisyphus, Camus calls our attention to Sisyphus' momentary pause on

the mountain's peak before returning to the bottom to take up his rock and begin the ascent once again. Camus asserts that this is Sisyphus' moment of consciousness. The Greek does not renounce life but revolts against its meaninglessness. Camus explains, "At each of these moments when [Sisyphus] leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lair of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock." <sup>8</sup>

As we will see, the archetype of the absurd individual can take many forms. A central focus of my paper will be to discover what it means to live as Sisyphus and accept the futility and meaninglessness of his task as our own.

## Part II.

### The Absurd Hero: Three Responses to the Absurd

#### Caligula

If the world lacks transcendental meaning, what then is to stop all from being permitted? This question lies at the heart of Camus' play "Caligula" and points to a fundamental problem of accepting the human condition as absurd, namely, the problem of the moral equivalency of all values. If all values are morally equivalent, the selection of one set of values over another is arbitrary. The play centers on an individual's revolt against the absurdity of the human condition but, more importantly, highlights a form of revolt that, although "logical," is unacceptable to Camus. The logic of young Caligula, the play's main character, maintains that in an absurd world, all is permitted. Although Camus cannot accept Caligula's logic, the young emperor's argument haunts Camus' struggle to find an ethic that affirms and preserves human life within the conditions of a world without ultimate meaning.<sup>9</sup>

"Caligula" was written for the most part in 1938 but was not performed until 1945. Still, despite its late release, the play belongs to the earlier part of Camus' philosophical career and is essentially a study of the problems of the absurd. In his notebooks, Camus himself places "Caligula" in the first series of his work on the absurd along with Sisyphus, The Stranger and The

Misunderstanding. The Plague and the philosophical essay The Rebel belong to the second.<sup>10</sup> "Caligula," like the other works in Camus' first series on the absurd, focuses primarily on the individual's encounter with the absurd and his or her attempt to come to terms with the realization that the world may have no transcendent significance.

Camus' Caligula is based on the historical Caesar Caius Caligula who came to power at the age of 25. According to the writings of Suetonius, the emperor reigned for four years until his assassination in A.D. 41. The historical Caligula was apparently rather soft hearted in the early years of his reign but became suddenly cruel and despotic after the death of his sister and lover Drusilla. The emperor killed many of his subjects and tortured others until he was finally assassinated by members of his court.<sup>11</sup>

The events in Camus' play "Caligula" take place shortly after the death of Drusilla. In essence, we are presented with an already transformed character who, conscious of the absurd, seeks to change the world order. We do not know if Drusilla's death caused the transformation but only that Caligula has come to the sad realization that humans live in a world in which "men die and are not happy."<sup>12</sup> Suddenly, Caligula sees the world as lacking ultimate meaning. Human beings are sentenced to death from the outset, and human life is filled with suffering.

Caligula's encounter with the absurd has two very important consequences for the emperor's vision of human life and human values. He concludes that in an absurd world

all actions are morally equivalent, and that all human beings are condemned to death, so whether they die now or later is of no consequence. Caligula's conscious revolt consists in forcing his subjects to realize the absurdity of the human situation. He wishes for others to realize this truth and cease to live as if the world held some transcendental meaning. In a conversation with Helicon, his loyal servant, Caligula voices his desire to force others to recognize the human condition as absurd:

everything around me is a lie and I want people to live in truth! And I have the means of forcing them to live in truth. For I know what they need, Helicon. They are deprived of truth and they need a teacher who knows what he is talking about.<sup>13</sup>

Caligula "teaches" the people by instituting famine, closing the granary, raping and torturing his subjects, depriving them of their material goods, and killing at whim. In his revolt, Caligula becomes a monstrous evangelist of the absurd and the logic that, in a world with no transcendental purpose, God or absolute moral principle to govern human actions, all is permitted.

Camus himself seems to find Caligula's logic very compelling and perhaps even irrefutable, particularly in the writer's early years. He does not seem to ask us to loathe Caligula but to understand him.<sup>14</sup> Caligula is a paradoxical character because he yearns for a transformation of the metaphysical order of things even though he realizes that a metaphysical revolution is impossible. Similarly, the emperor expresses the human need to find meaning in the world--even if one suspects the world offers no ultimate



meaning. His last attempt at finding meaning centers on obtaining the impossible. Caligula explains how this might somehow alleviate his despair:

I am not mad. And indeed I have never been so lucid. It's just that I suddenly feel a need for the impossible. Things do not strike me as satisfactory...the world as it is is unbearable. Therefore, I need the moon, or happiness, or immortality, or something that may be mad, but at least is not a part of this world.<sup>15</sup>

Caligula, however, is unable to obtain these things and must reconcile himself with living in truth. Camus seems to admire Caligula's desire for lucidity and readiness to act in accordance with the truth he finds, but he must condemn Caligula's methods of revolt.<sup>16</sup> The emperor's conscious revolt fails to allow for harmonious human interaction. He is a perversion of absurd ideals. Toward the end of the play, Caligula himself begins to realize that his methods are distorted. Having strangled Caesonia, he mutters in Act IV scene xii: "yet murder is no solution."<sup>17</sup> In the next scene, which is also the last, Caligula condemns his actions as a whole. Not only does he decide that killing is not the answer but adds: "I have not taken the right road, I have achieved nothing. Mine is not the right kind of freedom."<sup>18</sup>

Camus concludes that Caligula's error lies in his denial of humanity. In his notebooks, Camus writes: "We are in a world in which we must choose between being a victim or an executioner--and nothing else. Such a choice is not easy."<sup>19</sup> Caligula chooses to become an executioner and this is where he may be criticized. In the second scene in Act II, Caligula reveals his decision to exhaust his power at the

expense and alienation of other persons:

I have won the god-like lucidity of a solitary man. I live and kill. I wield the frenzied power of the destroyer which makes the creator's power seem laughable. That's what it is to be happy. That's what happiness is--this unbearable liberation, this universal contempt, blood, and hatred all around me, this unparalleled isolation of the man who sees his whole life at once, the measureless joy of the unpunished assassin, this ruthless logic that crushes human lives. <sup>20</sup>

As his madness develops, Caligula identifies himself with the gods. He is playing the part of "the plague," a metaphor for the cruel and arbitrary nature of fate or god. Camus sees no evidence of divine love in the natural order, only the suffering of human beings at the hands of fate.

