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THE ABSURD BEYOND MODERNISM

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This volume is presented as a record of the work undertaken for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney.

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work.

This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

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Paul Mumme

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Abstract

While the absurd is usually associated with the modern subject, it is the purpose of this project to show how it is still relevant today. The concepts of end times, ecological disaster, and post-democracy are pressing concerns of the new millennium that emphasise the futility of being and a lack of political agency. Absurdity describes a similar condition, the feeling of purposelessness that results from the observation that life has no inherent meaning. A fundamentally modern condition of religious dispossession, this feeling is predominantly frustration, since it is impossible to determine the meaning of life through reason. In these cases, crisis seems unavoidable, insurmountable, and permanent, and these attitudes can be observed in works of art since modernism. The thesis aims to define the absurd by the special examination of works closely associated with the concept, which will allow the identification of a specific literary and artistic tradition originating in the nineteenth century and continuing to the present. This is achieved through the rigorous examination of works by Søren Kierkegaard, Albert Camus, Michel Houellebecq, and Bruce Nauman. Despite the fact that works reflecting the absurd respond to distinct historical conditions, they all express frustration at the limitations of human agency, and the incomprehensibility of life.

The accompanying artwork consists of two distinct bodies of video performance. Both present actions that permanently and inexorably oppose their context, and as such epitomise the conflict inherent to the absurd. Similar to the texts and artworks discussed in the thesis, these performances are motivated by a sense of frustration and futility stemming from the crises of the new millennium, and the similarities between this condition and the absurd. The first series features *Dr Nobody*, a performance alter ego whose attempts at activism consistently fail to exceed the trivia of his personal life. In long, convoluted online video monologues he cites the many annoyances of the everyday and his various theories as to their causes, rarely reaching a conclusion. The second body of work presents the repetitive and pointless gestures of a nameless, suit-clad figure. These videos are produced to make them as engaging as possible, using changing camera angles, sound effects, and attractively coloured backgrounds that try to emphasise the importance of their rather trivial contents. In different ways both series insist on pointless activity, and in doing so allegorise the futility, frustration, and absurdity of the contemporary condition.

Introduction

Before the second semester of 2005 my work was directly political, environmentalist, and countercultural. It seemed that the crises of contemporary civilisation were multiplying in number and increasing in scale before a largely apathetic public, so I made art that aimed to enlighten them. Although somewhat naïve, and a little pompous, these works voiced concerns that are still relevant today because they involve problems that are the same if not worse. While these predicaments are real and worthy of concern, it took years of making work that appealed for action and change before it became clear that, from a personal perspective, these problems seemed insoluble. This realisation then gave rise to a new predicament—a crisis of social agency, personal insignificance, and logical paradox. It was a dead end, and it seemed that this dead end would be a more appropriate subject for my work. This decision soon led to a body of performance videos that centred on a nameless figure in a business suit and tie engaged in patently futile tasks, such as standing waist deep in water and warding off rain with an umbrella, or trying to put out a raging fire with a tiny kitchen spray bottle—all with the footage looped so that they appeared to go on forever. Due to the utter ineffectiveness of the tasks, their lack of narrative, and the strong symbolism of the costume, the works elicited comparison with the concept of the absurd in philosophy and literature. In the subsequent years, with further reading, it became clear that this emphasis on impasse was mirrored in this concept and the writings that dealt with it. The absurd is also about frustration, critique and doubt, and an inability to understand the world, all that has changed is time and context.

Even though the absurd is a fundamentally modern condition it denotes a crisis that is relevant to the present. Due to its familiarity within the discourses around existentialism, from the writings of the agnostic Søren Kierkegaard to the atheist Albert Camus, the absurd is generally understood as the problem of the meaning of life outside religion. The absurd results from the attempted marriage of two disparate elements, creating an unsolvable contradiction. Traditionally this conflict is between a desire for existential meaning and the inability to ascertain that meaning through reason—the meaning of life provided by religion cannot be replaced by any logical thought process, since the assertions of religion are irrational. The condition of absurdity is the result of this opposition: it is a feeling of despair that life is meaningless, and frustration at our futility of being and lack of agency. Similar crises are observable in the contemporary world, for example the alienating nature of current democratic politics, the threat imposed by climate change and deferral of any significant response, and the

potentially catastrophic results of deregulated capitalism.¹ Because these issues are overwhelmingly complex, and their resolution seems impossible, they emphasise a sense of alienation, insignificance, and frustration at contemporary circumstances. Given the similarities between the experience of the present world and the crisis of the absurd it is possible to draw a comparison between the two, and it is the aim of the present study to demonstrate how this is possible in works of art. In order to achieve this, the absurd will be defined in the work of modern foundational thinkers, and then examined in successive works of visual art and literature that share a sense of futility and frustration at the attempt to understand life. By establishing the absurd as a distinct literary and artistic tradition, one that continues to the present, this study proposes its continued relevance.

Because the condition of the absurd is usually associated with writers active between the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, an important problem for this study is whether it has a place in the contemporary. Since it entails the question of a fundamental meaning to existence outside political and religious ideology, the absurd implies the criticism of established ideas and beliefs in a manner that is exemplary of modernist critique. In his seminal analysis of the psychology of the avant-garde, Renato Poggioli notes that such work critiques the status quo by posing risky alternatives, thus expanding and progressing culture. Because the avant-garde's work is new and challenging they implicitly critique the status quo, and their work is of such defiance that it estranges, or alienates, them from the dominant culture. However, this new and challenging work can become recognised and later absorbed by the culture it comments on.² In the case of the absurd it may seem that this process has run its course, since the concept is dated and atheistic attitudes are quite common, whether they are reflective or not. However, the argument that the absurd is still relevant implies a degree of similarity between the modern and contemporary, and therefore the manner in which the world has changed is important when considering the absurd in current times.

The conditions of contemporary society and modern society are different, since avant-garde values of engaged but distanced critique seem to have been absorbed by late capitalism. In *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (2009) Slavoj Žižek examines the way that similar critiques, such as that of alienated consumption, are now integrated with the process of consumption

¹ Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), 4; Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism Vs. The Climate* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 4; Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2011), x.

² Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968), 117-18.

itself.³ Alienated consumption is the phenomenon in which consumer society is pacified and alienated by relentless bombardment with, and consumption of, commodities—whereas previously production and consumption involved both necessity and use value, and a sense of agency in the process.⁴ Zizek points out that this latter twentieth-century critique has been integrated by capitalism in a phenomenon that he calls ‘ethical consumerism’, or ‘cultural capitalism’.⁵ This is exemplified by the ‘Starbucks Shared Planet’ program where a small portion of the sale price of a coffee is dispensed to support the developing nations that the coffee industry usually exploits.⁶ By buying the coffee, consumers are not only sustaining a free trade agreement that guarantees a reasonable price to producers, but also buying into an ethic of goodwill. The consumer is no longer isolated by the process of consumption, but is engaged with a sense of agency and usefulness, as well as an implicit critique of the repercussions of the capitalist system.⁷ The market can adapt to cater for all positions, and in doing so neutralise those of dissent.

A similar absorption of critique and zeal into a marketable product can be seen in contemporary art. Drawing on Zizek’s observation, Adam Geczy describes how modernist critique now resides in the background, that it has been ‘sublimated’, as an implied aspect of all art.⁸ He argues that like Zizek’s formulation, where altruism and authentic experience are integrated into the product, criticality has similarly been integrated into the contemporary artistic product.⁹ What remains of modernist zeal has become somewhat diluted outside a distinct ideology—the pursuit of innovation and advancement is now without a political dimension, it has become simply the pursuit of novelty.¹⁰ Making art that is new and interesting is less driven by the ideal of cultural advancement, rather, it is increasingly what makes a contemporary artist’s work appealing to the market, and therefore, it is criticality that drives sales. Criticality has become incorporated with the idea of the artistic product, no less the

³ Slavoj Zizek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), 54.

⁴ Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of ‘68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956-1976* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8-9; Greg Kennedy, *An Ontology of Trash: The Disposable and Its Problematic Nature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 103.

⁵ Zizek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, 52-53.

⁶ Zizek, *Living in the End Times*, 236.

⁷ Zizek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, 54.

⁸ Adam Geczy and Jacqueline Millner, *Fashionable Art* (London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

defining factor of its worthiness for consumption and success.¹¹ Like the way that altruism has become absorbed into the very act of consumption, as with Zizek's Starbucks logic, criticality in art has become little more than 'an invisible remainder that is synonymous with "being art"'.¹² Therefore, if modern criticality is implied by the work of art itself, there seems little reason for contemporary works of art to be critical, or to engage with modernist themes. However, artists continue to be socially critical and innovative, and continue to make works that engage with modernist ideas and forms.

Despite the many factors that separate the modern and contemporary world, art has a propensity to connect the past with the present through analysis and reflection. In a meditation on the nature of contemporary art, Boris Groys compares the different experiences of the present for the modern and contemporary subject, drawing some pertinent conclusions about how contemporary art relates to the modern. During modernity there was such excitement for the realisation of projects and ideals that the present was considered a hindrance, something that gets in the way of progress, an obstacle on the way to the future.¹³ Groys contrasts this attitude with the contemporary one, which is more hesitant given the widespread disbelief in these promises.¹⁴ For him, the present is a time in which we can pause and reconsider the modern projects, a time for analysis and not rapid advancement.¹⁵ Groys describes this 'contemporary' time as an infinite, repetitive, 'useless' time, because the modern drive to the future is not as strong today. Without this drive, and with the benefit of hindsight, contemporary art can reflect on the modern, recontextualise it, and therefore assess its relevance and value today. According to Groys, rapid and meaningful change now seems unlikely and even suspicious, it is more the task of contemporary art to analyse and reconsider the concepts of the past. The contemporary is therefore conducive to both the feeling that progress is impossible, as well as the idea that the consideration of past concepts might permit a better understanding of our situation.

A self-evident and rather crucial distinction between the modern and the contemporary is the fact that Western society is now in very different socio-political circumstances. Since modernity conceptions of truth, society, politics, and the self are increasingly questioned and

¹¹ Ibid., 8.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Boris Groys, 'Comrades of Time,' *e-flux*, no. 11 (2009), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/comrades-of-time/>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Idem.

exploded, along with an almost exponential growth in accessible knowledge due to recent developments in communication such as the Internet. But even within predominantly secular, globalised, and multicultural developed societies, the perpetuation of attitudes of political conservatism and religious fundamentalism illustrate that while society and culture have progressed, this progress is far from unqualified. A result of industrialisation is the capacity to feed, clothe and shelter the world's population, but due to the inequality inherent to capitalism the populations of developing countries continue to languish in poverty. Since the Second World War, during so-called peace time where large-scale conflict is in abeyance, the world has almost constantly been at war, whether this is in the form of localised conflict or continued nuclear proliferation.¹⁶ While the conditions of the contemporary are certainly different to those of modernity, not everything has changed. Many of the old problems persist while many new ones appear.

To give a better idea of the crises facing the contemporary subject it is worth citing a few specific examples. These are the type of situations that give one a sense of absurdity, since they seem at once urgent and insurmountable, and while the present study does not respond to them directly they do give an indication as to why it is conducted. The concept of post-democracy as put forward by Colin Crouch accounts for the passivity and apathy of citizens in established democratic societies. He argues that due to the decline of the working class there is a significant reduction of political activity that directly represents the public interest. As a result, political debate in these democracies is a 'tightly controlled spectacle' between major parties whose agendas are increasingly catered toward the interests of 'elites that overwhelmingly represent business interests'.¹⁷ In democracies, citizens are still able to vote in elections, however the issues that are presented and debated in the public eye are both selective and limited. For Crouch, politics is actually shaped by the interactions between governments and those with the resources to influence them, namely business lobbies.¹⁸ Due to the public's limited role in shaping political matters that affect them, there is a pervasive sense of disillusionment and uninterest.¹⁹ In Crouch's analysis, the contemporary subject's experience of the current political climate is characterised by futility and a lack of agency.

¹⁶ Marianne Hanson, 'The Failed Effort to Ban the Ultimate Weapon of Mass Destruction,' *The Conversation*, June 8, 2015, <https://theconversation.com/the-failed-effort-to-ban-the-ultimate-weapon-of-mass-destruction-42722>.

¹⁷ Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2-4.

For others, the current political, economic, and ecological situation is both irremediable and leading towards an unavoidable catastrophe. In his aptly titled book, *Living in the End Times* (2010), Žižek sets out how the global capitalist system is approaching an ‘apocalyptic zero-point’.²⁰ This crisis is signalled by four factors—the impending ecological catastrophe associated with global warming, potential fundamental changes with human identity and self-awareness as a result of genetic engineering, problems within the system that can weaken it (such as the global financial crisis and decline in raw materials), and finally, the widening gap between rich and poor and its radical effects for governments in developing countries.²¹ Žižek analyses these symptoms in a structure corresponding to the five stages of grief developed by psychologist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. Not only is this structure witty and useful, since these stages of grief apply to patients who have just learned that they are terminally ill, it also reinforces Žižek’s position that the coming catastrophe is unavoidable, and also that in our current state we are both implicated and powerless.²² Kubler-Ross’ final stage of grief is acceptance, and Žižek emphasises that while accepting this self-imposed catastrophe implies a certain degree of resignation, this is a necessary first step—before it can be addressed it must be acknowledged, and as he puts it, ‘fully lived’.²³

Probably the most evident crisis faced by the contemporary world is climate change. This is, of course, one of Žižek’s concerns, but is significant enough to warrant its own address. As Naomi Klein points out in *This Changes Everything* (2014), the fact that the global climate is being affected as a direct result of human activity has not only been known for some time, it is also plainly obvious in everyday life.²⁴ Despite this rather common knowledge, carbon output in developed nations is increasing, and instead of moving away from hazardous fossil fuel sources Western countries are actively searching for new and more crude ones.²⁵ She uses the psychological term ‘cognitive dissonance’ (discomfort caused by having contradictory ideas, beliefs or aims) to describe this resignation, and to illustrate that addressing climate change requires action that is fundamentally at odds with the current system of deregulated capitalism.²⁶ The threat of ecological disaster and need for action has grown in tandem with

²⁰ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, x.

²¹ *Ibid.*, x-xi.

²² *Ibid.*, xii-xiii.

²³ *Ibid.*, xii.

²⁴ Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism Vs. The Climate*, 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 3, 16-17.

globalised trade and mass consumption, and with it the massive exploitation of resources.²⁷ Because these factors are inextricable from one another, Klein suggests that the only way to sufficiently address climate change is to reverse the dominant ideological and economic model of our time, to stress contraction rather than growth.²⁸ Klein's assessment is accurate, and while her solution is conceivable it is also drastic. Without seeming pessimistic, the prospect of a rapid remodelling of our economic and political system is becoming less realistic. Currently, there seems to be no feasible solution, and from an individual perspective there is an overwhelming sense of frustration and disempowerment.

While these pressing concerns of the new millennium have had a role in stimulating this study, they are not the ones that are discussed at length within it. The above crises are simply examples from the current time that mirror the existential crisis of the absurd. These problems demonstrate how the absurd is relevant to the contemporary world and serve to introduce to this case study its relevance to recent literature and art. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to first outline how the absurd developed as a concept in the work of its foundational thinkers, then it will be possible to explain its relevance to more recent examples.

The discussion of the absurd as a specific philosophical idea originates in Søren Kierkegaard's works. He uses the term to illustrate the crisis of belief and reason that Christian faith involves. According to Kierkegaard, in order to have faith one must be able to genuinely accept the irrational assertions of Christian doctrine. Because many of the core tenets of Christianity are physically and logically impossible, they are absurd to comprehend. But this does not mean that they can be lightly dismissed, as they form the core of one's understanding of the nature of existence, morality, duty, and the meaning of life. Christianity therefore involves a paradox where the subjective desire to understand life encounters the logical impossibility of the teachings that explain it, and the absurd describes the exact point where the mind rejects them. Kierkegaard asserts that the only way that the absurd can be overcome is by embracing 'subjective truth', and making a 'leap of faith', to overcome the objective mind, but notes that this is rarely, if ever, achieved. In effect, Kierkegaard argues against the plausibility of Christianity, and in doing so discredits the sense of purpose and meaning it engenders in personal life. Kierkegaard uses the concept of the absurd to describe the precise point at which faith becomes untenable, and therefore in crisis.