A recurrent theme in Camus' writings is the silent and capricious nature of the deity or fate. In general, these two terms mean the same thing for Camus: both refer to the sinister force at work in the universe. The pagan gods in "Caligula" and the Christian God in The Plague (as we shall see later) are both presented in this unfavorable light. For Camus, to imitate the deity or fate is to act unjustly and capriciously toward one another. This is the type of "god" Caligula becomes for his subjects. It is also where his fundamental error lies: instead of promoting human solidarity, Caligula seeks to become god or fate who, for Camus, is silent, capricious and oppressive. The image of Caligula as an absurd and horrible deity is strongly evoked in the scene where he dresses up as the goddess Venus. By playing the part of god, Caligula "proved to those capricious gods that, without previous training, a mere man can practice their ridiculous profession" and that "there is

only one way of equaling the gods: all that's needed is to be as cruel as they." <sup>21</sup>

As earlier stated, the error in Caligula's revolt lies in his denial of human beings. He inflicts his logic on his subjects, even though they may not share his vision of the world. The supporting characters, however, share Caligula's belief that the world lacks ultimate meaning but offer different responses to the absurd. These characters are Caesonia, Scipio, and Cherea, and much of the play concerns their reaction to Caligula's merciless logic. Caesonia is Caligula's lover, confidante and servant. Like the emperor, she is aware of human suffering and the inevitability of death but reaches a different conclusion regarding what the response to this realization should be. Caesonia tells Caligula: "At my age, one knows that life is not good, but if there is evil on earth, why add to it?" <sup>22</sup> Her response to the absurd hints at an idea Camus will develop extensively in his novel The Plague, namely, the solidarity of humankind against fate. The character of Caesonia, however, is still a very young and underdeveloped version of this type of absurd hero. She does not fight against evil and suffering as the characters in The Plague but instead takes solace in the moment, praising the body, sensual pleasures and love.

Another character who shares Camus' vision of the human condition is Scipio, the boy poet whose character, artistic ability, and passion are distinctly reminiscent of Caligula. Scipio is able to find meaning and consolation in nature.

But while the absurd stimulates an awe of and respect for the natural world in Scipio, it stimulates contempt in Caligula. Though they were once friends, the emperor alienates Scipio by murdering the boy's father. Yet even after this atrocity, Scipio is unable to participate in the emperor's assassination because "something in [Scipio] resembles him. The same flame burns in both [their] hearts."<sup>23</sup>

Cherea, an intelligent and learned patrician, is the primary opponent of Caligula's logic. Although he appreciates Caligula's vision of the world, his principal concern is with how people can practically live together. He argues that individuals cannot fulfill their human desires, which for Cherea is to live and be happy, in a world where all is permitted. Cherea makes his position clear in a heated conversation with the emperor:

I want to live and be happy. I don't think a man can do either when he pushes the absurd to its extreme. I am like everybody. In order to liberate myself from them, I have sometimes longed for the death of those I loved most, I coveted women that the laws of family and friendship forbade me. In order to be logical, I ought at such moments to kill or possess. But I consider that such vague ideas are not important. If everybody tried to realize them we could neither live nor be happy.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, Cherea appreciates Caligula's logic but argues against it for practical reasons. Cherea contends that we simply cannot live in a world in which all is permitted--not because this is not the fundamental character of the world but because the practical concerns of living and being happy prohibit it. Still, he understands Caligula's position but, in his own words, he "cannot love one of [his] own faces

that [he] is trying to cover up." <sup>25</sup> It is likely that the supporting characters' sympathy for Caligula's position reflects Camus' own feelings. At this point, however, Camus seems unable to offer any direct argument against Caligula's position. Even Cherea, the main opposition to Caligula, recognizes the emperor as one of his own faces he wishes to hide.

In "Caligula" Camus struggles with the problems that arise when one starts with the premise that the world offers no transcendental principle or God to dictate our conduct. The character of Caligula embodies the problem of moral indifference. Upon his encounter with the absurd, Caligula wants to carry it to its logical conclusion. The emperor argues that once an individual realizes that the world holds no ultimate purpose, he or she wins his or her freedom. But what are the consequences of this boundless freedom? This devastating question becomes the focal point of the play. Without a transcendent reason for living, one may conclude that there can be no reason for performing one action over another. This is Caligula's position and a problem inherent in Camus' philosophical position.

For the emperor, all actions are equivalent: murder is no different from brushing one's teeth. Indeed, Camus seems to struggle with the consequences of this logic in his early philosophical career. He even goes so far as to imply that Caligula resides in each of us, only we do not have the unlimited power to exercise our freedom as the emperor does. This point is evident in an earlier version of the play. The play released in 1945 ends with Caligula's murder at the

hands of Cherea and the patricians. In the earlier version, however, Caligula comes forward, drawing back the curtain and utters a final and disturbing monologue that highlights his universal qualities:

No Caligula is not dead. He is there, and there. He is in each one of you. If you were given the power, if you had the courage, if you loved life, you would see this monster or angel that you carry within yourselves break loose. Our century is dying for having accepted values, for having believed that things could be beautiful and cease to be absurd. Farewell. I am going back into history where those who are afraid to love too much have held me prisoner for so long.<sup>26</sup>

Camus later rejects Caligula's conclusions on the ground that the emperor joins the enemy fate in his revolt against the absurd: Caligula betrays human solidarity by seeking to become God.<sup>27</sup> Still, the play raises a fundamental problem that arises with Camus' concept of the absurd. If the world fails to offer any transcendental meaning, what governs our actions? We must ask ourselves if the philosopher's later efforts to escape the nihilism of the absurd--of which Caligula is the embodiment--eliminate this monstrous hero, or if Caligula and his absurd logic stand unchallenged, haunting Camus' philosophical position with the incessant cry that "all is permitted!"

### **Mersault**

The Stranger stands at the opposite pole from "Caligula" as far as human affairs are concerned. This novel presents a character who is passive and antisocial, far from

the crazed evangelist of the absurd embodied in Caligula. Yet he offers a response to the absurd that is equally as disturbing as that of Caligula and that may lead to the same conclusion that in a world without transcendent meaning all is permitted. Published in 1946, The Stranger poses many philosophical problems that Camus discusses in Sisyphus. The novel epitomizes the absurd universe and Mersault is the absurd incarnate. Here, it is the reader who encounters the absurd.