²⁷ Ibid., 16-19.

²⁸ Ibid., 19-20.

The work of Albert Camus reinterprets the absurd during and after the Second World War. In the wake of a loss of faith, religious and otherwise, and set against the devastation of the war, Nazi occupation, and the horrific results of mass ideology, he poses the question as to whether there is any justifiable reason against suicide. He suggests that the search for this reason is the only thing worth living for, even if an answer is unlikely. The inability of humans to make sense of their own life is what he describes as the absurd. It is the contradiction that arises between the desire for existential meaning and the inability to find any. Camus's idea of the absurd admits that life is ostensibly meaningless, although he is careful to avoid nihilism. Rather, his absurdist philosophy aims for a sense of individual and collective agency. He argues that while life is a futile struggle to find meaning, there is meaning to be found in the struggle itself. He famously uses the Greek myth of Sisyphus as a metaphor for this idea. Sisyphus is condemned by the gods to ceaselessly roll a boulder up a hill again and again, and he continues despite the pointlessness of his arduous task. Camus's point is that while life is a futile and meaningless struggle we must endure it with the same heroic resolution as Sisyphus.

Fifty years later, the fiction of Michel Houellebecq portrays life in a similar, albeit more bleak manner. He describes contemporary existence as meaningless, and the pursuit of happiness as futile and hollow. The idea of happiness is itself deemed an absurdity. His prose lacks Camus's heroic tone, instead presenting a bitter complaint about the manifold disappointments of postmodern life. He depicts a society that, in lieu of religious commitment, has elevated individual aspiration above all else. The esoteric bonds that sustained families and imbued life with a sense of meaning no longer have any effect. Despite his characters' many attempts at personal fulfilment and love, their personal lives remain emotionally destitute, and most of them struggle with depression. Emotional and sexual relationships are brief, superficial, and competitive—and when his characters occasionally do find love it is either accompanied by loss or the feeling is fleeting. Old age only brings bodily embarrassment and abandonment, and many people choose suicide or voluntary euthanasia. Tracing the lineage of what he describes as the rise of the individual from the Enlightenment to the contemporary, Houellebecq presents the paradoxes and disappointments of existence when self-interest is taken as a guiding principle. While Houellebecq's portrayal of life does not share Camus's consolations, it follows the same tradition, insofar as his frustration with its meaninglessness.

While Houellebecq's work is a good example of the absurdity of the contemporary world, it is only one such example. Houellebecq makes it clear that, despite the advancements of modernity, the structure of contemporary society makes individual life prone to crisis, and

he makes this particularly clear in his work by focusing on extremes. Houellebecq's work illuminates how the central ideas of the absurd—the loss of faith, the belief in human capacity for self-determination, and the meaninglessness of life that results—manifest now, and he illustrates this with excoriating detail. Although this is an excellent example to demonstrate the relevance of the absurd today, there are other ways in which its influence endures. Bruce Nauman's work is best understood as the product of his navigation of the doubts, contradictions, and frustrations that attend both the role of the artist and the human experience. His engagement with the absurd is so consistent and thorough that this study focuses entirely on his art with the exclusion of all others, particularly because he seems to appreciate the absurd for his own reasons, making the case for the contemporary absurd stronger.

Nauman has an almost absurdist approach to being an artist and making art. His work is not often influenced by that of other artists and it is difficult to ascribe it to a distinct movement or category, rather, he prefers to approach each artwork as though it is the first one he has ever made. As a result, Nauman's rigorously independent method and attitude involves a constant struggle to invent new meaning. In these struggles, the artist often finds himself alone in the studio with no idea as to what to do next, often resorting to filming himself engaged in pointless tasks that are arduously repetitive and prolonged. Fittingly, he has mentioned his admiration for Samuel Beckett's work, which is frequently compared with Camus's, allowing Nauman's common interests to be aligned as well. Nauman's deliberately baffling installations seem to imitate the absurd universe, because they prevent the viewer from determining a clear meaning, providing the impression that they are lacking the required information to understand. Nauman's works also articulate his general existential frustration, not with transcendental meanings or truths, but human nature and behaviour, which he sees as both shamefully brutal and admirably complex. Nauman therefore engages with the absurd because it is conducive to his ideas about life, meaning that he uses the absurd in another context, and for his own reasons. He presents a consistent and timeless example of how human beings are prone to absurdity, that nothing can be certain with regard to human thought and behavior.

Anyone with an interest in theatre and literature would have come to the absurd through Martin Esslin's study of modernist drama, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961). Perhaps the most-cited work dealing with the concept in artistic form, it has given the term 'absurd'

everyday currency. While having its roots in the anti-Hegelian, dialectical philosophy of Kierkegaard, the absurd has come to embody a specific postwar condition of disillusionment and disempowerment, and this is largely a result of Esslin's text. Placing a rather abstract philosophical concept in terms of concrete and vivid stage images, the work struck a chord with the protest generation, for whom the original certainties of Western culture and the optimism of various civil movements were increasingly being made unavailable or suppressed. At the same time, entrenched beliefs surrounding race, gender and marriage were being challenged and exploded, adding to the appeal of a text dealing with a concept about the struggle for independent thought and meaning.

Despite, and in many ways because of, its massive influence, Esslin's book will not be discussed in the present study. Although it has become emblematic of the concept of the absurd, the book is confined to a narrow group of dramatists operating in the middle of the twentieth century.²⁹ Predominantly about theatre, the book discusses attributes of the absurd with reference to specific plays, and as a result does not permit comparison with the works under examination without extensive interpretation—it is much more efficient to consult the original texts. Esslin also presents a thorough discussion of the work of Samuel Beckett, which, owing to the popularity of the book, has become synonymous with the absurd. The close association between Beckett's work (despite Beckett's objections to such labelling) with the absurd has since become a major area of scholarship in its own right, making any discussion within this study insignificant by comparison.³⁰ Avoiding this book sustains a more direct line of enquiry distinct from the complexities of the discourse around absurdist theatre, and also prevents a discussion of the topic that is both too general and too brief. The omission of Esslin's work is not intended to devalue it; rather, to discuss it thoroughly would require a large detour. His text is an important contribution to the study of the absurd and the wider understanding of Camus's thought and deserves credit.

Among the texts that seem to follow on from Esslin's, *The Absurd* (1969) by Arnold Hinchliffe is particularly worthy of recognition. Hinchliffe acknowledges his debt to Esslin early in the book, and states his aim to situate the concept in a more broad literary and philosophical tradition.³¹ While Hinchliffe's book achieves this in several ways, first by the discussion of the antecedents of absurdist literature, and then the work of Sartre, Camus, and

²⁹ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 15.

³⁰ Ibid., 14; Charles Juliet, *Conversations with Samuel Beckett and Bram Van Velde*, trans. Janey Tucker (Leiden: Academic Press Leiden, 1995), 148-49.

³¹ Arnold Hinchliffe, *The Absurd* (London: Methuen, 1969), 2.

the theatre of the absurd, he does not mention Kierkegaard at all. This omission is partly to do with the prohibitive brevity of the book, which he acknowledges, as well as his stated aim to only discuss the idea of the absurd in the context of the ‘death of god’—perhaps precluding Kierkegaard due to the abundance of Christian themes in his work.³² It would be presumptuous to infer that Hinchliffe was not aware of the sceptical nature of Kierkegaard’s argument with Christian faith, as well as his instrumental role in twentieth-century existentialism. It is more likely that Hinchliffe’s book was not long enough to discuss Kierkegaard’s complicated work thoroughly, and that, as he states in the introduction, the volume largely makes the case for the theatre of the absurd since it is in these works that he believes absurdity to be best expressed.³³ Therefore, because Hinchliffe neglects Kierkegaard’s influence, and because his discussion of the absurd seems to function best as a supplementary volume to Esslin’s, it is largely omitted from the present study.

Thomas Nagel conducts an independent and thorough analysis of the absurd in his 1971 essay, *The Absurd*, and while it is a significant discussion of the concept it will not be addressed in the present study. This has to do with the essay’s central argument. Nagel is critical of the use of the term to describe feelings of insignificance and futility, but finds the concept useful to describe a contradictory, yet intrinsic, aspect of human thought. His essay begins by analysing the simple reasons why one might consider his or her life to be absurd: that human life is short and becomes insignificant with the passing of time, that humans are small and mortal compared with the scale of the infinite cosmos, and that occupying ourselves with stressful careers and complicated relationships does not change the fact that we will eventually die, negating our efforts and achievements.³⁴ Nagel explains that these are inadequate reasons to consider life as absurd, because if they were reversed they would not make life any more or less absurd. For example, of course our lives will not matter in a million years, because the life of someone in a million years’ time does not matter to us, and if life is absurd while it is short and we are small, then it would be just as absurd if it were infinitely long and we were infinitely huge.³⁵ In other words, these arguments are circular, they do not explain that life is absurd, only that the person who uses them has already assumed it to be the case. While Nagel’s argument is quite valid it is of little use to the present study because it has a different aim. His aim is to refute the more vernacular causes of the feeling of absurdity, which

³² Ibid., vii.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Thomas Nagel, ‘The Absurd,’ *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 20 (1971): 716-17.

³⁵ Ibid., 717.

he achieves, but his essay neither contributes to the understanding of the concept in its original discussion, nor aids in its comparison with more recent examples.

Despite his initial, rather dismissive, appraisal of the absurd Nagel later elaborates on its utility to describe a distinctive human psychological tendency, but again he does so in a manner that deviates from the intentions of the present study. He states that absurd situations arise when one's pretension or aspirations contradict, or are not realistic in, the circumstances in which they find themselves. Normally we are able to dismiss the occurrence, adjust our aspirations accordingly, or extricate ourselves from the situation, but when we notice this discrepancy in our fundamental attitude toward life then the problem becomes much more difficult.³⁶ Nagel submits that the difficulty of this sense of absurdity is due to the fact that our intelligence is able to undermine itself, namely that we are always capable of doubt.³⁷ In his view, the concept of the absurd is the clash between the seriousness with which we take our lives, and our capacity to doubt everything that we take seriously.³⁸ He goes on to analyse the psychological causes and philosophical ramifications of this idea of the absurd in the remainder of the essay, but as seductive as his account may be, this is the point at which it deviates in principle from the present one. Nagel's aim is to understand how it is possible to experience our lives as absurd, and to understand this as a peculiarity of human thought, however it is the aim of the present study to examine its evolution. Nagel's essay is different to this study because it seeks to understand the concept of the absurd in another light, not to see how this concept is manifest in, and helps illuminate, other circumstances.

Another philosopher and author who has used the term absurd is Jean-Paul Sartre, a central figure of existentialism who found inspiration in Kierkegaard's work, and was an erstwhile friend of Camus.³⁹ Despite these associations Sartre is not discussed at length in the present study, and this has to do with the meaning of the absurd in his work. The absurd for Sartre is the relationship between knowledge, perception and nature. Best played out in his novel *Nausea* (1938), it involves the sudden apprehension that our experience of the world is

³⁶ Ibid., 718.

³⁷ Ibid., 719.

³⁸ Ibid., 718.

³⁹ Ronald Aronson, *Camus & Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel That Ended It* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 1-2; Jonathan Judaken, 'Sisyphus's Progeny: Existentialism in France,' in *Situating Existentialism*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Jonathan Judaken (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 93; Samuel Moyn, 'Anxiety and Secularization: Søren Kierkegaard and the Twentieth-Century Invention of Existentialism,' in *Situating Existentialism*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Jonathan Judaken (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 291.

largely dictated by our practical understanding of it. When these ideas are removed and objects are perceived in their simple materiality they seem absurd, foreign to one's understanding.⁴⁰ Sartre's idea of the absurd is quite similar to Kierkegaard's and Camus's because it emphasises a disjuncture between human beings and the physical universe, and that this becomes clear with prolonged thought. However, Sartre's absurd differs because it does not involve the rather crucial paradox that Kierkegaard's and Camus's does. Sartre's absurd articulates the tenuous relationship between thought and experience, and while this is similar to Camus's idea that the mind cannot comprehend meaning in the material world, it does not involve the same urgency and consequences.

Apart from the resources outlined above, and despite the familiarity of the absurd as a philosophical concept, there are few discrete texts devoted to it. This could be due to its similarity with other concepts and artistic genres. Ideas of the futility of being can be recognised in Western culture since Greek tragedy, in philosophies of the tragic after Immanuel Kant, and even the works of William Shakespeare. Such works present the suffering of the individual due to circumstances of their own design, their insignificance before nature's magnitude, and the tragic consequences of human foolishness. As Camus notes, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Franz Kafka's works feature heroes who question the meaning of life and suffer meaningless fates, but these do not belong to the same tradition because they reach different conclusions.⁴¹ The many ways that the absurd is anticipated in works of literature is more than enough to occupy a separate discussion, but it is not the purpose of this one. Rather than become immersed in these various anticipations and antecedents of the absurd in literature and philosophy, it is more efficient to observe it in works that use the term explicitly, and with specific regard to the question of meaning in life in the context of the loss of faith.

Before the scholarship around the absurd is examined in more detail, it is obligatory to acknowledge that Kierkegaard was not the only philosopher to notice the effects of the decline of religion. For example, Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy entails the endless suffering of all forms of life as they compete for survival.⁴² Schopenhauer's analysis differs to Kierkegaard's because it begins with the assertion that any pursuit is futile, and concludes that the only way to appease suffering is to get rid of the will altogether. In effect, Kierkegaard works toward the absurd, where Schopenhauer works away from it—he begins at the end. Similarly, the

⁴⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 2010), 185.

⁴¹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin, 2005), 101, 21.

⁴² Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Suffering of the World*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 3.

philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche announces the decline of religion in the West with the provocative words ‘God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.’⁴³ For Nietzsche, the decline of religion involves acknowledgement that god is no longer a source of justification for moral principles and a sense of life’s purpose, and could lead to a nihilistic abandonment of morality. While Nietzsche criticises the illusory nature of faith, and announces the psychological detriment involved in Christian notions of guilt and sin, he emphasises the need for a basis of morality in order to avoid nihilism. The work of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer are examples of how strongly philosophers reacted to the decreasing influence of the church, and show that Kierkegaard’s critique of Christianity is not isolated.

Within the still-growing field of scholarship on Kierkegaard there are few books principally devoted to the themes already mentioned. The large quantity of texts that he self-published, his idiosyncratic writing style, and the ambiguity of his precise attitude toward Christianity have led to a considerable variance in response. Somewhat ironically, although Kierkegaard’s techniques are intended to make his ideas clearer, they actually make his work more problematic to translate and to study, thus contributing to the at once voluminous and variant nature of Kierkegaard scholarship.⁴⁴ Due to these inconsistencies it is necessary for the present study to consult different sources to outline different aspects of his work, and how the absurd is addressed within them, making an introductory commentary on each one both tedious and unnecessary. Yet despite the rather nebulous nature of Kierkegaard commentary, Michael Watts’ *Kierkegaard* (2003) is consistently cited to clarify each of his ideas. Published as a ‘beginner’s guide’ it may seem out of place in this research, yet its insight into the exact nature of the absurd and Kierkegaard’s particular understanding of Christian faith is invaluable. Watts methodically sets out Kierkegaard’s core problem as the possibility of Christian faith, making explicit the idea that the absurd is a barrier against faith. Crucially, Watts emphasises that the absurd is a reaction to the assertions of Christian doctrine, and not the doctrines themselves, a detail that many other scholarly texts overlook. This detail is useful to demonstrate how the absurd is relevant to other contexts and not specific to Christianity.

⁴³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 181.

⁴⁴ For these reasons, and for the sake of consistency, when consulting the original texts preference is made for works translated by Edna and Howard Hong, who excellently interpret Kierkegaard’s complicated use of Danish to digestible English that better suits the author’s intentions. However, when necessary, other translations are used to reinforce certain points.

To continue the examination of the absurd in twentieth-century thought it is necessary to follow the trajectory taken by Esslin and Hinchliffe, and consult the work of Albert Camus. However, despite the fact that Camus's ideas are well-known, scholarship that comments directly on his concept of the absurd is not abundant. Many texts about Camus take a much more biographical approach, and while many note his personal philosophy they rarely venture into its details. Nevertheless, the present study makes use of various adequate resources from this field, but owes much to Avi Sagi's *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd* (2002), which presents a thorough philosophical discussion of Camus's oeuvre. It is the only sustained volume on the absurd in Camus's work available at the time of writing, and as a result is invaluable. One of the main benefits of the text is how Sagi emphasises the functional nature of the absurd, specifically how Camus uses the term. Where many authors assume that the absurd means simply that life is meaningless, and that human activity is therefore futile and absurd, Sagi emphasises that it explicitly refers to the contradiction between the desire for life's meaning and reason—or the conflict between one's agency and one's inherent inability to achieve their aim. Sagi's definition of the absurd allows for Camus's ideas to be clearly aligned with Kierkegaard's, and makes it possible to discuss the concept in further contexts.

Although Michel Houellebecq's work is the most suitable for this discussion, it is important to note that other postmodern and contemporary authors operate in similar terrain. Houellebecq writes about contemporary life with such extreme pessimism that it divides audiences quite rigidly, much like Bret Easton Ellis, who polarised his readers with a notorious depiction of postmodern society that in many ways resembled Greek tragedy. Ellis dramatised the emptiness underpinning 1980s materialistic yuppie culture and its extreme psychological and moral consequences in *American Psycho* (1991), and similarly Houellebecq exacerbates contemporary self-sufficiency and self-help to the point of existential crisis. However, despite these similarities the two authors have significant differences, the clearest of which is chronological since Ellis's work is more relevant to the 1980s. Another more recent example of relevant literature is David Foster Wallace's lengthy work *Infinite Jest* (1996). Wallace has sympathy for the spiritual vacuity of everyday life, and the measures that ordinary people take to fill it. His characters are isolated, but his work conveys this as more of an innate aspect of individual life and less due to social and ideological influences. The preoccupations and addictions of his characters are also treated with a great deal more sympathy than Houellebecq's, making it seem much more personal, and somewhat more guarded. While the

book is an exemplary work on the contemporary condition its objectives are less clear cut than Houellebecq's and therefore less suitable for analysis.

While the field of scholarship on Houellebecq's work is growing, there are natural hazards that attend any authoritative discussion of a living author's work, as there is always the potential that new work will contradict any conclusions reached. As a result, not many commentators have attempted to understand the core motivation of Houellebecq's excoriation of contemporary society, and instead choose to focus on particular aspects of his work and what these might mean. For example, in *The new pornographies: Explicit sex in recent French fiction and film* (2007), Victoria Best and Martin Crowley examine the role of pornographic imagery in Houellebecq's work, and how it amounts to an equivalence between individuals and commodities in late capitalism. Best and Crowley make a strong argument, and its highly specific nature is useful to define Houellebecq's social critique within specific examples. Other texts attempt to reach more general conclusions about the author's work, but lack a suitable lens to make their reflections more specific, and therefore more credible. Ben Jeffrey's *Anti Matter: Michel Houellebecq and Depressive Realism* (2011) aims to summarise Houellebecq's output in a thematically coherent and digestible manner. However, the scope of the book seems to outgrow its means, and its brevity and lack of scholarly citation reduces its value to this discussion. Similarly, John McCann's *Michel Houellebecq: Author of Our Times* (2010) seems to be a personal reflection of Houellebecq's work rather than rigorous literary criticism. It is a good meditation but it lacks the necessary objectivity to contribute to a scholarly account.

Two thorough scholarly texts on Houellebecq's work are Carole Sweeney's *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair* and Douglas Morrey's *Michel Houellebecq: Humanity and its Aftermath* (both 2013). Both of these texts provide extensive overviews of Houellebecq's output prior to their publication, and both argue distinct theses that are helpful to the present study. Sweeney's text asserts that all of Houellebecq's writing depicts the market as the dominant force in contemporary life. The despair of the contemporary individual is caused by their alienation, which in turn is caused by social liberalism and aggravated by late capitalism. For Sweeney, Houellebecq points to a seeming paradox in contemporary society—that increased freedoms inevitably lead to greater unhappiness. Douglas Morrey argues that Houellebecq's work is a sustained contribution to a broader definition of posthumanism. He proposes that the author's criticism of contemporary liberalism is essentially a rejection of humanist values. Like Sweeney, he observes that increased personal freedom leads to unhappiness, but instead of ascribing this to market forces he attributes it to the prevalence of

humanist values, such as reason and autonomy. This makes the book particularly valuable, because it places Houellebecq's ideas within the same historical parameters as the absurd—that the decline of religion laid bare the reality that human beings desire more than is rationally available, particularly when it comes to a sense of meaning and purpose. Crucially he explains how Houellebecq does not provide any solution to these problems, suggesting that they are innate to contemporary life, and that they are overwhelming and unavoidable.

One problem with the study of the absurd and visual art is that the term can be so easily mistaken. For this reason, it is crucial that a clear distinction is made between art about the absurd, and absurd art, from the outset. The latter is quite simply art that is ridiculous, meaningless, and pointless in its own right—so thoroughly lacking sufficient aesthetic, conceptual, or critical content that it does not warrant the classification of art. For example, this could be work that is so inherently and unreflectively superficial that it would be more accurately described as a blithe decoration or novelty. It would be useless to give examples of such artworks, because they are self-evident. On the other hand, art about the absurd can take many forms, whether this is the performance of repetitive and futile tasks, works that present subjects as alienated and insignificant, or artists that celebrate the limitation of reason and logic by making works that deliberately flaunt convention and meaning. Such works present philosophical attitudes in creative forms, whether absurdity is depicted, insinuated, or defied—if it is meaningless it questions the possibility of meaning, and if it is nonsensical it casts doubt on the sensible.

There are many artists whose work may be considered according to the parameters described, therefore in the interest of concision and focus a more systematic approach is required to identify them. As such, the absurd in the contemporary moment can be defined in relation to four different artistic approaches. The first might be termed the 'bodily absurd', and applies to the work of artists such as Vito Acconci, with his relentless exploration of the limits of his own identity and materiality, and the failures that come to define them. The work of Marina Abramović, particularly her collaboration with Ulay, is also relevant to the bodily absurd, because together they consistently aimed to surpass the boundaries of their existence—their bodily endurance, identity, emotional attachment, and even their ontic materiality as evident in their later works. Another classification could be made under the title, the 'commercial absurd', and applied to the work of artists such as Andy Warhol or Jeff Koons. Both artists have made works, and assumed roles (particularly in the case of Warhol and his artistic persona), that create a kind of self-aggrandising, self-negating loop. Their works

comment on the superficial and commercial world by embodying the superficial and commercial—a pointless, Sisyphean activity both achieving and signifying nothing. Other artists make work that corresponds to what might be described as the ‘personal absurd’, which emphasise emotional and psychological frailty set against personal or social standards of confidence, efficacy, and merit. One might consider the work of Ugo Rondinone or Bas Jan Ader in this instance, as they separately portray human life as unheroic, laughable, and tragic. The fourth approach, the ‘political absurd’, is similar to the first in that it is characterised by the struggle against limitation, but rather than physical, this limitation is social and political, whether this is based on issues of gender, race, or social caste. While examples of politically-resistant art are abundant, the work of Francis Alÿs is exemplary, since he regularly depicts Sisyphean struggles against certain and unfavourable odds. For example, in the performance entitled *Paradox of Praxis 1 (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing)* (1997) Alÿs pushed a block of ice through the streets of Mexico City until it melted completely, his action symbolising the failure of repeated attempts to impose a Northern model of modernity on Latin America.⁴⁵

While the above artists warrant inclusion within this analysis, their work will not be discussed. This is due to the fact that, while they exemplify certain approaches to the absurd, Bruce Nauman’s work not only straddles several, but it is also the best example of an artistic approach that engages the absurd in a more existential or ontological sense. It is Nauman’s attitude towards making art, his process in making it, and also the works themselves that exemplify the absurd.

Active for over half a century, the length and scope of Nauman’s career has led to a wide variety of critical responses. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on the artist’s pivotal role in the development of video and performance art, and the texts that specifically address it, in order to take a decisive line of enquiry that also relates to the studio work. Crucial among these is *Bruce Nauman* (2001), edited by Robert Morgan. This volume is a compilation of critical essays, catalogue texts, and book chapters that address Nauman’s performance art. Morgan’s introductory survey is particularly valuable due to several comments on the absurd in Nauman’s work, however, as is typical of surveys, Morgan’s discussion of Nauman’s art is quite general. Occasionally he mentions how works are reminiscent of the absurd without

⁴⁵ Emma Cocker, ‘Over and over, Again and Again,’ in *Contemporary Art and Classical Myth*, ed. Isabelle Loring Wallace and Jennie Hirsh (Farnham, United Kingdom & Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 284.

going into detail to explain why. Robert Storr's contribution to the text largely avoids the use of the word absurd, instead he discusses Nauman's themes of philosophical doubt and human limitation. His essay, *Flashing a light in the Shadow of Doubt*, is a general discussion of Nauman's work that accompanied one of his retrospectives. This format suits Storr's assertive style of writing, which favours long passages of reflection on the works' broader significance. Because Storr prefers to discuss more universal themes the text is useful in order to illustrate the philosophical nature of Nauman's work.

Ingrid Schaffner's essay *Circling Oblivion: Bruce Nauman Through Samuel Beckett* is also published in Morgan's volume, and is particularly valuable due to its specific topic. As the title suggests, Schaffner follows Nauman's affinity with Beckett's writing by locating the writer's influence in his artworks. This text is the single most sustained interpretation of Nauman's work with respect to absurdist themes. Although it relies heavily on works of theatre, it emphasises the presence of frustration, repetition, and pointlessness in Nauman's work. Significantly, her text does not fundamentally align Nauman's worldview with Beckett's but rather compares the work of the two formally and conceptually in order to determine their affinity. Thus, as she demonstrates, Nauman's work reflects the absurd without a specific philosophical agenda, but rather out of an interest with its symbolism.

Other texts of significant value are *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words* (2005), edited by Janet Kraynak, and *Bruce Nauman* (2014) by Peter Plagens, both addressing the personal motivations of the artist. Plagens' recent monograph *Bruce Nauman* is a thorough account of the artist's work to date, and describes the manner in which Nauman's particular approach to making art is reflected in each of his works. He emphasises the artist's distinction from other movements and ideas, and the independence that such a position affords. By Plagens' account, Nauman's art is a solitary endeavour that is not reliant on the ideas and actions of others, and as a result it is possible to describe Nauman's attitude as absurdist. *Please Pay Attention Please* features an interview between Nauman and Joan Simon where he reveals that frustration at human nature is foundational to his work. This is important for the present study because it means that while Nauman's art reflects absurdist themes, it originates from more immediate concerns than the meaning of life.

The present study is divided into four chapters beginning with an outline of Søren Kierkegaard's theory of the absurd in relation to Christianity. It commences with a discussion of his concept of subjective truth, since this is how he proposes true faith is possible.

Subjective truth essentially involves an abandonment of logic, and thus it is useful to explain how the absurd is the product of rational thought and not faith. Kierkegaard uses the term absurd from various points of view, and in relation to different aspects of doctrine, to explain the true nature of faith—therefore it is necessary to explain how the absurd is consistent through each of these examples. He does so by postulating various exemplary figures that are capable of transcending the absurd, but frequently emphasises the personal sacrifice that the achievement of such a status involves, as well as its extreme difficulty. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Kierkegaard's notion of the spheres of existence, a helpful analogy to understand how the absurd is a sort of barrier between rational thought and religious faith. While Kierkegaard's authorship is devoted to the explanation of the possibility of such a faith, it frequently presents it as logically, and humanly, impossible.

Chapter two examines the absurd in the philosophy and literature of Albert Camus. It begins with his definition of the concept in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), and how it relates to the specific socio-historic conditions of his day. Particular attention is given to the fact that Camus uses the term as an atheist, and his conclusion that the absurd infers the total meaninglessness of life. *The Rebel* (1951) is then discussed in order to address his absurdist philosophy in more detail—particularly how he proposes one should react to the realisation that life is absurd. Camus's ideas are then examined within his novel *The Plague* (1947), which presents his humanist absurdist philosophy in the form of a fictional narrative, thus providing a useful segue to Houellebecq's work.

Chapter three argues that Michel Houellebecq's novels present a crisis in contemporary life that can be closely compared with the absurd, and these similarities are broken down under four subheadings. The first deals with Houellebecq's criticism of Enlightenment humanism, and its role in the decline of religion. This decline leads to what Houellebecq describes as the rise of individualism in the sexual revolution and other liberation movements, and is examined second. The third section discusses how these factors contribute to his perception that most people are extremely unhappy, particularly with regard to relationships and ageing. The chapter concludes with Houellebecq's predictions of the eventual decline of individualism in genetic engineering, or a return to religion. These conclusions clarify Houellebecq's doubts that a sense of meaning can be found in life without sacrificing individuality and free thought.

Chapter four condenses the many ways that Bruce Nauman's work presents similar ideas to the absurd under six subheadings. The first likens Nauman's idea of art practice to the existential problems of the absurd, particularly his reduction of the artistic act to his solitary

activity in the studio. The second examines an early series of performance videos that depict pointless and repetitive tasks, and these are compared with similar actions in the plays of Samuel Beckett. Nauman's use of repetition is analysed in the third section, particularly the way that this emphasises a sense of entrapment and futility. The fourth section explains how Nauman replicates the absurd by making deliberately unintelligible artworks, and how the apparent meaninglessness of his work is distinct from nihilism. The fifth section briefly examines Nauman's obscurity of his identity in his performances, and how this enhances and universalises his philosophical commentary. Finally, this commentary is analysed with reference to Nauman's comments about his frustration with human nature, and how this manifests in his work in a way that makes it seem absurdist. The chapter is also interspersed with reflections on the accompanying artwork in the manner of Paul Valéry's *Introduction to the Method of Leonardo da Vinci* (1894), and Julia Kristeva's *Stabat Mater* (1977). These digressions are necessary in order to avoid the inelegancies of writing in the first person, while maintaining the critical tone of the chapter. This structure also helps to establish affinities between Nauman's practice and the studio work, thereby placing it in the context of the present study.

Chapter One: Søren Kierkegaard

Perhaps what led Søren Kierkegaard to describe belief as absurd had to do with his personal life, which permeates his work.⁴⁶ Almost every account of Kierkegaard's philosophy takes into consideration his aborted engagement with Regine Olsen, whom he had pursued for some time but left out of the fear that he could not fully devote himself to his marriage and his work at the same time.⁴⁷ This sense of hesitancy and personal insufficiency manifests in several ways. For example, Kierkegaard's texts are often written with the voices and opinions of other people, a technique he called 'indirect communication', and despite being a lifelong Christian he spent his career proving the extreme difficulty of belief in god. But this characteristic is most evident in his concept of the absurd, which represents internal division and the inability to commit in the extreme. Perhaps this is why his solution to faith involves the most singular commitment, taking as the only truth the unmeasurable inward experience of one's being in order to embrace the irrational in faith. The absurd is what prevents this from happening; it is the product of thinking rationally about Christianity. In short, it is the point when one realises that faith is impossible. This chapter examines Kierkegaard's ideas regarding faith, reason, and subjectivity in order to explain the absurd and its crucial position within them.

Kierkegaard's work emphasises the paramount importance of a subjective rather than objective analysis of existence.⁴⁸ For Kierkegaard, the peril of an objective study of existence is its ignorance of individuality.⁴⁹ Objectivity is concerned with the perception and expression of outward facts, as a mode of understanding it is detached and observational. To view and describe something existing with objectivity is to ignore the inner experience of that existence. The inner experience of life itself is completely invisible to the observer, as it has no tangible quality despite the physical presence of the existing individual. If the moment-to-moment, inner experience of our lives has no measurable qualities then it cannot be understood objectively.⁵⁰ Kierkegaard argued that the crisis of modern Christian thought was the 'illusion

⁴⁶ Tess Lewis, 'Søren Kierkegaard: A Master of Refraction,' *The Hudson Review* 59, no. 1 (2006): 77.