The Stranger is the story of Mersault, an office employee in Algiers. In the first half of the novel nothing special seems to happen. Mersault's mediocre life unfolds before our eyes: he buries his mother, has an affair with Marie, and makes a friend in Raymond. Then the drama begins: Mersault kills an Arab. He is judged and condemned to death. Although a simple story, The Stranger forces the reader to recognize the limited responsibility of Mersault for the murder he commits and the shocking severity of the sentence he receives. Jean-Paul Sartre, in his "Explication of The Stranger" offers valuable insight into this character: "Camus' hero is neither good nor bad, neither moral nor immoral. These categories do not apply to him. [Mersault] belongs to a very particular species for which the author reserves the word 'absurd'."<sup>28</sup> Mersault is fundamentally a being who accepts a world without transcendent meaning. This character inhabits a world in which natural, indifferent forces dominate--the sun, the sea, the town of Algiers itself. Here, motivations and credibility do not

apply.

Above all else, Mersault is a thing in nature. His everyday life has no meaning, and this constitutes the novel's central theme. As an embodiment of the absurd, Mersault seeks no meaning. Instead, he merely observes and registers facts, as they occur, without assigning any significance to them. And this is perhaps what is so disturbing about him. Mersault reacts with utter indifference to incidents that seem very important, like the death of a loved one or the murder of another human being. Camus has created a character who challenges socially accepted patterns of feeling and behavior. This is evident in the first passage of the book:

Mother died today. Or, maybe it was yesterday; I can't be sure. The telegram from the home says: YOUR MOTHER PASSED AWAY. FUNERAL TOMORROW. DEEP SYMPATHY. Which leaves the matter doubtful; it could have been yesterday.<sup>29</sup>

Mersault seems indifferent to his mother's death. It is as if her passing away holds no meaning. In a way, he seems removed from life although Camus argues that Mersault embraces life in a way contemporary society does not. He is reminiscent of Camus' "Algerian man" who is part of the natural world.<sup>30</sup> As a thing in nature, Mersault does not ask for a purpose to his life or the lives of others. He functions chiefly on the level of elementary sensation: he drinks, eats, sleeps, smokes and occasionally makes love. His life is made of an eternal repetition of gestures, abstract thoughts, and physical sensations.

At this point in the novel, Mersault's life is the



monotony of existence. We are reminded of Camus' description of mechanical daily life: "Rising, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep..."<sup>31</sup> His general state of mind reflects this way of life. Mersault is passive, bored and indifferent; he does not seem to know love, remorse or joy. This lack is particularly apparent as he tells of Marie's proposal of marriage:

Marie came in that evening and asked me if I'd marry her. I said I didn't mind; if she was keen on it, we'd get married. Then she asked me again if I loved her. I replied, much as before, that her question meant nothing or next to nothing--but I supposed I didn't.<sup>32</sup>

In the first half of the novel, Mersault describes every event as being of equal importance--the death of his mother, the liaison with Marie. Nothing significant seems to happen and if one event is discussed in more detail it seems to be only because it momentarily catches Mersault's attention. No hierarchy of values is recognized. The hero of The Stranger offers another response to the absurd: if the world lacks transcendental meaning, then the lucid and logical absurd individual should recognize that he or she cannot find meaning in it. He or she should therefore refrain from trying. This is Mersault's logic. Like Caligula, he too exhibits moral indifference. He writes a letter for Raymond to coerce the pimp's girlfriend to return so he can "teach her a lesson" and thinks nothing of Salamano beating his dog.

Camus seems to have two principal aims in The Stranger:

first, to remove the image society imposes from the real or natural human being and, second, to assert Mersault's innocence--even after he has committed murder. Mersault's character is stripped of any social pretense. He lives in an absurd world and reacts according to this world's implications. And in an absurd world, how does the death of a person really change anything? Mersault is natural, Camus argues, because he does not attempt to find meaning in arbitrary events. He presents Mersault as an innocent who shocks society by not accepting the rules of the game: he fails to exhibit the proper grief at his mother's funeral and the expected remorse at his own trial.

Mersault's crime consists in the murder of an Arab he does not know. Ironically, his crime is only the result of accidental occurrences. Mersault meets up with the Arab, the sun burning his eyes, and pulls the trigger. There is no explanation for his action aside from the influence of natural forces:

Beneath a veil of brine and tears my eyes were blinded; I was conscious only of the cymbals of the sun clashing on my skull, and less distinctly, of the keen blade of light flashing up from the knife, scarring my eyeballs. Then everything began to reel before my eyes...the trigger gave, and the smooth underbelly of the butt jogged my palm. And so with that crisp, whipcrack sound, it all began.<sup>33</sup>

Mersault is brought to trial, the verdict of guilt or innocent to be decided by a jury. His trial reveals the absurd man as a victim of a society that refuses to acknowledge the absurdity of the human condition. The members of the court and jury refuse to admit the

possibility of an absurd crime because it goes against their belief in rational ethics, self control, and moral accountability. They are shocked at this stranger who ignores conventional values. In the end, Mersault is convicted, not for having committed murder, but because the murder was inexplicable. With no clear cut motivations, Mersault is indicted for not crying at his mother's funeral, for sleeping with Marie, and for associating with disreputable persons like Raymond. The prosecutor describes him as "an inhuman monster wholly without a moral sense."<sup>34</sup> Thus, Mersault is condemned to death because he does not play the game. In effect, the members of the court are defending the very meaning of their lives against the absurd man. He is a threat not only to them, but to the entire society. There is no point of contact between the jury and Mersault; that is why he is the stranger.

In his preface to the American edition of The Stranger, Camus proclaim's Mersault's innocence:

Mersault is not a piece of social wreckage, but a poor and naked man enamored of a sun that leaves no shadows. Far from being bereft of all feeling, he is animated by a passion that is deep because it is stubborn, a passion for the absolute and for truth. This truth is still a negative one, the truth of what we are and what we feel, but without it no conquest of ourselves or of the world will ever be possible.<sup>35</sup>

Camus wants us to see Mersault as an innocent because he refuses to lie. Mersault's innocence is also meant to show his persecutors' hypocrisy. Camus has created a character

who refrains from thinking, feeling and judging beyond the realm of sensual experience, and he calls this character "natural."

It is important to note that up until the last days before his execution, Mersault is not an example of conscious revolt; he is, rather, the absurd incarnate. His revolt begins only after he is condemned to death. When he first hears the verdict, Mersault's reaction is to feel afraid. Still, neither his fear nor his anger at the chaplain who tries to convert him leads Mersault to the humanitarian feelings expressed in The Plague and The Rebel. Instead, Mersault deduces from his fear and anger that nothing matters--neither the death of his mother nor the murder of the Arab. Mersault reasons:

Nothing, nothing had the least importance, and I knew quite well why. [The chaplain] too, knew why. From the dark horizon of my future a sort of slow, persistent breeze had been blowing toward me, all my life long, from the years that were to come. And on its way that breeze had leveled out all the ideas that people tried to foist on me in the equally unreal years I then was living through. What difference could they make to me, or the deaths of others, or a mother's love, or his God; or the way a man decides to live, the fate he thinks he chooses, since one and the same fate was bound to 'choose' not only me but thousands of privileged people who, like him, called themselves my brothers...all alike would be condemned to die one day...and what difference could it make if, after being charged with murder, he were executed because he didn't weep at his mother's funeral, since it was all the same thing in the end? <sup>36</sup>

Mersault realizes that death is the only reality. At this moment, his consciousness leaves the realm of monotonous daily existence. Mersault becomes lucid and he

concludes that he wouldn't have lived his life any other way. Now, he can judge his life; he can justify it. Mersault understands that he isn't guilty; the absurd man is innocent. Thus, at first, Mersault was confused by the blind automation of daily life--to the point of being deformed. After the sentencing, however, he conquers his freedom, refuses the temptation of philosophical suicide (in this instance, repentance and belief in the Christian God), and in the presence of imminent death, chooses revolt instead of suicide. Yet Mersault does not discover that other people's lives are as important as his but instead that his life is as unimportant as anyone else's. He has offered a logic that is dangerously close to Caligula. He argues that nothing matters because death claims us all in the end. Both Caligula and Mersault are figures of despair.

### **The Characters of The Plague and the Ethic in The Rebel**

As we have seen, Camus explores possible responses to the world's indifference in "Caligula" and The Stranger. According to both of these works' vision of the world as absurd, all values and actions are morally equivalent. But Camus was never satisfied with this conclusion, and consequently, much of his effort, particularly his post-war work, was directed toward finding a vision that affirms and preserves human life. Camus seemed unable to reconcile the logic of Caligula and Mersault with the common sense belief that certain values and actions are in some way preferable

to others.

In the fourth of his "Letters to a German Friend," a series of editorials that appeared in the resistance letter "Combat" in 1943 and 1944, Camus voices his passion for justice despite his belief that the world lacks ultimate meaning for human beings. Addressing his German friend, Camus writes:

You have never believed in the meaning of this world, and therefore deduced the idea that everything was equivalent and good and evil could be defined according to one's wishes.... And to tell the truth, I, believing I thought as you did saw no valid argument to answer you except a fierce love of justice which, after all, seemed to me as unreasonable as the most sudden passion. <sup>37</sup>

In this passage, Camus expresses the very real difficulty of finding a justification for an ethic that will remain faithful to his vision of the world. In his later works, he discovered an ethic in the human condition that centers on the solidarity of human beings against fate.

In the fourth letter, Camus also explains how the logic of Caligula went wrong by refusing solidarity:

you saw the injustice of our condition to the point of being willing to add to it....Because you turned your despair into intoxication, because you freed yourself from it by making a principle of it, you were willing to destroy man's works and to fight him in order to add to his basic misery....Because you were tired of fighting heaven, you relaxed in that exhausting adventure in which you had to mutilate souls and destroy the world. In short, you chose injustice and sided with the gods. <sup>38</sup>

Camus goes on to argue in "The Letters" that the human task

is not to add to the injustice of a world without an ultimate meaning. In fact, such a universe demands the mitigation of injustice. Although such a universe has no meaning, humans do. This position counters Mersault's logic that the absurd hero should refrain from seeking or creating meaning. We see here the incipient formulation of ethic, one that is explored in The Plague and The Rebel.

The Plague, written in 1948, reflects a transition in Camus' thought. While he focuses purely on the individual in Sisyphus, "Caligula," and The Stranger, his perspective in The Plague encompasses all of humanity. Here, Camus is more interested in a community of human beings fighting against the irrationality and meaninglessness of the world than in the individual's encounter with the absurd. His thought becomes more and more humanistic, and in this novel, the emphasis is on the solidarity of human beings against fate. Once again, this work, like the others I have already discussed, seems to reflect the working out of a very grave problem--how to live in an absurd world, a world which offers no transcendent principle or God. The Plague replaces the responses of Caligula and Mersault to the absurd with the solidarity of humans against fate. I believe this becomes the only response for Camus because he sees the other responses as inadequate for creative human interaction.

This novel is on one level the story of a town under siege and on another a commentary on the human condition. The story takes place in the town of Oran, a French port on

the Algerian coast. In the opening passages of the novel, the narrator emphasizes the banal quality of life here: "The truth is that everyone is bored, and devotes himself to cultivating habits." <sup>39</sup> The theme of mechanized monotonous existence discussed in Sisyphus and illustrated in The Stranger by Mersault's life is thus continued in The Plague. Life in Oran is meant to typify life in contemporary society: the daily habits of Oran's citizens "are not peculiar to [their] town. Really all [their] contemporaries are much the same. Certainly nothing is commoner nowadays than to see people working from morn till night and then proceeding to fritter away at card tables, in cafés and in small-talk what time is left for living." <sup>40</sup>

Suddenly, life in Oran changes. Rats come from everywhere to die in the streets. And then people too begin to die horrible, agonizing deaths. The plague has come to Oran. The mechanized life is replaced by a life of pain and suffering. In its most basic sense, the plague is symbolic of the human condition: humankind has received a death sentence for an unknown crime, and we are all equal in the face of death. After the plague strikes, Oran must close its doors, and here we see the torture of the exiled who are separated from lovers, husbands and wives, and brothers and sisters. The plague means exile and deprivation in the profoundest meaning of the words. Among the exiled, the plague strikes or spares at random; it is unpredictable, arbitrary and impartial. The narrator explains how the plague affects Oran's prison: "The plague was no respecter



of persons and under its despotic rule everyone, from the warden down to the humblest delinquent, was under sentence and, perhaps for the first time, impartial justice reigned in the prison."<sup>41</sup>

Among the citizens of Oran are Dr. Rieux, Rambert, Tarrou, Grand and Cottard. Dr. Rieux is the narrator of the novel. At the end of the book, Rieux explains that he compiled the chronicle in order to bear witness to the evil and suffering inflicted on the plague stricken people and "to state quite simply what we learn in a time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise."<sup>42</sup> Through his profession, Rieux is engaged in the battle against death. Yet his effort goes beyond just caring for the sick. Even though he realizes that death will claim us all, he goes on fighting. He is aware of the precariousness of our lives and that we are all subject to the arbitrary will of fate, symbolized here by the plague. At the end of the novel, after the plague has passed, Rieux reflects upon the human condition:

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...the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good...and that perhaps the day would come when for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.<sup>43</sup>

In human life there is no final victory. Still, it is a battle that must be fought.