⁴⁷ Michael Watts, *Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), 35-36.

⁴⁸ George Pattison, *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard* (Chesham: Acumen, 2005), 23.

⁴⁹ Watts, *Kierkegaard*, 80.

⁵⁰ Michael Weston, 'Kierkegaard, Levinas, and "Absolute Alterity",' in *Kierkegaard and Levinas: Ethics, Politics, and Religion*, ed. David Wood J. Aaron Simmons (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 162.

of objectivity'.⁵¹ For Kierkegaard, the essence of any truth lies in the individual's understanding of it.⁵² This understanding is not outwardly measurable because it is within the individual—it is their conscious recognition of a fact, not the fact itself. If the truth lies in the individual's recognition of it, then it has more to do with the unfolding process of existing. It is completely inward and therefore cannot be outwardly gauged for objective understanding. As he states: 'Subjectivity, inwardness, is truth... the inwardness of the existing person is the truth.'⁵³ Kierkegaard's idea of subjective truth is the personal recognition of one's own self currently existing. It is a continual process of actively acknowledging the passage of existence, and the self that is the vehicle for this existence.⁵⁴ In short, it could be described as the inward recognition of one's own existence unfolding within temporal reality. Kierkegaard refers to subjective truth as the highest truth for a human to acknowledge.⁵⁵ Other forms of truth are objective because they relate to the facts of being; subjective truth is the process of being.

Subjective truth forms the most elementary paradox that occupies Kierkegaard's thought. The perception of this paradox leads to what he calls objective uncertainty. Because the source of subjective truth is within the existing individual, he or she cannot perceive it from an external standpoint. If subjective truth cannot be experienced objectively, then it cannot be understood rationally. Furthermore, because subjective truth is a continual engagement with the constantly unravelling process of existing, it can never be comprehended as a finished, logical truth.⁵⁶ Therefore, because subjective experience is impossible for an objective view to simultaneously analyse, it is a logical paradox. Subjective truth is the most essential factor of our status as living beings and, according to Kierkegaard, is irrefutable as truth. Indeed this truth is the only definitive truth to our existence because it is our existence. Objectivity cannot be relied upon to deal with matters of subjective existence, because of the paradox. Therefore it must follow that subjective truth is superior. This is how Kierkegaard

⁵¹ P.L. Gardiner, *Kierkegaard: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 2; Weston, 'Kierkegaard, Levinas, and "Absolute Alterity"', 162.

⁵² Watts, *Kierkegaard*, 82.

⁵³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 171.

⁵⁴ Watts, *Kierkegaard*, 82.

⁵⁵ Thomas Anderson, 'The Opposition between Objective Knowledge and Subjective Appropriation in Kierkegaard and Climacus,' in *Christian Discourses and the Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, ed. Robert L. Perkins, International Kierkegaard Commentary (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2007), 198-99; Watts, *Kierkegaard*, 82.

⁵⁶ Watts, *Kierkegaard*, 82-84.

manages to assert subjectivity's status as the highest form of truth.⁵⁷ As he states: 'When subjectivity, inwardness, is truth, then truth, objectively defined, is a paradox; and that truth is objectively a paradox shows precisely that subjectivity is truth.'⁵⁸ Kierkegaard's view that subjective truth undermines objective certainty is bolstered by the fact that objectivity is influenced by subjective truth. Subjective truth is entirely within the existing self and it is the existing self that perceives the objective truth. In other words, our impressions of the external world are influenced by our core values.⁵⁹ In this manner Kierkegaard arrives at what he calls objective uncertainty. The fact that an objective view of the subjective truth is paradoxical, and the assertion of subjective truth is the only given fact of our existence, leads to a conclusion of the uncertainty of an objective viewpoint regarding existence. With objectivity debunked as such, Kierkegaard claims that the individual is able to embrace values that are objectively or logically uncertain, such as Christian faith.

Like subjective truth, Christianity is objectively paradoxical. For Kierkegaard, Christian faith presents the highest form of subjective truth attainable.⁶⁰ When fully embraced as an existential condition, Kierkegaard's Christianity involves a passionate, ongoing inner commitment with the infinite God. Like the moment-to-moment unfolding of the existential self, the Christian God is an eternal, intangible truth that is objectively uncertain.⁶¹ The engagement with God cannot be made objectively. This engagement must be an entirely subjective, inner passion.⁶² Regarding this kind of subjectivity, Kierkegaard states: 'An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing person.'⁶³ Relating this to Christianity, Kierkegaard asserts that:

The definition of truth stated above is a paraphrasing of faith... Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am able to apprehend God objectively, I do not have faith; but because I cannot

⁵⁷ Ibid., 82.

⁵⁸ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, 171.

⁵⁹ Watts, *Kierkegaard*, 86.

⁶⁰ Anderson, 'The Opposition between Objective Knowledge and Subjective Appropriation in Kierkegaard and Climacus,' 199.

⁶¹ C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2006), 61.

⁶² Robert Solomon, *From Rationalism to Existentialism: The Existentialists and Their Nineteenth-Century Backgrounds* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1978), 103.

⁶³ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, 170.

do this, I must have faith. If I want to keep myself in faith, I must continually see to it that I hold fast the objective uncertainty.⁶⁴

Faith and subjective truth are inherently similar because they are both inner passions and objectively uncertain. Naturally, this faith requires a subjective acceptance—it cannot be communicated directly. Like subjective truth, faith cannot be grasped intellectually. For Kierkegaard, ‘the subjective acceptance is precisely the decisive factor; and an objective acceptance of Christianity is paganism or thoughtlessness.’⁶⁵ Objectively comprehending and believing the irrational propositions of Christianity is not Kierkegaard’s idea of faith. Rather, this is more of a mindless, gullible acceptance of a nonsensical statement. According to Kierkegaard, internalising God as a subjective passion removes God’s irrationality, because rationality is an objective concern.⁶⁶ In other words, because of the logical inconceivability of our unfolding existence, we exist, and because of the objective irrationality of an infinite, transcendent absolute, God exists. ‘It is subjectivity that Christianity is concerned with, and it is only in subjectivity that the truth exists, if it exists at all; objectively, Christianity has absolutely no existence.’⁶⁷ As such, faith makes it possible for the individual to engage with God in a state of being uninhibited by the constraints of logical thought. Kierkegaard considered this notion of a life of subjective faith the paramount level of selfhood that can be achieved by a human being.⁶⁸ It is only in this way that one can transcend the irrationality of Christianity and live with passionate subjective faith.

Both subjective truth and faith are objective uncertainties and as such can be considered paradoxical. Kierkegaard asserts that Christian faith contains another paradox, what he calls the ‘absolute paradox’—the central assertion of Christianity that God was incarnated in the human form of Christ. Kierkegaard’s problem with this assertion has to do with the dynamics of the incarnation. God is infinite, immortal, eternal and transcendental from all temporal forms of existence. Humans are finite, temporal and, above all, mortal. To suggest that an infinite transcendental phenomenon somehow, without rational explanation, managed to manifest in the temporal realm in the form of a mortal human being is entirely

⁶⁴ Ibid., 171.

⁶⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), 116.

⁶⁶ ‘Kierkegaard’s Pragmatist Faith,’ *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 51, no. 2 (1991): 280.

⁶⁷ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 116.

⁶⁸ Watts, *Kierkegaard*, 88-89.

preposterous. As Kierkegaard states, ‘that that which in accordance with its nature is eternal comes into existence in time, is born, grows up, and dies—this is a breach with all thinking.’⁶⁹ Any application of logic to resolve this paradox is bound to fail, it is intellectually impossible to explain objectively. It is a wildly irrational proposition, but it is a proposition that the individual must face in order to become Christian.⁷⁰ It is possible for the imagination to apprehend such a paradox occurring, because with imagination all things are possible. But to comprehend that this actually happened in the history of this planet is impossible: ‘In the fantasy-medium of possibility God can perfectly well for the imagination be fused with a man, but that this should occur in reality with an individual man, this precisely is the paradox.’⁷¹ The fact that this paradox, the ‘absolute paradox’, is impossible to comprehend dictates that any rational attempt to adopt this central belief results in failure. The absolute paradox is offensive to reason, and is therefore absurd. As Kierkegaard states:

What, then, is the absurd? The absurd is that the eternal truth has come into existence in time, that God has come into existence, has been born, has grown up, etc., has come into existence exactly as an individual human being, indistinguishable from any other human being...⁷²

This is not to say that the absolute paradox is in itself the absurd. The absurd is the reasoning mind’s inability to grasp the paradox objectively. The absolute paradox presents the absurd. Because the individual cannot rationally digest the paradox, the reasoning faculties of the mind reject it. In this attempted transaction of logic, the absurd is the ‘rebound’—the mind’s withdrawal from the assertion of the paradox, a reaction of offense.⁷³ As Kierkegaard puts it, the absurd is the ‘negative criterion’, the dismissal of a necessary criterion for faith: ‘The absurd is the negative criterion of that which is higher than human understanding and knowledge.’⁷⁴ Because of the mind’s refusal to positively absorb the absolute paradox as a fact,

⁶⁹ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 513.

⁷⁰ Emmanuel, ‘Kierkegaard’s Pragmatist Faith,’ 279.

⁷¹ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 515.

⁷² Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, 210.

⁷³ G. M. Malantschuk, ‘Notes, Commentary and Topical Bibliography,’ in *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, ed. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), 497-98; Watts, *Kierkegaard*, 90-91.

⁷⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), 8.

this refusal is a negative response.⁷⁵ It is the mind's assertion that it cannot be correct, a negative judgement or disagreement with an illogical proposition: 'The activity of reason is to distinguish the paradox negatively—but no more.'⁷⁶ The incarnation presents an impossible situation, a suggested historical fact that does not marry with the usual information that the rational mind can process. There is no scientific evidence to explain this impossible situation. The absurd, the response to the impossible situation, relies on this lack of evidence. 'The absurd is the negative determinant which assures, for example, that I have not overlooked one or another possibility which still lies within the human arena.'⁷⁷ Kierkegaard's definition of the absurd is as simple as the definition of the word itself. It is the mind's reaction of offense to an illogical suggestion. What separates his absurd from the usual definition is its context. While typical instances of absurdity are often arbitrary or illogical, Kierkegaard's absurd presents itself on the crux of what he perceived to be the most important process of thought that a human can embark upon. This process is of course the path to faith, in his terms, 'becoming Christian'. As such, the absurd is the last obstacle that one must encounter, an obstacle that stands on the threshold to a life of passionate subjective faith.

Just as the absurd relies on a lack of evidence for the absolute paradox, it also relies on faith. In the driest terms, if there is no suggestion of a paradox there cannot be an offense of reason. Similarly, if reason is not offended, there cannot be an absurd. For the absurd to exist, faith must remain a possibility. As Kierkegaard asserts, faith cannot be taken for granted, it must be earned through the pursuit of subjective truth. This faith, which Kierkegaard terms 'existential faith', is an entirely personal pursuit. As such, one cannot blindly accept Christian doctrine as the truth; first one must face the absurd. As Kierkegaard states, 'in order to become a believer everyone must be alone with the absurd.'⁷⁸ In becoming Christian, one must face the absurdity of Christianity's assertions even though they exist in, and can only comprehend objectively, the finite world where such things are impossible. In order to overcome the rational revulsion of the absolute paradox, one must acknowledge their limitations. Like the mind's inability to perceive the totality of infinity, we as humans cannot comprehend God's

⁷⁵ Gerhard Schreiber, 'Magnus Eiriksson: An Opponent of Martensen and an Unwelcome Ally of Kierkegaard,' in *Kierkegaard and His Danish Contemporaries: Theology*, ed. Jon Stewart (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 91.

⁷⁶ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 4.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

eternal transcendental nature, or the absolute paradox.⁷⁹ If we continue to perceive the nature of existence objectively, the paradox is rejected by the mind. However, if we can acknowledge our mind's limitations in objectively comprehending such things, it becomes possible to perform what Kierkegaard calls the 'leap to faith'.⁸⁰ Because objective uncertainty undermines logic, faith becomes an option. In other words, with the prior realisation of objective uncertainty we can come to terms with the incapacity of our minds to deal with matters of experiential existence. This allows us to move beyond the absurd rejection of the absolute paradox in a leap of faith.

For any leap of faith to take place the individual must have faith as their object. Presumably at this point the believer-to-be is well aware of Christian doctrine, otherwise the absolute paradox would not be absurd. The individual would be completely ignorant of it. Because he or she is seeking faith, has found subjective truth, and is obviously sincerely committed to self-realisation, he or she is almost already there. For Kierkegaard, this faith is 'the inner transformation of the whole mind, by which a person in life-peril of the spirit comes in earnest, in true inwardness, to believe at least something—of the considerable Christianity that he knows.'⁸¹ This pursuit of true inwardness must end with faith. Kierkegaard asserts that the individual, through subjectivity, generates his or her own faith. Rather than arriving at faith, he or she creates it:

Truly, no more than God allows a species of fish to come into existence in a particular lake unless the plant that is its nourishment is also growing there, no more will God allow the truly concerned person to be ignorant of what he is to believe. That is, the need brings its nourishment along with it; what is sought is in the seeking that seeks it; faith is in the concern over not having faith... The need brings the nourishment along with it, not by itself, as if the need produced the nourishment, but by virtue of a divine determination that joins the two, the need and the nourishment.⁸²

Speaking of the need and the nourishment in this way, Kierkegaard implies that becoming Christian is as important as the Christianity that one believes in. Faith is as important as its

⁷⁹ Emmanuel, 'Kierkegaard's Pragmatist Faith,' 286.

⁸⁰ Watts, *Kierkegaard*, 90.

⁸¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses: The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 246.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 244-45.

object.⁸³ The divine determination is God's predestination that the two can become connected, which Kierkegaard believes is a wonder, or a miracle.⁸⁴ The fact that a miracle is required for this connection makes Christian faith a paradox in itself: 'But then is faith just as paradoxical as the paradox? Quite so. How else could it have its object in the paradox and be happy in its relation to it? Faith itself is a wonder, and everything that is true of the paradox is also true of faith.'⁸⁵ Faith itself is a paradox guarded in a way by the absurd.⁸⁶ If one is to have faith it must be on the strength of the unthinkable nature of paradox, and that faith is in itself paradoxical.

Faith is ultimately irrational, and any believer must embrace that irrationality based on the objective uncertainty created by his or her own subjective experience. If an individual cannot embrace this irrationality, if faith is considered too irrational a goal to ever potentially be a goal, then faith is impossible, and the absurd is not the absurd. It is merely an untruth. For the absurd to be absurd it must be a proposition. When faith is ruled out the proposition is not proposed and no offence to reason can take place and the absurd becomes nonsense:

The absurd, the paradox... is a symbol, a riddle, a compounded riddle about which reason must say: I cannot solve it, it cannot be understood, but it does not follow thereby that it is nonsense. But, of course, if faith is completely abolished, the whole sphere is dropped, and then reason conceited and perhaps concludes that, ergo, the paradox is nonsense.⁸⁷

For Kierkegaard the question of faith is paramount. True to his dialectical approach and his method of indirect communication this question is addressed from a variety of angles throughout his authorship. A key angle to this approach is evident in *Fear and Trembling* (1843).

The absurd in *Fear and Trembling* contextually differs to that which is caused by the absolute paradox, but is essentially similar. In the text Kierkegaard implements the Old Testament story of Abraham to discuss existential faith. According to the story, God promised Abraham a son through whom he would become father of a people. All that was required of Abraham in return was absolute faith in God. Abraham grew old remaining childless but never

⁸³ Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self*, 64-65.

⁸⁴ Watts, *Kierkegaard*, 90.

⁸⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments, Johannes Climacus*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985), 65.

⁸⁶ Schreiber, 'Magnus Eiriksson: An Opponent of Martensen and an Unwelcome Ally of Kierkegaard,' 91.