In the chronicle, Dr. Rieux speaks often of Tarrou, who had come to Oran some days before the plague and begun to

record seemingly insignificant facts about Oran into his notebook. This character is the new absurd hero as well as the voice for Camus' vision of the human condition and the moral responsibility it entails:

All I maintain is that on this earth  
there are pestilences and there  
are victims, and it's up to us, so far  
as possible, not to join forces with the  
pestilences.<sup>44</sup>

This passage reflects Camus' belief that "what balances the absurd is the community of men fighting against it."<sup>45</sup>

Tarrou has spent much of his life fighting against plagues of one sort or another. The son of a lawyer, he grew up listening to his father argue for the heads of defendants. At seventeen, Tarrou left home to devote his life to the fight against capital punishment. He told his father that if forced to return, he would kill himself. Tarrou chose politics as a means of fighting the death sentence but realized that in his effort to change the political structure and promote other principles, he contributed to the deaths of thousands. He and his people authorized the murders of those who disagreed with their cause. He killed in order to stop killing. Refusing to kill, Tarrou left politics. In a conversation with Dr. Rieux he explains how this decision changed his life: "Once I'd definitely refused to kill, I doomed myself to an exile that can never end. I leave it to others to make history."<sup>46</sup>

When the epidemic begins, Tarrou joins in the fight against the plague. Others who, like Tarrou, are just visiting when disease breaks out, try to escape. Rambert, a

journalist, is stranded in Oran after the Prefect's office orders the city gates closed to prevent the spread of the contagion. Consequently, he is unable to return to Paris and join the woman he loves. The character of Rambert expresses the conflict between two competing realities in the plagued city: personal happiness and the existence of others. In the early days of the plague, Rambert seeks a means of escape. His reasoning is that he does not belong in the plagued town and, furthermore, that the plague is not his problem. Instead of fighting, he wishes to seek happiness, which for him consists in being with the woman he loves. In a conversation with Rieux and Tarrou, Rambert proclaims the love of one human being as his guiding value: "I know now that [man] is capable of great deeds. But if he isn't capable of great emotion, well, he leaves me cold."<sup>47</sup> For Rambert the dilemma is between courage and love. Dr. Rieux, however, argues that fighting against the plague is not to choose between courage and love, but to choose the love of all human creation. Later, Rambert decides to stay. He explains:

Until now I always felt a stranger in this town, and that I'd no concern with you people. But now that I've seen what I have seen, I know that I belong here whether I want it or not. This business is everybody's business.<sup>48</sup>

The plague reveals itself as the concern of all. The response of Rieux, Tarrou, Rambert, and others to the plague reflects Camus' ethic:

The essential thing was to save the greatest possible number of persons from dying and being doomed to unending separation. And to do this

there was only one resource: to fight the plague. There was nothing admirable about this attitude; it was merely logical.<sup>49</sup>

The solidarity of human beings is, according to Camus, the logical response to a world with no transcendent meaning. In The Plague, Camus presents humanitarian values. The implicit ethic of The Plague is to take the victim's side and share what all human beings have in common, namely, love, exile, and suffering. In essence, we are all in the same predicament and the plague forces us to accept this reality. The treatment for the plague is lucidity and sympathy: Lucidity is our conscious revolt and sympathy prohibits the exploitation and murder of other human beings.

Sympathy is central to the idea of sainthood without God. The perception of another's suffering arouses love, and at the same time, revolt. It is in the name of love that the absurd individual stands up to God and either refuses or denies Him. According to Camus, evil is a scandal; neither the heart nor mind can justify it. Children die and God is not; this is the cry of ultimate revolt. This is also the cry of Tarrou as he stands before the corpse of Monsieur Othon's little boy: Ah! That child anyhow was innocent, and you know it as well as I do!"<sup>50</sup> Love and revolt are the fruits of suffering. There is no sainthood with God.

The Plague rejects traditional Christianity because of the reality and extent of evil in the world. Camus cannot reconcile the Christian belief in an omniscient omnipotent deity with the pervasiveness of the political injustice,

cruelty and murder he witnessed during his lifetime. In the novel, Father Paneloux is the voice of Christian faith. In the plagued town, the priest represents hope in a future life. He gives two sermons in the cathedral, the first exemplifying a triumphant faith and the second revealing a desperate one. In the first sermon, Paneloux presents the plague as a divine chastisement and the opportunity for repentance. The priest rationalizes suffering by giving it a meaning. For him, evil is not a scandal, and the correct attitude is one of submission, not revolt:

If today, the plague is in your midst, that is because the hour has struck for taking thought. The just man should have no fear, but the evil doer has good cause to tremble....No man should seek to force God's hand... <sup>51</sup>

Paneloux speaks of the plague as someone uninvolved. In the second sermon, however, he speaks as someone who has experienced suffering and death first hand. Having joined in the fight, Paneloux too is present during the death of Othon's child. The boy's slow and agonizing death forces Paneloux to consider the evil of the plague. Yet instead of renouncing God, the father opts for a faith that is the acceptance of the evil inflicted on the citizens of Oran. In his second sermon, Paneloux argues: "My brothers, the time of testing has come for us all. We must believe everything or deny everything." <sup>52</sup> Later, he states that "this is the faith, cruel in men's eyes and crucial in God's, which we must ever strive to compass." <sup>53</sup> Paneloux's choice of faith is a total, existential commitment made in the face of the

world's irrationality. He has, in Camus' terms, committed philosophical suicide. Camus seems to be somewhat sympathetic to this blind all or nothing faith, although he can not accept it.<sup>54</sup> Paneloux's position is a more legitimate faith because it fully recognizes the irrational.