⁸⁷ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 5.

gave up his faith. Eventually Isaac was born when both parents were clearly too old to conceive. Isaac grew to adulthood and thrived, at which time God told Abraham that it was his duty to sacrifice Isaac at the distant Mount Moriah. Abraham was left with a choice whether to keep Isaac and abandon his faith in God, who gave him Isaac, or sacrifice Isaac and keep his faith in God who promised and delivered him a son in the first place. Kierkegaard's interest in the story lies in the paradoxes Abraham faced in this decision, and his ability to carry out the sacrifice. For Abraham to have faith, he must overcome the absurdity of God's command. In this case, the paradox is the fact that God's command entailed two contradictory suggestions. According to God's initial promise, Isaac must live because through him Abraham was destined to become father of a people. But according to God's latest command, Isaac was to be sacrificed, making the first promise redundant. The combination of these two assertions is paradoxical, and therefore offensive to reason. This is the absurd with which Abraham is confronted.⁸⁸ For Abraham, 'the collision is precisely between two higher hints—God's promise about Isaac and God's demand that he sacrifice Isaac'.⁸⁹ In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard employs Abraham's role as the prototype of Christian faith to once again express the subjective nature of existential faith. Because of the lack of the absolute paradox in Abraham's time, the absurd appears as a paradoxical divine command, one that he must personally overcome.

That there is a difference between the absurd in *Fear and Trembling* and the paradox in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is quite correct. The first is the purely personal definition of existential faith—the other is faith in relationship to a doctrine.⁹⁰

While there are literal differences between these two instances of the absurd, they are essentially similar. Both instances detail a final and rationally unacceptable obstacle before faith. With *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes de Silentio manages to establish the absurd's universality. Because the story of Abraham takes place before Christ, Kierkegaard needs to establish the absurd outside Christianity. In doing so, Kierkegaard outlines another instance of the subjective experience of faith:

⁸⁸ Edward Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 131.

⁸⁹ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 8.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

The objection that there is conflict between the absurd in Johannes de Silentio and in Johannes Climacus is a misunderstanding. In the same way according to the New Testament Abraham is called the father of faith, and yet it is indeed clear that the content of his faith cannot be Christian—that Jesus Christ has been in existence. But Abraham’s faith is the formal definition of faith. So it is also with the absurd.⁹¹

Because of Abraham’s prototypical faith, his collision with the absurd is no different from that of any contemporary Christian. The only difference is situational. Abraham’s absurd is a paradoxical divine command, likewise the Christian’s absurd is the paradoxical assertion of a doctrine. Both instances of the absurd are essentially identical. And both require the believer to have faith on the strength of its irrationality.

Commonly found in Kierkegaard’s authorship is the phrase ‘by virtue of the absurd’. For an individual to have faith they must believe in the strength of the absurd, as distinct from merely believing the absurd. Because it is completely irrational, the individual must suspend reason in order to overcome the absurd. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), Kierkegaard asserts that this can be done on the strength of the objective uncertainty. In *Fear and Trembling*, however, comparatively little is offered as to why Abraham performed the leap. Much is left to the assumption that a divine command carries with it some certainty of God’s existence, or even assistance.⁹² Instead, Kierkegaard highlights the sheer irrationality of his faith, completely devoid of human reasoning. Abraham did not want to sacrifice his son, but God demanded it. God had also promised earlier that Isaac would live and prosper, but now God wanted Isaac killed. God’s demand was absurd, and because God’s demand was absurd, Abraham was able to maintain the absurd belief that he would not, in the end, have to sacrifice Isaac:

During all this time he had faith, he had faith that God would not demand Isaac of him, and yet he was willing to sacrifice him if it was demanded. He had faith by virtue of the absurd, for human calculation was out of the question, and it certainly was absurd that God, who required it of him, should in the next moment rescind the requirement.⁹³

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation*, 52.

⁹³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 35-6.

God did rescind the requirement at the last moment by offering a ram to be sacrificed while Abraham's knife was drawn. Abraham's faith was absurd, but it proved correct. Abraham had faith because logic had no power to dissolve his situation. He had faith because the proposed situation was illogical, and adopted an illogical faith to deal with it. Abraham believed in the impossible, sacrificing logic to sacrifice Isaac.⁹⁴ The Christian has faith because of the absurdity of the incarnation. Similarly Abraham maintains his faith that Isaac will live because of the absurdity of God's command.

According to the *Postscript*, faith must be achieved because the absurd cannot be understood. Just as the absurd is a negative reaction to the paradox, faith is a negative reaction to the absurd. 'It can be believed altogether-against the understanding. If anyone imagines that he understands it, he can be sure that he misunderstands it.'⁹⁵ To accept the content of Christian faith blindly is to reduce the importance of the absurd. Moreover, blind acceptance would be a sign of immense stupidity because it is the operation of logic that makes the absurd absurd. If one can believe Christian assertions immediately, one can believe anything. Instead of faith, it is gullibility: 'He who understands it plainly (in contrast to understanding that it cannot be understood) will confound Christianity with one or another pagan analogy (analogies that lead away from factual reality)'.⁹⁶ This confounded Christianity is faith simply based on a lack of reason. Kierkegaard's Christianity is faith against all reason. It is a full acknowledgement of impossibility that is used to strengthen the position of faith, because existence itself is objectively irrational.

The central focus of *Fear and Trembling* is what was involved in Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. For Kierkegaard, to be willing to sacrifice his only son required Abraham to completely resign from any emotional connection he had with Isaac. This resignation from his earthly commitments allowed Abraham direct communion with God, and God's will. Among these earthly commitments was Isaac. According to Kierkegaard, Abraham's resignation of the earthly allowed him to carry out the sacrifice devoid of any connection to Isaac. But at the same time Abraham needed to continue loving Isaac. For the time being Isaac remained his son, and it was a long ride to Mount Moriah. In short, Abraham needed to be totally committed as well as completely withdrawn from his son at the same time. This simultaneous position of absolute connection to God and earthly grounding is the ability of what

⁹⁴ Dorota Glowacka, 'Sacrificing the Text: The Philosopher/Poet at Mount Moriah,' *Animus* 2 (1997): 37.

⁹⁵ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 513-14.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 514.

Kierkegaard calls a Knight of Faith.⁹⁷ The renunciation of all earthly hopes, concerns and possessions is what Kierkegaard refers to as Infinite Resignation. This resignation allows the individual to embrace the infinite God without being tied down to the finite world. It is the disavowal of the petty concerns of human existence that allows the full acceptance of God's infinite grace.⁹⁸ According to Kierkegaard, Infinite Resignation is only half of the requirements of a Knight of Faith. The other is the simultaneous ability to 'remain in finitude'. This requires the Knight to fully embrace the requirements of earthly existence. It is to continue living, and even enjoying finite existence in the full knowledge of its utter superfluity in the face of the infinite. While Abraham best exemplifies the gravity of this undertaking by continuing to love Isaac, Kierkegaard also describes the day-to-day existence of what could be called the everyday Knight of Faith:

[The Knight] belongs altogether to the world, no *petit bourgeois* belongs to it more... This man takes pleasure, takes part, in everything, and whenever one catches him occupied with something his engagement has the persistence of the worldly person whose soul is wrapped up in such things... *if one didn't know him*, it would be impossible to set him apart from the rest of the crowd.⁹⁹

The life of a Knight of Faith, while ideal for Kierkegaard, is utterly paradoxical. It involves two contradictory 'movements', one to the infinite as well as one to the temporal. Because of the completely subjective nature of these movements, and because of their contradictory nature, they must be made at every instant. The Knight of Faith's life is a continual 'dance-like double movement' around the absurd.¹⁰⁰ As such there is a recurring possibility that in the next instant the Knight's movements may fail.¹⁰¹ At any instant the tendency for objectivity could take over

⁹⁷ Ronald Green, "Developing 'Fear and Trembling,'" in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Daniel Marino (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 261.

⁹⁸ John Lippitt, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling* (London: Routledge, 2003), 42; Clare Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming: Movements and Positions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 101-02.

⁹⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 69.

¹⁰⁰ Edward Mooney, *On Søren Kierkegaard: Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 224.

¹⁰¹ Ronald Hall, *The Human Embrace: The Love of Philosophy and the Philosophy of Love: Kierkegaard, Cavell, Nussbaum* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 33-34.

and reason may be offended: 'When the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd—faith transforms it, but in every weak moment it is again more or less absurd to him.'¹⁰² Because the Knight of Faith is continually 'dancing', the absurd is always present as a possible reaction. Kierkegaard's hero never truly escapes the absurd.

A popular mode of explaining Kierkegaard's ideas of self-development is their simplification in the form of the three spheres of human existence. Due to his method of indirect communication these spheres, or stages, are elucidated in only some of his texts.¹⁰³ Other texts such as *Fear and Trembling* explore the same concepts but from the varied individual viewpoints of their pseudonymous authors. In order of progression these stages are the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. Aesthetic existence, as the name suggests, is preoccupied with the sensuous properties of human existence. What can be touched, tasted or seen is inevitably rooted in the external, physical world. Kierkegaard asserts that an existence totally engaged in the experience of these properties is inherently shallow.¹⁰⁴ These individuals are interested only in personal gratification, be this the day-to-day struggle for survival or the most opulent hedonism. This is not to say that the 'aesthete' is selfish, rather these individuals are entirely preoccupied with everyday tasks and concerns.

Within the aesthetic stage there are various levels. The lowest is an almost animal-like pursuit of base pleasure, the relentless pursuit of immediate gratification. These immediate pleasures could take the form of drugs, alcohol or sex.¹⁰⁵ Higher levels share the same preoccupations, but with an element of sophistication. These pleasures could be intellectual conversation, good company or the appreciation of fine art. These aesthetic individuals actively choose how best to enjoy life because they are highly selective in all forms of pleasure.¹⁰⁶ Kierkegaard outlines many other examples of aesthetic existence such as those whose sole interest is the preservation of health or beauty, or career-driven individuals who forever chase financial success.¹⁰⁷ Regardless of the preoccupation, these modes of existence are all focused on the immediate aspects of this world. The focus is entirely on external qualities that have nothing to do with the inner self.¹⁰⁸ At any moment these aspects can be taken away. As such, the aesthete's happiness is at the whim of the universe: 'Fortune, misfortune, fate, immediate

¹⁰² Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 7.

¹⁰³ Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation*, 3.

¹⁰⁴ Watts, *Kierkegaard*, 192.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 192, 97.

enthusiasm, despair—these are what the aesthetic life-view has at its disposal'.¹⁰⁹ Because aesthetic individuals place all importance on the external and temporary aspects of life, they lack an awareness of the inner self. If, however, the individual perceives that this kind of existence is lacking it is then possible to move into the ethical sphere.

A segue into the ethical can be achieved when one realises the meaninglessness of their aesthetic existence, living it with ironic detachment. This ironic view of existence acknowledges the futility of aesthetic endeavours, but continues with these endeavours with cynicism. From this point it is easier for the individual to move into the ethical sphere because they realise the arbitrary nature of aesthetic existence. The ethical individual is concerned in determining the inner self, shaping their view of existence with the help of morals and values. At this level, the individual takes responsibility for their past and future actions as they relate to themselves and the choices they have made, rather than ascribing them to luck, fate or other external influences. As such this individual is autonomous, able to choose his or her actions. Being able to choose liberates the individual from the continual cycle of desire-satisfaction now that they have a central moral ideal. Even though the ethical person's actions do not necessarily conform to the demands of aesthetic existence, they are still informed by reason. In determining the correct action to be taken in a given circumstance, the ethical individual applies logic according to the moral absolute of his or her character.

In later writings, Kierkegaard dissolves the ethical sphere into the religious because of the problematic nature of a purely ethical existence. For instance, the ethical individual would encounter many devastating moral dilemmas throughout the course of their life. These would be irreconcilable with their central ideals and lead to a state of dejection. It is not difficult to see why Kierkegaard merged these two spheres. Regarding Abraham, moral impulse had to be ignored to go through with the sacrifice, it was faith that informed his actions. This could easily be viewed as a transition from the ethical to the religious.¹¹⁰ There is always the supposition that if Abraham did not have faith there would be no dilemma. However, this is clearly not an option for Kierkegaard. Faith provides a solution to contradictory ethical dilemmas. When two ethical standpoints are both morally valid, but pose a threat to one another if carried out, one must be chosen. Faith allows this choice. Faith transcends logical paradoxes because faith itself is irrational, thus transcending logic. Both the aesthetic and the ethical spheres lie before the religious sphere. According to Kierkegaard, the absurd lies

¹⁰⁹ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, 434.

¹¹⁰ Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation*, 4.

precisely within this gap: "The absurd terminates negatively before the sphere of faith, which is a sphere by itself."¹¹¹ The paradoxes of the ethical approach and the futility of the aesthetic sphere prompt the move into the religious sphere. Here the individual encounters another paradox that the logic of the two previous spheres cannot maintain. Because it is paradox that is driving the individual towards faith, they must accept the absurdity of faith.

Life is absurd, and faith is absurd. The absurd, the 'negative' reaction to the paradox of Christianity, 'terminates' before the religious sphere. The absurd is the threshold of faith. It is the last reason-offending hurdle that the individual must pass. Once passed, the absurd disappears. The illustrative aspect of the spheres also indicates the 'balancing act' of the Knight of Faith. For Kierkegaard, the spheres are not in complete isolation to one another. They are more like building blocks. If an individual has ascended into the next sphere, they still remain in contact with the previous. A person in the religious sphere still has earthly requirements like eating and working as well as ethical commitments. However, these are subordinate to the requirements of the religious sphere, the absolute commitment before God, which remains his or her highest priority.

By illustrating the emptiness and pointlessness of temporal existence, Kierkegaard's intention was to bolster the position of existential faith as the ultimate way of life. But when the possibility of faith is removed, the only conclusion that can be made from his ideas is the inherent meaninglessness of existence.¹¹² The absurd stands at the threshold between faith and reason, as such it can only justify the 'leap to faith' or the sobering conclusion of nihilism.¹¹³ Kierkegaard's assertions of the subjectivity of faith also helped justify the atheistic view. Because faith cannot be objectively held, it must be subjectively lived.¹¹⁴ Such a suggestion carries its own uncertainties. Subjectively, anything can be believed. Or, as Albert Camus puts it: "Since nothing is proved, everything can be proved."¹¹⁵ It was Kierkegaard's upbringing and the socio-religious climate of his time that influenced his need to justify faith. He did so in the only rationally acceptable way, by explaining faith's irrationality. He introduced the idea of the absurd as an acknowledgement of this irrationality. Furthermore, he admitted that the absurd is an ever-present possibility in the life of the faithful, an inescapable uncertainty to accompany

¹¹¹ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 7.

¹¹² Charles Glicksburg, *The Tragic Vision in Twentieth-Century Literature* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), 19.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin, 2005), 37.

the irrationality of a life of faith.¹¹⁶ Even if faith is subjectivity and truth is subjectivity, an irrational leap is still required. There is nothing to stop the individual living a life of atheism with subjectivity.¹¹⁷ It is only convenient that atheism sits so comfortably in objectivity as well. For Kierkegaard, the process of subjective faith generates the individual's perception of God, the object of their belief. By the same logic, the subjective experience of a person without faith also propagates their acceptance of the meaninglessness of existence.¹¹⁸ Kierkegaard's ideas can operate both ways.

Without faith as a paradigm, the work of Kierkegaard takes a very different shape. In unleashing the truth of existential dread he exposed the flippant way in which life is so often lived. Begging the question of the meaning of existence in this way, he gestured towards the intangible absolute of God's grace. But in a life devoid of such grace this realisation is grim. The focus then becomes authenticity, a search for personal meaning.¹¹⁹ Camus took what he could from Kierkegaard's ideas and applied them to his own condition.¹²⁰ When faith is removed from Kierkegaard's objectives, the outcomes of his process of self-definition are radically different. The dynamics, however, remain the same. Kierkegaard introduced Camus, among others, to the inescapable alienation of individual life, the meaning of despair and the finality of death. Above all he introduced Camus to the absurd, and along with it, the limits of reason.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Glicksburg, *The Tragic Vision*, 21.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Idem.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 24.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 27.

¹²¹ Ibid.