In The Rebel, which he began writing at the end of the war, Camus develops the idea of the solidarity of human beings more fully. This essay is a philosophical consideration of many of the issues presented in The Plague. The focus of this philosophical essay, however, differs slightly from that of The Plague because here Camus is specifically concerned with the problem of murder. In his notebooks Camus writes:

The only serious moral problem is murder. The rest comes after. But to find out whether or not I can kill this person in my presence, or agree to his being killed, to find I know nothing before finding out whether or not I can cause death, that is what must be learned.<sup>55</sup>

Camus' effort in The Rebel is directed at answering the question of whether or not we have the right to kill. Here, he considers the legitimacy of murder much as he considered the legitimacy of suicide in The Myth of Sisyphus. He explores the question of the right to kill by examining the history of revolt from the Ancient Greeks and Hebrews to the present. Camus believes that one may better understand why the western world is experiencing a century of brutality and murder by conducting an historical analysis of the ideas generated by human rebellion against cosmic and political orders. He also hopes that, as a result of this exercise, he

will discover an ethic that demands the preservation of human life.

Like Sisyphus, The Rebel begins with the absurd as its starting point but goes further to draw conclusions that were not reached before. Camus reasons that if faithfulness to the absurd perception of reality prevents suicide, then it also affirms the value of individual human life. Simply continuing to live, Camus argues, affirms this value. The individual's value for his or her life must be extended to the life of other human beings because a person cannot assert that his or her life is valuable and yet deny the value of another's existence. Hence, suicide and murder stand together in Camus' absurd reasoning: if one is precluded, the other must be as well. Both suicide and murder are inconsistent with the value of human life:

If the final decision is to reject suicide in order to maintain the confrontation [between consciousness and the irrationality of the world], this amounts implicitly to admitting life as the only factual value... whence it is clear that to obey that absolute value, whoever rejects suicide likewise rejects murder. <sup>56</sup>

Camus himself sees a contradiction between the ethic ostensibly entailed in the original absurdist reasoning (i.e., that of Caligula and Mersault) and the ethic now seen to have been present all along. Thus the absurd leads to value-equivalence on the one hand and certain basic values--the value of human life in particular--on the other. In order to explain this contradiction, Camus argues that the absurd is only a starting point and ambiguous in its developments.<sup>57</sup> Camus refuses to say that the equivalency and

subjectivity of all values--the ethical implications of absurdity as he saw it in Sisyphus--was a mistake. Instead, he maintains that we are left with two contradictory entailments of the absurd. His later works somewhat abandon the earlier implications of the absurd as expressed in Sisyphus, "Caligula," and The Stranger and award greater emphasis to the value of human life and the refutation of the logic that all is permitted.

In The Rebel, Camus focuses specifically on the idea of revolt or rebellion. He is looking for the moral dimensions of active protest against the absurdity of the human condition. He believes that these moral dimensions will reveal universal values present in the human condition. Camus defines "the rebel" as the individual who revolts against injustice, be it the injustice of slavery, the cruelty of a capricious God, or the oppressive features of political, economic, and social orders. It is through the negation of injustice that rebellion defines values. By uttering "No more!" the rebel assigns a limit to oppressive individuals, regimes, or religions. Camus claims that "in assigning oppression a limit within which begins the dignity common to all men, rebellion defined a primary value."<sup>58</sup> This primary value is the basic value of all human rights. The negation of injustice is motivated by the affirmation of human solidarity and the values it entails.<sup>59</sup>

For Camus, solidarity is part of the natural makeup of human beings. It is a universal human nature of sorts. In contrast to Sartre, Camus believes in a more permanent human



nature. He rejects Sartre's notion that humans entirely create themselves by their actions. <sup>60</sup> Camus sees this move as an attempt to define human beings purely in reductionist historical terms. Camus claims that "analysis of rebellion leads at least to the suspicion that, contrary to postulates of contemporary thought, a human nature does exist, as the Greeks believed." <sup>61</sup>

It is not entirely clear what Camus means by the term "solidarity" because he never explicitly defines it. Still, he talks around it enough to give us a general idea of what he means. In The Plague, human solidarity consists in the common struggle against human suffering and death. In The Rebel, Camus reiterates this idea:

From the moment when a movement of rebellion begins, suffering is seen as the collective experience. Therefore, the first progressive step for a mind overwhelmed by the strangeness of things is to realize that this feeling of strangeness is shared with all men and that human reality, in its entirety, suffers from distance which separates it from the rest of the universe. The malady experienced by a single man becomes a mass plague. <sup>62</sup>

In this passage, Camus also emphasizes the universal struggle to find meaning in a silent and often unjust world. True human values arise out of the confrontation between the meaning creating human consciousness and the indifference of the universe. The basic value becomes human life, for being alive is what makes possible and manifest all other values uniquely present in human beings.

We now come to the problem of murder. In a rebellion against injustice, particularly if it takes the form of

political tyranny, some action must usually be taken to rectify the situation. The question of whether or not killing to combat injustice is morally excusable arises. Here, we may think of Tarrou who contributes to the deaths of others in his fight against the death sentence, or of Helicon who organizes the assassination of Caligula to put an end to his tyrannical reign. Camus maintains that murder is morally inexcusable yet allows for instances when taking human life is necessary in order to thwart oppression. If killing is necessary, he argues, the rebel must become personally involved in and accept personal responsibility for the murder, even at the risk of losing his or her own life. In other words, Camus' rebel does not kill at a distance like so much of the "rational" murder that occurs in modern society. Rational murders are executions ordered by the state, revolutions in which thousands are indiscriminately killed, and warfare in which one never sees the face of one's victim. Personal involvement, Camus believes, gives some legitimacy to murder even though it remains inexcusable. He argues, "the rebel has only one way of reconciling himself with his act of murder if he allows himself to be led into it: to accept his own death and sacrifice." <sup>63</sup>

Thus, Camus concludes that it is sometimes necessary to kill in order to thwart oppression but adds that the rebel must strive never to forget human life as the supreme value. He cautions against becoming like one's oppressor by indiscriminately taking human life in the name of some

ideal. True revolt, he asserts, brings to light human solidarity and the values that human life together makes possible. The intrinsic value of human life serves as a foundation for other values essential to life's affirmation. These values are the dignity and integrity of the human being, political and personal freedom for the individual provided this freedom is consistent with the freedom of others, equality of rights, and the opportunity to explore and fulfill human needs and desire beyond those of sheer survival.

In both The Plague and The Rebel Camus' focus has moved from the individual in the absurdity of his or her condition, as we saw in Sisyphus, "Caligula," and The Stranger, to the solidarity of all human beings in their life together, and the formulation of an ethics resting on intrinsic values grounded in the value of human life.

### Part III.

#### Analysis

In the previous section, I discussed the three principal responses to the world's indifference in an effort to shed light on their implications for human interaction. I have argued that Camus' thought changes and develops over the years: he moves from the destructive logic of Caligula and Mersault's indifference to an emphasis on the solidarity of humanity against fate and in favor of human life. An analysis of the development of Camus' thought reveals several inconsistencies within his philosophical position.

In The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus states that "belief in the meaning of life always implies a scale of values, a choice, our preferences" but "belief in the absurd, according to [his] definitions, teaches the contrary."<sup>65</sup> Yet on a closer look, Camus' philosophical position seems to contain a scale of values from the very outset. In his absurd reasoning, Camus uses the same words over and over again: consciousness, lucidity, courage, revolt. These words express value judgments and are reflective of a hierarchy of values implicit in Camus' philosophical position.

This scale of values becomes even more apparent in The Plague and The Rebel. Camus presents The Plague as an allegory of the human condition. According to the author's vision, human beings are engaged in a futile battle against fate, a capricious and indifferent opponent who strikes or

spares at random. In the end, fate claims us all; death is the fundamental reality of the human condition. Our lives are filled with suffering, anguish, and the futile desire to find ultimate meaning in a world whose meaning--if it exists--is inaccessible to us. Given this as the human condition, the ethic that arises is the solidarity of human beings against fate.

Here, it seems appropriate to ask if Camus' characterization of the human condition is accurate. Is the world universally perceived to be silent, unyielding of any ultimate meaning, and unjust? The universality of this experience is, at the very least, questionable. Anguish over the world's ultimate meaning or lack thereof may be limited primarily to western bourgeois society, and western intellectuals in particular. Does the homeless person question the ultimate meaning of existence or is he or she more concerned with finding food and shelter? Contemplation of the world's ultimate meaning seems to be a luxury for those who have the time and the energy to consider such questions. Furthermore, if we look outside of western culture, we are apt to find more examples that bring the universality of this experience into question. Does the struggling peasant, for example, find the world to lack ultimate meaning? Would he or she even be asking this kind of question? We must take these kinds of examples into consideration in our assessment of Camus' philosophical position. If his characterization of the human condition is

inaccurate, the ethic of solidarity seems to have little foundation.

Yet even if we accept this characterization, we must still ask why we should choose solidarity as the proper response to the absurd instead of the moral equivalence of all values. As we saw earlier, Camus' absurd reasoning, presented first in The Myth of Sisyphus and taken up again in The Rebel, offers two inconsistent consequences of the absurd: the equivalence of values and the supreme value of human life. Yet Camus rejects Caligula's logic, arguing that human beings must not add to the injustice of the world.<sup>66</sup> Is Camus emphasizing solidarity over moral equivalency for practical reasons? Indeed, he seems to be revealing a preference for a response to the absurd that promotes positive human interaction.

Camus turns to solidarity, presenting it as implicit in the universal nature of human beings. But given Camus' initial position--i.e., he wishes to live solely with what he knows and to bring in nothing that is uncertain--where does he discover a universal human nature? In The Rebel, he argues that the analysis of rebellion indicates the existence of a human nature. Yet Camus seems simply to assume the existence of a human nature instead of presenting any argument for it. He covertly slips in ontological assertions while, at the same time, trying to remain epistemologically skeptical of such assertions. We can, however, appreciate his predicament. He needs human nature to support his ethic.

Camus also uses the historical analysis of rebellion to reveal what he sees as universal values present in the human condition. This line of argument is very different from Camus' position in Sisyphus where he asserts that "no code of ethics is justifiable a priori in the face of the cruel mathematics that command [the human] condition."<sup>67</sup> Here, the "cruel mathematics" refers to the inevitability of death. Yet in The Rebel, Camus is engaged in an effort to find universal values present in the human condition. How is this effort justifiable? Is it justifiable for pragmatic reasons? This point is unclear in Camus' philosophical position. Camus also asserts that rebellion defines values through the negation of injustice, oppression, and tyranny. Still, it seems appropriate to ask how one defines or recognizes injustice, oppression or tyranny. By using these words, Camus has once more revealed a hierarchy of values in his philosophical position; values are already defined in the very conception of injustice or oppression.

From the very beginning, Camus has refused to accept that which is not immediately accessible to his rational faculties. We are reminded of the cartesian tradition of epistemological skepticism. Camus himself presents the absurdist position as the equivalent of Descartes' methodical doubt.<sup>68</sup> But as the inconsistencies in Camus' philosophical position reveal, the author's personal values and moral sentiments seep into his philosophical position anyway. He seems both unwilling to break with the absurd and to

part with his humanitarian sentiment that justice ought to prevail. This tension--between what he can accept on the basis of pure reason and what he intuitively feels to be right--pervades both his fictional and purely philosophical works.

We have seen that Camus' philosophical position contains several inconsistencies. Another point of criticism can be raised, but this time the object of concern is with the very absurdist position and its stance toward metaphysical questions. The absurdist position is clearly stated in The Myth of Sisyphus:

I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean?<sup>69</sup>

Later in the essay, Camus asserts that, due to one's inability to know if the world holds a transcendental meaning, one's task is "to live solely with what [one] knows, to accommodate [oneself] to what is, and to bring in nothing that is not certain."<sup>70</sup> Here, it is fair to ask if we must accept Camus' method for attaining truth, particularly when we are considering the fundamental character of the world. The issue of transcendental meaning is, after all a metaphysical question, the answer to which no one knows for certain.

In his essay "The Will to Believe," William James defends "our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced."<sup>71</sup> I think it



is fair to say that the issue of transcendental meaning qualifies as a religious matter. After all, transcendental meaning may well take the form of God for many individuals. This accepted, James' analysis will be useful in an examination of the absurdist position on ontological meaning.