Chapter 2: Albert Camus

Albert Camus's concept of the absurd is fundamentally similar to Kierkegaard's, but aims to inspire a more immediate sense of belief. Both writers explain that the absurd is an obstacle to understanding the meaning of life, that it involves the inability of reason to grasp that meaning, and describes the mind's recoil from the attempt. In each case, the subject is left with the conclusion that life has no ostensible meaning and that his or her existence has no purpose. Kierkegaard uses this despair to justify the leap of faith, but Camus was unsatisfied with any solution that demeaned reason. His writing on the absurd was shadowed by the Second World War and its ideological fallout. It was a socio-political climate pervaded with disillusionment, and his work confronted this directly by questioning the value of human life. However, despite his conclusion that life is ostensibly meaningless he was careful to avoid nihilism. For Camus, the apparent meaninglessness of life increases the need for agency and self-determination, and he aims to encourage his readers not to live complacent and deluded lives. To achieve this, his works explore the absurd and its ethical consequences through a variety of lenses, each forming a detailed picture of how one can live with the knowledge of the absurd. Taking a chronological trajectory through his philosophical writing and then his fictional works, this chapter presents a thorough examination Camus's idea of the absurd.

Camus's absurd describes a conflict of reason that is born of the human desire to seek meaning in the universe. For Camus, the comprehension of this meaning would endow the individual with a profound sense of unity with the world and within existence. Apparently this unity would bring with it immense happiness and satisfaction. For Camus, this meaning, 'the meaning of life', is not only desirable, it is 'the most urgent of questions'.¹²² With Camus's absurd, the reasoning faculty of the mind attempts to discern an inherent meaning in existence, however the immediate universe offers no proof. The reasoning mind can only seek proof objectively in the given world of facts. For Camus, this world merely exists as it is, profoundly indifferent to and ignorant of not only us as humans, but our desire to discern meaning from it. Camus's essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, sets as its task the elucidation of the possibility of living in the face of the realisation of the absurd. It contains one of the most lucid explications of his, at times circumstantially varied, concept of the absurd:

¹²² Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 2.

At this point of his effort man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.¹²³

In the same manner that Kierkegaard's idea of the absurd describes logic's rejection of the paradoxes of faith, Camus's absurd is the logical mind's rebound from its attempt to divine meaning from the universe of facts. The absurd has nothing to do with either the human mind or the universe individually, it is the 'intellectual malady' born of their attempt at marriage.¹²⁴ As Camus states: "The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation."¹²⁵ Unlike Kierkegaard's absurd, however, Camus does not view faith as an ultimate goal. His goal is to understand the meaning of life. Hence when the absurd is generated in the attempt to understand this meaning, the only available direction for the mind to move is backward to the given world. The only conclusion than can be reached from this ordeal is the realisation that the meaning of life is impossible to understand. Ostensibly, life is meaningless.¹²⁶

While Camus's assumption that life is meaningless appears to provoke certain nihilistic undertones, it does not necessarily assert the total meaninglessness of existence. It is the realisation that if there were a meaning, or greater knowledge of life and existence, it is simply unavailable to the human intellect.¹²⁷ Camus denies the option of faith, but this is does not mean that his brand of nihilism is embraced by choice. Camus's denial of faith represents a refusal to surrender the supremacy of the intellect when it is confronted by the challenge of the absurd.¹²⁸ The fact that reason cannot be surrendered dictates that any conclusions made after an encounter with the absurd must be entirely based within finite earthly existence.¹²⁹ For Camus, these conclusions infer an absolute responsibility for one's actions and their consequences. This responsibility carries with it the fact that one's destiny is entirely predicated by one's actions.¹³⁰ As such, Camus holds that what we do in this life is of paramount importance. If any meaning is to be found in life, it is in human action. The realisation of the

¹²³ Ibid., 26.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 1.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 28-29.

¹²⁶ Glicksburg, *The Tragic Vision*, 51.

¹²⁷ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 49.

¹²⁸ Glicksburg, *The Tragic Vision*, 51.

¹²⁹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 49.

¹³⁰ Glicksburg, *The Tragic Vision*, 51.

absurd includes the fact that the universe is completely indifferent to humanity's need for meaning. Our actions are completely inconsequential. The world exists, and so do humans.¹³¹ Whatever humans do in this world is in no way permitted or forbidden by the world itself. As such, moral commitments and human aspirations are entirely superfluous. There can be no universal justification for any act, good or bad.¹³² If the universe offers no justification for human action, then this justification has to be found in oneself. This moral autonomy, combined with the realisation of the invalidity of communal moral norms, can be viewed as a justification for total nihilistic abandon. Troubled by this conclusion, Camus formulates within *The Myth of Sisyphus* a description of the life of what he calls the absurd man.

Living in the face of the absurd involves the acceptance of the meaninglessness of living.¹³³ With the knowledge of this meaninglessness comes the realisation that there is no reason for living. Camus calls this living 'without appeal'.¹³⁴ The central problematic of *The Myth of Sisyphus* is the question of whether it is possible to live without appeal. If living without appeal entails the knowledge that there is no reason for living, then it is possible to assume that life is not worth living. In the famous opening lines of the essay, Camus indicates the problematic effects of such an assumption: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy."¹³⁵ Despite the strength of this assertion at the beginning of the essay, Camus is quick to denounce the solution of suicide. He argues that suicide does not solve the problem of the absurd—it merely eliminates one of the absurd's constitutive elements.¹³⁶ Suicide does not solve the absurd because the absurd is a problem. Suicide is giving up and giving up does not solve problems, it avoids them. The absurd is confronted when a living person seeks meaning that transcends life. If the person is no longer living, no transcendental meaning is sought, and the absurd disappears.

In a manner of speaking, suicide does settle the absurd, because it is no longer a possible reaction generated by the reason of an existing person. Cancelling life settles the absurd only in the sense that without life the absurd ceases to be.¹³⁷ Without life, the absurd is

¹³¹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 49-50.

¹³² Glicksburg, *The Tragic Vision*, 51.

¹³³ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 51.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

¹³⁶ Avi Sagi, *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, trans. Batya Stein (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 67.

¹³⁷ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 52.

not the absurd: 'Negating one of the terms of the opposition on which he lives amounts to escaping it... [it] is to elude the problem... Suicide is a repudiation.'¹³⁸ For Camus, this repudiation reduces the urgency of the question of meaning in existence by avoiding the problem that this search encounters. Apart from commonly held beliefs that suicide is irrational, Camus's treatment of suicide as a response to the absurd uncovers a deeper incongruence of logic. If one kills oneself because of the conclusions of the absurd, their act of suicide devalues the inherent value of life placed on it through the process of questioning. Seen this way, suicide involves a disregard for existential meaning. The desire for meaning exposes an inherent value on life. Suicide is not an adequate response to the absurd because it devalues life. Suicide, therefore, devalues the absurd. It is a supreme transgression of logic to kill oneself over something that one does not value, and as Camus asserts, the absurd is the product of relentless logic.

Another means of settling the absurd is faith. Kierkegaard asserts that the absurd necessitates the leap to faith, a subjective incorporation of the absurd. However, for Camus this is a solution just as problematic as suicide. In fact, Camus's repudiation is so strong that he calls faith 'philosophical suicide'.¹³⁹ By philosophical suicide, Camus refers not specifically to Kierkegaard's existential faith but to any attitude that attempts to resolve the absurd through an all-encompassing theory of existence.¹⁴⁰ Such theories, through their total explanation of life, inherently solve the absurd by explaining away its parameters. Camus singles out several philosophical and phenomenological theories for attack but the most useful one here is Kierkegaard's, due to his contribution to the lineage of the idea of the absurd.

For Camus the absurd is produced through a relentless pursuit of logic. Kierkegaard's suggestion that the irrationality of faith can be accepted as a result of the objective uncertainty of subjective experience cannot be justified in Camus's view. To accept the shortcomings of logic is to abandon logic. According to Camus, 'what Kierkegaard calls for quite plainly is... "The sacrifice of the intellect."¹⁴¹ With a method bordering on circular reasoning, Kierkegaard implements the absurd as a justification for the leap to faith. This is close to answering a question with a question, or asserting that two wrongs make a right.¹⁴² In Camus's view this reasoning is unacceptable. The sacrifice of logic not only amounts to philosophical suicide, but

¹³⁸ Ibid., 52-53.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 27.

¹⁴⁰ Sagi, *Albert Camus*, 68.

¹⁴¹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 36.

¹⁴² Ibid.

what might be more accurately described as intellectual suicide. For Camus, Kierkegaard's solution rewards quitters: "In his failure," says Kierkegaard, "the believer finds his triumph."¹⁴³ Camus denies that faith is an outcome of the encounter with the absurd.¹⁴⁴ He asserts that a truly logical approach cannot resort to begging questions of the infinite, the comprehension of which is beyond human reasoning. Camus's absurd sits entirely within the scope of human perception, and cannot be transformed into 'eternity's springboard'.¹⁴⁵ The use of the absurd as a justification for an acceptance of the irrational removes its links with human logic, and eliminates its status as an intellectual malady.¹⁴⁶

For Camus, a solution to the absurd must be indubitable. In Camus's view, Kierkegaard's haste to justify the leap of faith stems from his fiercely Christian upbringing.¹⁴⁷ This may account for what Camus perceives as his unrelenting desire to resolve the absurd in faith: 'Kierkegaard wants to be cured. To be cured is his frenzied wish and it runs throughout his whole journal. The entire effort of his intelligence is to escape the antimony of the human condition.'¹⁴⁸ Faith provides relief for the tension of the absurd. It is an illogical cure for a crisis of logic. The absurd is a logical truth that carries with it a great anxiety. Faith is a salve for this anxiety. In Camus's view, Kierkegaard is too hasty to find a desirable solution to the absurd. In the opening passages of *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard poses the question, 'If man had no eternal consciousness... what would life be but despair?'¹⁴⁹ This question, or rather, statement, reveals Kierkegaard's unwillingness to accept the possibility that life could be meaningless. In response, Camus states: "This cry is not likely to stop the absurd man. Seeking what is true is not seeking what is desirable."¹⁵⁰ Indeed, the assumption that life is meaningless is far from desirable. But regarding the meaning of life, pursuing a course of pure logic *ad absurdum* can only have one possible outcome. For Camus, if despair is the lot of the logical then so be it:

If in order to elude the anxious question: 'What would life be?' one must, like the donkey, feed on the roses of illusion, then the absurd mind, rather than resigning itself

¹⁴³ Idem.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 38.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 33-34.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.; Sagi, *Albert Camus*, 69.

¹⁴⁷ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 36.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 37.

¹⁴⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 2005), 14.

¹⁵⁰ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 39.

to falsehood, prefers to adopt fiercely Kierkegaard's reply: 'despair'. Everything considered, a determined soul will always manage.¹⁵¹

However dissatisfying this conclusion may be, it is the only one that can be reached using Camus's logical approach. Any other solution would be, as he puts it, an illusion. This conclusion leaves the logical mind with only one possible solution to the absurd, acceptance.¹⁵² Camus's acceptance, despite the word's implications, does not infer resignation or consent. This type of acceptance becomes abject nihilism. Instead, Camus's acceptance forms the basis of what he considers to be the only defensible position that the absurd man can assume, revolt.

Accepting the absurd does not entail surrender. For Camus, the assumption that life is meaningless is a truth, however inconvenient. But this does not infer that life must be lived devoid of objective or justification. Camus also asserts that the absurd must not be forgotten. Like a well-earned battle scar, it should be constantly held as a truth, even revered. It should always be held as a reminder that there is no hope of a transcendental solution to the lack of meaning of human life. Furthermore, it should be renounced. The absurd cannot defeat the human desire for meaning. After all, the absurd is not a lack of meaning, it is the reaction to the discovery of no apparent meaning. By the same token, the absurd assures that no meaning will ever be found outside what is available to the intellect. But for Camus, this is no reason to give up. His brand of acceptance thus becomes a ceaseless battle with the absurd:

I must admit that that struggle implies a total absence of hope (which has nothing to do with despair), a continual rejection (which must not be confused with renunciation), and a conscious dissatisfaction (which must not be compared to immature unrest). Everything that destroys, conjures away, or exercises these requirements (and, to begin with, consent which overthrows divorce) ruins the absurd and devalues the attitude that may then be proposed.¹⁵³

If the absurd is a divorce, then consent settles the rift between the two elements. Settled, the absurd is neutralised and no longer the absurd. Camus asserts that if we do not commit either

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Sagi, *Albert Camus*, 70.

¹⁵³ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 30.

form of suicide, then the absurd must be kept alive.¹⁵⁴ Understood in this way, we must live in spite of the absurd, which is what Camus calls metaphysical revolt. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the concept of metaphysical revolt is not realised without a struggle.¹⁵⁵ In an attempt to outline the life of an absurd man that is not categorised by ambivalent nihilism, Camus draws a few characters that may best exemplify the principles of metaphysical revolt. These characters, loosely summarised as the lover, the actor and the conqueror, come across as ironically detached and solipsistic. Their heroism in the face of the absurd is their understanding of the meaninglessness of existence, as well as the awareness of their concrete existence and mortality.¹⁵⁶ This mode of existence, while true to Camus's motives, appears to condone a not necessarily immoral but amoral take on life. When individual freedom becomes paramount, the possibility arises for these liberties to clash between individuals. Seen in certain ways this approach seems to allow murder, brutality and deceit.¹⁵⁷ Apparently bothered by this, Camus changes his tune in later works. His task then becomes the elucidation of a form of metaphysical revolt that involves an element of human solidarity.

In works such as *The Rebel*, *The Plague* and the posthumously published *Resistance, Rebellion and Death* (1961), Camus reveals a more unified idea of metaphysical revolt. Contrary to the varied and undirected revolt of previous works, the more recent texts exhibit an ethic of human responsibility that transcends the nihilistic undertones of the absurd man.¹⁵⁸ These rebels are still driven by a spirit of freedom and are personally responsible for their actions and values. If the search for transcendental meaning only encounters the absurd, then meaning must be sought within immanence, or the destiny that we as humans choose for ourselves.¹⁵⁹ Because our immanent existence and fate consist of our actions, it is therefore our responsibility to make these actions meaningful. In this way humans can bring meaning into their lives. With the absurd constantly in mind, this self-made meaning becomes revolt. If the absurd is oppression, a denial of existential meaning, then the creation of an alternative meaning is a challenge to the absurd's authority. Like the revolutionary, the metaphysical rebel perceives an oppressive fate and decides to create his or her own. With this sense of freedom and responsibility also comes the awareness that this situation is universal. These rebels

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 52.

¹⁵⁵ Glicksburg, *The Tragic Vision*, 54.

¹⁵⁶ Sagi, *Albert Camus*, 107.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 107-08.

¹⁵⁸ Glicksburg, *The Tragic Vision*, 53.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

acknowledge that all humans are in the same metaphysical situation. The absurd is an ever-present fact of existence. Its cold refusal of meaning is born of an indifferent universe. The absurd does not justify itself, it merely is. As such, the absurd is indifferent to the human notion of justice. Humanly apprehended, the absurd is unjust. Camus's idea of solidarity in metaphysical revolt is born of this injustice. According to Camus, 'man must exalt justice in order to fight against eternal injustice, create happiness in order to protest against the universe of unhappiness.'¹⁶⁰ If the meaninglessness of life is an injustice against humans, then the action of revolt is centred in the human desire for justice. The universe is indifferent to our desire for meaning, and as such it provides none. By that reasoning Camus asserts that if any meaning is to be found, it is to be found in humanity. If it is the responsibility of humans to create their own meaning, then the only meaning that will ever be found will come from humans. If human meaning is created, then humanity must be preserved. Thus Camus's idea of a living a life without appeal becomes increasingly benevolent:

I continue to believe that this world has no ultimate meaning. But I know that something in it has meaning and that is man, because he is the only creature to insist on having one. This world has at least the truth of man, and our task is to provide its justification against fate itself. And it has no justification but man; hence he must be saved if we want to save the idea we have of life.¹⁶¹

With the absurd's defeat of reason comes the recognition that the only truths of existence are human. Transcendental absolutes do not fit within the scope of the rational mind and are therefore unjustifiable. If the only truths are human truths, then they are intrinsically linked to humans.¹⁶² Therefore the preservation of humanity and human freedom is the only justifiable action after the encounter with the absurd.

Various reactions to the absurd can be seen throughout Camus's oeuvre. *The Outsider* (1942) reflects a state of isolation that stems from the moral ambiguity of its central character. An unlikely hero, Meursault has gained the insight that life is meaningless.¹⁶³ Coupled with the

¹⁶⁰ Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Knopf, 1961), 28.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² Glicksburg, *The Tragic Vision*, 55.

¹⁶³ Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961), 151.

realisation that life is meaningless is the fact that nothing matters. As such Meursault is indifferent to the moral demands of society, his sole commitment is to the immanent experience of his life.¹⁶⁴ At the beginning of the novel Meursault is informed of his mother's death. Upon hearing the news and during his attendance at the various funeral events he neither exhibits nor experiences any grief. He is indifferent to the fact of his mother's passing, and he refuses to mimic the actions or words of a grieving son. Meursault's commitment to immediate existence reflects absolute authenticity. Because his only passion is living in the first-person, his absolute is immediate truth.¹⁶⁵ As Camus states, 'he refuses to lie. To lie is not only to say what isn't true. It is also and above all, to say more than is true, and, as far as the human heart is concerned, to express more than one feels.'¹⁶⁶ Because he is unwilling to lie, Meursault refuses to feign grief. This refusal creates a tension with the expectations of society. As Camus puts it, 'he does not play the game. In this respect, he is foreign to the society in which he lives'.¹⁶⁷ Meursault's refusal to play the game culminates when he is sentenced to death for killing a man. The murder itself could be considered an act of self-defence given the fact that the victim was carrying a knife. But his evident indifference and passivity during the trial causes the prosecutor to focus more on Meursault's antisocial behaviour. His lack of grief at his mother's funeral becomes the main point of argument and eventually the trial becomes a judgement of Meursault's general character. The prosecutor accuses Meursault of being 'morally guilty for his mother's death' and that because of this he 'has no place in a community whose basic principles he flouts without compunction'.¹⁶⁸ Meursault's unwillingness to participate in facetious moral appearance thus causes his condemnation.

Camus's aim in the novel is to illustrate the weight society places on these essentially superfluous moral veneers. As he states: 'In our society any man who does not weep at his mother's funeral runs the risk of being sentenced to death.'¹⁶⁹ Aware of the meaninglessness of existence, Meursault's only commitment is to authentic existence. His authenticity is immediacy, therefore he has no time for the ephemeral expectations of human communication and interaction. These expectations are not only ill-defined but unspoken, a transcendent code of conduct that one is expected to adhere to. Because this ephemeral code has nothing to do

¹⁶⁴ Glicksburg, *The Tragic Vision*, 56.

¹⁶⁵ Sagi, *Albert Camus*, 53.

¹⁶⁶ Albert Camus, cited in *ibid.*, 89-90.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Camus, *The Outsider*, 102.

¹⁶⁹ Camus, cited in Sagi, *Albert Camus*, 89.

with an absolute engagement with individual existence, Meursault perceives it as unnecessary and refuses to play along. From a romantic standpoint, Meursault's case could be the story of a man who refused to lie and was condemned for it. As Camus puts it, he 'agrees to die for the truth.'¹⁷⁰ While *The Outsider* may not refer explicitly to Camus's concept of the absurd—he reserves the term for his essays—it adds to the understanding of the life of the absurd man. It communicates what is involved in accepting the absurd and with it the meaninglessness of life and its contents. Meursault personifies the problematic nature of nihilism in the face of the absurd, even to the point where he fully accepts his early death as a matter of indifference.¹⁷¹ An action is merely an action, with no meaning or consequences assigned to it. Meursault's nihilism does not justify or condone any action, and as such any action is possible. *The Outsider* serves as a warning. It alludes to the consequences of a life without appeal undertaken solely on one's own terms. It warns against the anarchy of nihilism.

Central to *The Rebel* is the problem of murder.¹⁷² The individual freedom granted by the realisation of the absurd is problematic in its moral ambivalence and could be seen to condone murder. To illustrate this, as well as other outcomes, Camus points to three possible reactions to the absurd, each in some way allowing murder. The first is the nihilistic approach. Embodied by Meursault, this approach is characterised by moral ambivalence: 'If we believe in nothing, if nothing has any meaning and we can affirm no values whatsoever, then everything is possible and nothing has any importance.'¹⁷³ This response allows murder because all values are relative since life is meaningless. The individual has supreme freedom after the realisation that life has no meaning. If life has no meaning then the religious values that inform moral codes are illegitimate. There is no sin because there is no God. Camus even states in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that the absurd is sin without God.¹⁷⁴ Indeed, this concept is absurd even in the traditional sense of the word. If there is no sin, anything is possible. Nothing requires justification or condemnation because life is meaningless. Without God the idea of sin is ridiculous. This does not infer that murder is specifically encouraged, but its moral consequences are non-existent because nothing matters.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 90.

¹⁷¹ Glicksburg, *The Tragic Vision*, 56.

¹⁷² Sagi, *Albert Camus*, 107.

¹⁷³ Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 5.

¹⁷⁴ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 35.

¹⁷⁵ Camus, *The Rebel*, 5.

The second response to the absurd resembles the first but with an added element of passivity. Camus briefly outlines this as inaction: ‘We shall then decide not to act at all, which amounts to at least accepting the murder of others, with perhaps certain mild reservations about the imperfection of the human race.’¹⁷⁶ This response of inaction permits indifference to the acts of others that cause death or suffering.¹⁷⁷ The third reaction is the adoption of a more unified, directed purpose of existence. Camus’s treatment of this response implies a sense of unity among individuals rallying together for the purpose of efficacious action. This could be taken a number of ways, global capitalism could easily fall under this banner, but it appears that Camus is referring to political ideologies such as Nazism.¹⁷⁸ As he states: ‘Since nothing is either true or false, good or bad, our guiding principle will be to demonstrate that we are the most efficient—in other words, the strongest. Then the world will no longer be divided into the just and the unjust, but into masters and slaves.’¹⁷⁹ While this approach does not specifically entail murder, there is an implication that murder could be justified in the name of efficiency. At any rate, Camus sums up the three nihilistic responses by stating that each allows murder.¹⁸⁰ Nihilism seems a natural assumption after the apprehension of the absurd. But as Camus illustrates, each potential form of nihilism involves or allows some form of brutality. In order to avoid becoming the spokesman for a potentially destructive ideology, Camus sets out the terms for an absurdist approach to the problems of the absurd.

In *The Rebel* Camus argues that an absurdist attitude must condemn murder. As discussed in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, suicide is not a viable solution to the absurd because it eliminates one of the terms of the conflict. The repudiation of suicide in the absurdist attitude thus indicates that human life is of undeniable value: ‘Murder cannot be made coherent when suicide is not considered coherent.’¹⁸¹ Without human life, the absurd does not exist, and Camus asserts that we must keep the absurd alive. As such, the nihilistic attitude derived from the encounter with the absurd cannot be supported within Camus’s absurdist reasoning. Camus asserts: ‘But it is obvious that absurdism hereby admits that human life is the only necessary good since it is precisely life that makes this encounter possible and since, without

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Sagi, *Albert Camus*, 109.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Camus, *The Rebel*, 5.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 6.

life, the absurdist wager would have no basis.¹⁸² Murder and suicide both involve death, and the absurd can only be reached by a conscious logical effort of a living human being.

Involved in the realisation of the absurd is the desire for justice. The enquiring mind that encounters the absurd is seeking order. The harmony sought by the mind exposes a desire for justice, or at least a sense of justice.¹⁸³ Camus holds that even after the realisation that life is ostensibly meaningless there is room for human sympathy. One cannot prevent another from the realisation of the absurd when the desire that exposed the absurd also carried with it the desire for justice. As Camus states: 'How is it possible... to preserve exclusively for oneself the benefits of such a process of reasoning? From the moment that life is recognised as good, it becomes good for all men.'¹⁸⁴ The apprehension of the absurd exposes a desire for unity and order.¹⁸⁵ Nihilistic responses undermine this desire and cannot be supported with an absurdist reasoning. In *The Rebel*, revolt against the injustice of the absurd becomes a revolt against the injustice of life in general. This metaphysical revolt, as distinct from the revolt against metaphysics in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, is a rejection of the meaninglessness of life exposed in the absurd.¹⁸⁶ As discussed, Camus holds that human life is the only meaningful phenomenon in the universe, and as such it is oppressed by death. Metaphysical revolt in this sense then becomes a revolt against suffering and death.¹⁸⁷

The Plague is perhaps Camus's most lucid work in exposing the human struggle against suffering and death. Informed by his idea of revolt, the novel celebrates the solidarity and camaraderie involved in the battle against an unjust and unstoppable force. The plot details the efforts of Dr Rieux, a physician practicing in a town that becomes infected with bubonic plague. Rieux is determined to fight, albeit vainly, the unpredictable and untreatable disease. Eventually citizens gather to form health teams in an effort to aid Rieux and stymie the plague's progress. As Tony Judt remarks in his introduction, the correlations between this fictional plague and Camus's absurd are unmistakable.¹⁸⁸ Treatment against the plague is ineffective. Regardless of various preventative health measures and quarantine the infection

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 24.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 6.

¹⁸⁵ Sagi, *Albert Camus*, 112.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Camus, *The Rebel*, 23-24.

¹⁸⁸ Tony Judt, *Introduction to the Plague, by Albert Camus*, trans. Robin Buss (London: Penguin, 2009), x.

rate increases inexorably.¹⁸⁹ The quarantine causes separation and exile. It creates alienation like that of Meursault and a desire for unity like that which prompts the absurd.¹⁹⁰ Because the plague cannot be treated it cannot be understood. The plague, like the absurd, is incomprehensible. The disease is unjust, uncompromising and ineluctable, as is the absurd. After the gates are sealed in quarantine the inhabitants of the town under its siege have no escape and little to no means of avoiding its oppression. Because the plague is unavoidable and indiscriminating the townspeople share a common fate, just as all humans are dominated by the absurd. The struggle against the plague is futile, so is the human search for meaning that leads to the absurd.¹⁹¹ Camus's realisation of revolt in the face of the absurd is mirrored in *The Plague*. Rieux characterises the ethics of rebellion in his refusal to submit to the whims of the disease. Instead he chooses to fight the plague completely aware of the superfluity of his actions.¹⁹² Similarly, the metaphysical rebel continues to refute the absurd by creating his or her own meaning in a universe that does not supply one, and is completely indifferent to such efforts.

The formation of the health teams embodies Camus's idea of human solidarity in the face of universal injustice. If saving humankind is the ultimate meaning for Camus, then the health teams in *The Plague* establish this paradigm at its most literal level. Bound together by an inescapable and unjust predicament, their only possible course of action is to attempt to relieve suffering. Their only motivation is compassion.¹⁹³ Like those living without appeal in the face of the absurd, Rieux and his comrades cannot appeal for divine assistance. Their predicament is very much within the temporal. As Rieux comments in the novel: 'We are working together for something that unites us at a higher level than prayer or blasphemy, and that's all that counts.'¹⁹⁴ Echoing Kierkegaard, the town preacher ultimately agrees by admitting that the plague is a universal evil that humans must face without God's assistance.¹⁹⁵ Following this logic he joins Rieux in his efforts. Other characters join the health teams for their own reasons. Tarrou, a travelling man of leisure, is motivated purely by a hatred of condemnation, carelessness and death. His reasoning is that humans can easily pass judgement on one another

¹⁸⁹ Robert Zaretsky, *Albert Camus: Elements of a Life* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 85.

¹⁹⁰ Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Robin Buss (London: Penguin, 2009), ix-x.

¹⁹¹ Zaretsky, *Albert Camus: Elements of a Life*.

¹⁹² Glicksburg, *The Tragic Vision*, 61.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁹⁴ Camus, *The Plague*, 169.

¹⁹⁵ Patrick McCarthy, 'The Plague,' in *Albert Camus*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), 109.

in moments of weakness.¹⁹⁶ In this situation of mass infection his sentiments become tangible and he is driven to act by forming the health teams. Whatever their motivation, the characters in *The Plague* that formed the health teams chose to resist an unstoppable and irrational force. This resistance bound them.

For Camus what is important about this act of communal rebellion is its acknowledgement of individual and collective responsibility in what is essentially a hopeless situation.¹⁹⁷ Individual rebellion has nihilistic and thereby dangerous potential, but communal rebellion involves solidarity in a shared ethic of action. The health teams offer what is, thus far, the only ethically justifiable response to the acknowledgement of the absurd. This response does not carry with it an unquestionable transcendental meaning of life. The meaning sought before the apprehension of the absurd cannot be provided. The meaning that is provided by communal revolt is temporary, volatile and variable but at least it can be considered a meaning. If logic suppresses the ability for humanity to find transcendental meaning, then meaning must be sought on this earth. This meaning must be found in humanity itself, in a world pervaded by misery and inevitable death. Rieux and the health teams struggle against misery and death while they can be struggled against. As the narrator, later identified as Rieux himself, explains: 'Rieux felt he was on the right path, in struggling against the world as it was.'¹⁹⁸ This struggle is imperfect, and given human mortality, ultimately futile.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus calls upon the eponymous figure of Greek mythology, ceaselessly hauling a boulder to the top of a hill, only to repeat the task endlessly. This existence is exemplary of any individual who, after acknowledging the absurd, agrees to live a life without appeal. If life is to be lived after it is revealed as ostensibly meaningless then any action or cause is irrefutably futile. In the case of Rieux, his task is healing those who will eventually die. It is futile but it is the only task that he deems worth doing: 'I am defending them as best I can, that's all.'¹⁹⁹ Tarrou acknowledges this futility by replying: 'I can understand. But your victories will always be temporary'.²⁰⁰ To which Rieux asserts: 'Always, I know that. But that is not a reason to give up the struggle.'²⁰¹ Similarly, in the last lines of *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus proclaims that 'the struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a

¹⁹⁶ Zaretsky, *Albert Camus: Elements of a Life*, 87-88.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁹⁸ Camus, *The Plague*, 97.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy'.²⁰² For Rieux, this happiness comes from the fact that his task is not only justifiable but also worthwhile, at least for the time being. Camus's summation in both works is the acceptance of a meaningless fate combined with an absolute refusal to submit to this fate. His logic is nearly paradoxical, but it is in one way or another logically justifiable. Like Rieux with the plague, Camus not only apprehended the absurd but also insisted on bearing its implications throughout all of his works. His battle with the absurd, like Rieux's battle with death, was unwinnable—but also like Rieux, he prevailed nevertheless.

²⁰² Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 119.

Chapter Three: Michel Houellebecq

The work of Michel Houellebecq details the extreme consequences of the absurd in the contemporary world. His writing follows the tradition of Camus, but is emptied of any sense of heroism. He consistently emphasises how the structure of Western society inexorably leads to the despair of individuals. In Houellebecq's universe, the autonomy granted by the loss of faith has evolved into self-interest. Due to the abundance of this self-interest and the alienating nature of late capitalism, the desires that fuel contemporary life are impossible to satisfy. The pursuit of happiness is therefore futile. His characters live in despair and experience its worst repercussions, and these conditions extend to such a great proportion of society that disaster becomes inevitable. Houellebecq's dead end of contemporary existence is based on a single idea, that due to our circumstances we are incapable of making our own lives meaningful. This idea is intrinsic to the absurd, but differs in its focus on individual wellbeing rather than transcendental meaning. Like Camus, Houellebecq focuses on a need for community—but this is less out of a need for metaphysical revolt and more due to the fact that our lives are dysfunctional without it. Houellebecq's absurd is more immediate, but the dynamics are the same, and it shares the same cause in the loss of faith and affirmation of reason. This chapter will break down the various themes of his work into sections that examine how they contribute to a contemporary understanding of the absurd.