James distinguishes between two kinds of hypotheses: those that are "living" and those that are "dead." A living hypothesis is one which makes some appeal to our belief. We can imagine its being true; it appeals to us as a real possibility. A hypothesis is dead, however, if it makes no appeal to our belief or, in other words, if it means nothing to us. The decision between two hypotheses is, in James' terms, an "option." There are six kinds of options: living or dead; forced or avoidable; and momentous or trivial. A living option is one in which both hypotheses are alive: they both make some appeal to our belief. A forced option is one in which there is no possibility of not choosing. We cannot remain indifferent, we must accept one of the hypotheses and reject the other. A momentous option is significant; it will have a strong effect on how we live our daily lives. James calls an option that is living, forced, and momentous, a genuine option. <sup>72</sup>

Using James' language we can look at the question of transcendental meaning as concerned with two hypotheses: 1) the world holds transcendental meaning and 2) the world does not hold transcendental meaning. The choice between these two hypotheses is a live option. Both hypotheses appeal to

us as real possibilities: we can imagine a world in which there is a transcendental meaning as well as one in which there is not. Much of contemporary thought reveals both hypotheses as "living" for modern western culture. Similarly, this option is forced. We cannot avoid choosing between hypotheses 1 and 2 by waiting for more evidence. If we wait we lose the good--i.e., that there is a transcendental meaning--and it becomes the same thing as rejecting hypothesis 1 as false. The option of there being transcendental meaning or not presents itself as a momentous option. We have something to gain if we accept hypothesis 1--i.e., ultimate meaning to our lives, the existence of God. The second hypothesis is also momentous. If we choose it, we must live according to its implications. Thus, selecting either the hypothesis 1 or hypothesis 2 is a significant, life-changing decision.

Camus' method for choosing between these two options is to consider them through the reason. He discovers that reason tells him nothing. He simply does not know if the world holds a transcendental meaning or not. Given his limited knowledge, Camus concludes that he will live only with what he knows, which amounts to living as if the world holds no transcendental meaning. The alternative would be to live as if the world does hold some transcendental meaning. James offers an argument in favor of choosing hypothesis 1 even though we do not know through pure reason if it is true or not.

In contrast to Camus, James argues that we must use our

sentiments, or what he refers to as our "passional nature," to decide between options. This follows because "not only do we find our passional nature influencing us in our opinions, but there are some options between opinions in which this influence must be regarded both as inevitable and as a lawful determinant of our choice." <sup>73</sup> Our very belief that reason puts us into closer touch with reality is the result of a desire that our rational faculty function in this way. We want to believe that our discussions, studies and experiments continually give us greater insight into reality. Our passional nature is also often the lawful determinant of our choice because our intellect may be of no help. We must remember that our intellect is neither infallible nor all knowing. For this reason, we should not close ourselves off to other avenues for attaining truths. James offers a criticism of the method employed by Camus: "A rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule." <sup>74</sup>

If we reject Camus' method, we are able to consider the option in light of our moral sentiments, intuitions, and "mystical" experiences. Religious or mystical experiences often point to something which is "wholly other" than ourselves. I am speaking here of the idea of the holy, or to be more accurate, of what Rudolph Otto refers to as the "numinous." The numinous refers to that power outside of us that is awe-inspiring, mysterious, tremendous, and majestic

in its greatness.<sup>75</sup> We may also wish to consider, and perhaps should consider, which hypothesis we would like to accept. After all, the choice is between living as if the world holds transcendental meaning or as if it does not. We cannot know the actual fundamental character of the world. Why should reason prevent us from accepting the first hypothesis if our lives would be richer and more fulfilling if we were to accept it? James argues:

If religion be true and the evidence for it be insufficient, I do not wish, by putting your extinguisher on my nature (which feels to me as if it had after all some business in this matter), to forfeit my sole chance in life of getting upon the winning side,--that chance depending of course, on my willingness to run the risk of acting as if my passional need of taking the world religiously might be prophetic and right.<sup>76</sup>

In light of James' argument, belief in a transcendental meaning seems to be a legitimate, rational choice. For Camus, this decision consists in taking a leap of faith and committing philosophical suicide. But is it really suicide? If our choice was indeed to select hypothesis 1--that the world holds a transcendental meaning--we made the decision in light of our reason, intuitions, moral and religious sentiments, and personal needs. One might say that this is a much more thoughtful and informed decision than if we refuse to assent to that which is not certain.

In The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus states:

There exists an obvious fact that seems utterly moral: namely, that a man is always a prey to his truths. Once he has admitted them, he cannot free himself from them.<sup>77</sup>

Ironically, we see a poignant example of this statement

within Camus' thought itself. The breadth of Camus' work offers two inconsistent "truths": the absurd and the equivalence of all values, on the one hand, and the value of human life with its accompanying ethic of solidarity, on the other. Evidently, Camus is prey to both. Unable to renounce the absurd, Camus is anxious to discover a means of refuting the logic that all is permitted and providing a basis for life-affirming values.

This is the project undertaken in The Plague and The Rebel. Here, Camus argues for the solidarity of humankind against fate as well as for the value of human life. This move seems indeed to be a pragmatic one. Because of his humanitarian sentiments, Camus prefers solidarity over the equivalence of all values. He makes a practical decision and, in essence, breaks with the absurd. Camus has moved beyond the limits of reason and what this faculty is able to "know," to the realm of sentiments and moral intuitions. Without realizing it, he has--to a certain degree--adopted a Jamesian perspective toward truth. The following question thus arises: Has Camus committed philosophical suicide? Perhaps. Although he has not posited an ultimate meaning and purpose to the universe, Camus has in the end presented a universe pregnant with universal values that, far from being certain, are founded on what Camus intuitively feels to be right.

## Notes

- 1 Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Random House, Inc., 1955), p. 38.
- 2 Camus, Sisyphus, 37.
- 3 Camus, Sisyphus, 39.
- 4 Camus, Sisyphus, 40.
- 5 Albert Camus, Notebooks 1935-1942, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Hamish Hamilton Ltd. and Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1963) 10.
- 6 Camus, Sisyphus 10.
- 7 Camus, Sisyphus 40.
- 8 Camus, Sisyphus 89.
- 9 Lev Braun, Witness of Decline (New Jersey: Associated University Press Inc., 1974), p. 49.
- 10 Albert Camus, Notebooks 1942-1952, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), p. 158.
- 11 John Cruickshank, Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 194.
- 12 Albert Camus, "Caligula," trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Samuel French Inc., 1961), p. 13.
- 13 Camus, "Caligula," 13.
- 14 Braun 45.
- 15 Camus, "Caligula," 12.
- 16 Braun 47-52.
- 17 Camus, "Caligula," 79.
- 18 Camus, "Caligula," 80.