The Decline of Religion and the Rise of Individualism

Houellebecq's ideas are founded in the opposition between reason and religion. In his recent review of *Submission* (2015), Mark Lilla identifies the origins of Houellebecq's social critique in the Enlightenment.²⁰³ He suggests that Houellebecq's novels present societies where the insistence on individual liberties championed by the Enlightenment has precipitated detrimental effects.²⁰⁴ This view is supported by a recent interview in which Houellebecq articulates his dismissal of Enlightenment values and how this is reflected in the plot of the book.²⁰⁵ The Enlightenment's rejection of medieval submission to the church and the feudal

²⁰³ Mark Lilla, 'Slouching toward Mecca,' *The New York Review of Books* April 2 (2015): 43.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Michel Houellebecq, in Sylvain Bourmeau, 'Scare Tactics: Michel Houellebecq Defends His Controversial New Book,' *The Paris Review*, <http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/01/02/scare-tactics-michel-houellebecq-on-his-new-book/>.

system emphasised human individuality, and promoted philosophical enquiry outside the regulative structures of dogma, instigating a more rational engagement with religion.²⁰⁶ Reason and autonomy were asserted over the governing logic of religious doctrine or divine purpose.²⁰⁷ Immanuel Kant summarises these central motivations succinctly when he states: ‘Have courage to use your own mind! Thus is the motto of Enlightenment.’²⁰⁸ The assertions of the Enlightenment undermined those of Christianity and encouraged their critique, thus denying its claims to the ultimate aim of life.²⁰⁹ Obedience, duty, and faith became secondary to freedom, equality, and reason. These conditions led to the decreasing influence of the church in Western society, what Nietzsche described as the death of God, and what can be understood as the beginning of secular modernity.

Houellebecq’s criticism of the Enlightenment has to do with its affirmation of individual reason and liberty, and this is the first intersection between his work and the absurd. It is Enlightenment thinking that led to the recognition of the absurd by Kierkegaard and Camus, who separately debated the rational legitimacy of faith and the repercussions of its absence. They identify that the loss of religious meaning in life is irredeemable. Houellebecq’s ideas are also inspired by the implications of the decreasing influence of religion in personal life. As he states: ‘The death of God in the West was the prelude to an extraordinary metaphysical soap opera, and one that’s still running today... To date, all these attempts to make sense of the world have failed, and unhappiness keeps on spreading.’²¹⁰ Houellebecq’s novels take place near the conclusion of this ‘metaphysical soap opera’. His view is that the blind faith in human capacity has allowed for the recognition of its inadequacy to give life meaning, and people are unhappy as a result.

Houellebecq believes that the Enlightenment’s emphasis on personal freedom has had a detrimental effect on our wellbeing. This idea is not uncommon among European scholars, who in various ways argue that the Enlightenment’s legacy of liberalism has led to

²⁰⁶ William Bristow, ‘Enlightenment,’ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/enlightenment/>.

²⁰⁷ Couze Venn, ‘The Enlightenment,’ *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 2-3 (2006): 478.

²⁰⁸ Immanuel Kant, ‘Answer the Question: What Is Enlightenment?,’ Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/AnswerTheQuestionWhatIsEnlightenment>; Venn, ‘The Enlightenment,’ 477.

²⁰⁹ Andrea Baumeister, ‘Kant: The Arch-Enlightener,’ in *The Enlightenment and Modernity*, ed. Norman Geras & Robert Wokler (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 50.

²¹⁰ Michel Houellebecq, *Interventions*, trans. Ruth Cruickshank (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), 75-76.

contemporary moral and political crisis.²¹¹ For Mark Lilla, Houellebecq shares this ‘very persistent European worry that the single-minded pursuit of freedom—freedom from tradition and authority, freedom to pursue one’s own ends—must inevitably lead to disaster.’²¹² This disaster can be seen in Houellebecq’s depiction of contemporary society, where the social liberalism instigated by the Enlightenment has come to dominate personal life. The single-minded pursuit of individual desires has become the guiding principle of contemporary existence. For Houellebecq, this freedom does not entail happiness, but rather anxiety and despair.²¹³ In his view the Enlightenment’s insistence on reason and individual freedom, and the resulting decrease of religion, brought about adverse social conditions. At the core of Houellebecq’s criticism of contemporary society is the seeming paradox that greater freedom affords greater unhappiness.

The liberation movements of the 1960s, particularly the sexual revolution, are the next major targets for Houellebecq’s critique. He views this moment and its consequences as a natural extension of the liberal ideals of the Enlightenment. His treatment of the ideas and people of this generation is scathing, frequently emphasising their callous self-interest. These ideas are best expressed in his second novel, *Atomised* (1998), which relates an account of parental abandonment and its repercussions on children. Early in the novel the narrator outlines Janine Ceccaldi’s life during the 1960s, when she ‘enjoys to the full the sexually liberated existence of an affluent young woman in the western counter-culture’.²¹⁴ Although the novel’s main characters are Janine’s children, her decisions in this period are central to the plot. As the narrator states, she belongs to a social caste that are ‘catalysts... of social breakdown’.²¹⁵ While living in Paris and studying medicine she falls pregnant to a budding plastic surgeon. With palpable irony, Houellebecq describes their decision to have the child as being governed more by the desire for novelty rather than commitment and love. He writes: ‘Janine and Serge were what would later be called a “modern” couple; her pregnancy was something of an accident. She decided, however, to have the child, believing that maternity was something every woman should experience.’²¹⁶ Soon after giving birth to a son, the pair decides that ‘the burden of caring for a small child was incompatible with their personal

²¹¹ Baumeister, ‘Kant: The Arch-Enlightener,’ 50.

²¹² Lilla, ‘Slouching toward Mecca,’ 43.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Douglas Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq: Humanity and Its Aftermath* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 20.

²¹⁵ Michel Houellebecq, *Atomised*, trans. Frank Wynne (London: Vintage, 2001), 26.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 28.

freedom'.²¹⁷ They agree to send their son to Algeria to live with his maternal grandmother, and soon separate. By this stage Janine is pregnant to another man, a filmmaker named Marc Djerzinski, and she gives birth to another boy. After suddenly returning home and finding their infant son left alone in horrifically neglectful circumstances, Marc decides to send the child to his Grandmother, and the couple separate. Three years later he disappears while on a remote documentary shoot in occupied Tibet. By this stage Janine is living in an American hippie commune, and the two boys grow up with their respective carers, very rarely seeing their mother.

In Houellebecq's view, far from bringing individuals together, the sexual revolution was actually the catalyst for increased social isolation. As he states: 'It is interesting to note that the "sexual revolution" is usually portrayed as a communist utopia, whereas in fact it was simply another stage in the rise of the individual.'²¹⁸ In *Atomised*, Houellebecq charts this trajectory with Janine's multiple sexual partners and the children that result. Each time she starts a new family, her ideals of personal freedom compel her to seek out new possibilities for personal fulfilment. Houellebecq treats Janine's actions as symptomatic of a larger social phenomenon. He identifies this as the rise of individualism as it increased with the developments of the second half of the twentieth century. It is at this point in time that he believes individual interests replaced responsibility and the remaining bonds between individuals were severed, thus eschewing any purpose greater than the self and contingent pleasures.²¹⁹ Leonidas Donskis observes that: 'Houellebecq's novel lays bare the death of God in a rather unexpected way: He dies as social and human ties are snuffed out.'²²⁰ Here Donskis isolates the exact manner in which the sexual revolution and liberalism contribute to Houellebecq's association with the absurd. The diminishing influence of religion led to the recognition of the absurd, and for Houellebecq, to the breakdown of relationships that led to increased personal unhappiness.

Despite being primarily occupied with current society, his ideas begin with the decline of religion and the loss of its transcendental meaning. In the case of the absurd, this transcendental meaning is the meaning of life; for Houellebecq it is the interpersonal bonds,

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 135-36.

²¹⁹ Betül Dilmac, 'Houellebecq's Fin De Siecle: Crisis of Society, Crisis of the Novel,' in *Decadence in Literature and Intellectual Debate since 1945*, ed. Diemo Landgraf (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 155.

²²⁰ Zygmunt Bauman and Leonidas Donskis, *Moral Blindness: The Loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2013), 196.

duty, and love encouraged by religion. Houellebecq's absurd is a contemporary condition, and his death of God is the breakdown of the family. The independence afforded by the decrease in religion allowed for the perception of existential solitude and doubt in human agency. Similarly, the freedoms that led to and resulted from the destruction of family ties exposed the individual to the realities of their isolation from other human beings and the loneliness that this entails. Contained within both cases is the irony that that independence and reason seem to imply the promise of happiness and liberation, but instead lead to despair. Houellebecq observes that the ideal of self-fulfilment cannot be met by human capacity.

The Individual and the Market

Houellebecq sees marketing as responsible for the domination of contemporary life by insatiable sexual desire. Sex is blatantly implemented as a fundamental marketing strategy in the media that saturates our lives, and for him it is precisely this constant stream of sexualised images that characterises a sort of 'sexual injunction', an idea consistently represented in his works.²²¹ He describes a culture constantly repeating the litany that: 'You must desire. You must be desirable. You must participate in the competition, the struggle, the life of the world. If you stop, you will no longer exist. If you stay behind, you're dead.'²²² Houellebecq sees contemporary culture as being driven by a need for desirability, and that the constraints of sexual interaction have been widened to such a degree that this has become a need to be desired by everyone. It is a generalised desire to be desired, which comes as a result of the emotional vacuum of personal life.

In Houellebecq's work the liberation of sexuality has led to its increased commodification, and this has led in turn to greater anxiety. The increased frequency of possible sexual encounters has extended the competition inherent to seduction and courtship to a lifelong endeavour. The greater the number of potential partners, the more selective one can be with whom they pursue, thus introducing a capitalistic character to sexuality. In *Atomised*, Houellebecq states: 'the couple and the family were to be the last bastion of primitive communism in a liberal society. The sexual revolution was to destroy the last unit separating the individual from the market. The destruction continues to this day.'²²³ In Houellebecq's view the same laws that govern the free exchange of goods and services in a capitalist society

²²¹ Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, 24.

²²² Houellebecq, *Interventions*, 76.

²²³ Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 135-36.

can now be applied to sexual relationships.²²⁴ Relationships are increasingly viewed as utilitarian exchanges of pleasure, and as such have come to resemble transactions within a market economy.²²⁵ The same principles that are applied to consumer goods then become applied to individuals. Desirability can come in two forms, either through physical beauty or monetary wealth, as both are able to provide maximum pleasure in their own ways.²²⁶ These attributes are of course highly exclusive, and as a result a hierarchy forms.²²⁷ At the top are the most beautiful and the wealthiest, and at the bottom are their opposites. Sexuality has become less associated with the idea of permanent devotion and love, and more focused on the satisfaction of immediate desire. This desire is felt by all, but only realised by some, and even then it is not without its disappointments. Thus Houellebecq's identification of sexual consumerism emphasises its potential to create various social and psychological problems.

The sexual marketplace of Houellebecq's novels is the source of great unhappiness for his characters. Houellebecq's commitment to this idea is explicitly expressed in his first novel *Whatever* (1994), which has the French title, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (extension of the domain of the struggle). He writes, 'Economic liberalism is the extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages and all classes of society. Sexual liberalism is likewise an extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages and classes of society.'²²⁸ Unfortunately for many of the narrators and central characters, they usually fall short of the standards required to compete. As the protagonist Renault reflects: 'Just like unrestrained economic liberalism, and for similar reasons, sexual liberalism produces phenomena of absolute pauperisation. Some men make love every day; others five or six times in their life, or never... It's what's known as "the law of the market."²²⁹ According to Houellebecq, the extension of the range of possible partners for each individual has allowed for some to dominate at the expense of others. It is his apparent view that if monogamy were more widely observed, there would be better chances for those who may not immediately present the necessary charms to win the affections of a partner. There would be less of a struggle.

²²⁴ Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, 57; Carole Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 92.

²²⁵ Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, 13.

²²⁶ Ruth Cruickshank, *Fin De Millenaire French Fiction: The Aesthetics of Crisis* (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 122.

²²⁷ Victoria Best and Martin Crowley, *The New Pornographies: Explicit Sex in Recent French Fiction and Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 181.

²²⁸ Michel Houellebecq, *Whatever*, trans. Paul Hammond (London: Serpent's Tail, 2011), 99.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

It is possible to see the absurd mirrored in Houellebecq's idea of sexual pauperisation. The devaluation of emotional ties has exposed the individual to greater chances of unhappiness and solitude—much like the way the absurd reveals the futility and solitude of human life. But there is a further way in which Houellebecq's ideas reflect the absurd. The unhappiness of Houellebecq's characters is caused by their disappointment at being denied the pleasures of desirability because of their physical shortcomings. But this is not to say that those who are considered desirable do not also share the same disappointments. The promise of the market is that satisfaction is available, if not plentiful, but this is always contingent on the desires of another in order to be fulfilled. It cannot be assumed that the desires of one person will always be returned. The promise of the market cannot always be kept, demand does not guarantee supply, and there is no guarantee of permanence. This reflects the contradictory logic of individualism as Houellebecq describes it, and points to a fundamental dead end within his worldview. He identifies an unavoidable contradiction between desire and reality, and in this way it reflects the absurd.

Houellebecq's characters occasionally succeed in their attempts at sexual gratification, and these sex scenes are always related in dry and observational terms that resemble pornography. He does this to emphasise the superficial nature of uncommitted sexual relationships. This is evident in the way that they occur with abrupt immediacy and without the usual efforts of seduction and even dialogue to prepare the participants for the act.²³⁰ Houellebecq's sex just happens—it is mechanical intercourse that is neither communicative nor celebratory of a deeper sentiment, like love. Without greater significance or enduring commitment it is meaningless and temporary. To make these ideas more explicit, Houellebecq borrows many of pornography's visual tropes.²³¹ In an essay on the matter, Victoria Best and Martin Crowley identify his insistence on the visible male ejaculation, often onto the face or breasts of a female partner, as a key reference to porn imagery.²³² Houellebecq uses the most blatant and superficial representation of sex to emphasise how contemporary relationships are much the same.

Houellebecq's reference to pornography also highlights his idea that sexuality has become capitalistic, since it is the most widespread form of the commodification of sex

²³⁰ Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, 14.

²³¹ Julian Barnes, 'Michel Houellebecq and the Sin of Despair,' in *Through the Window: Seventeen Essays and One Short Story* (London: Vintage, 2012), 141.

²³² Best and Crowley, *The New Pornographies*, 192.

itself.²³³ The objectification of human bodies is inherent to pornography, so he implements pornographic tropes to communicate the objectification of individuals in contemporary social relations.²³⁴ For Houellebecq, pornography represents the utility with which contemporary relationships are regarded, leaving little room for emotional attachment. Sex has become entertainment and nothing else, as Houellebecq writes: “The centuries-old male project, perfectly expressed nowadays by pornographic films, that consisted of ridding sexuality of any emotional connotation in order to bring it back into the realm of pure entertainment, had finally, in this generation, been accomplished.”²³⁵ In Houellebecq’s view, sex is a ritualised, non-productive leisure activity, yet it is apparently the supreme aim of our lives. Futile and empty of meaning, it embodies the spiritual abyss that occupies his novels.

Houellebecq’s treatment of sex consistently presents dead ends and emptiness. He portrays the fluidity of contemporary sexuality as the epitome of the single-minded pursuit of individual liberties, as individuals no longer feel tied to one another due to the failure of social institutions like marriage. Contemporary sexuality is exclusive, illusory, disappointing, and leads to greater social isolation and unhappiness, despite being exemplary of personal liberation. The affirmation of individuality by Enlightenment humanism aimed for the emancipation of thought, ambition, and happiness. For Houellebecq this was eventually reduced to the elevation of sex above all else, and with it the enslavement of individuals to a system of evaluation, rejection, incommensurable desire, and depression. For Houellebecq, the elevation of sex is an attempt to replace the absence of meaning in life, and this attempt is fruitless.

Atomisation and Unhappiness

The title of Houellebecq’s second novel, *Atomised*, presents his ideas rather clearly. This is the English version of the original French title, *Les Particules élémentaires* (The elementary particles), and he chose the word to summarise his perception that contemporary life is isolated and lonely as a result of the disintegration of social bonds.²³⁶ He describes a world where social units are completely separated because the traditional grouping mechanisms of family and religion have lost all relevance and influence. The guiding principles of contemporary life do little to unite people, but instead they exacerbate isolation and

²³³ Ibid., 196.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Michel Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island* (London: Phoenix, 2006), 214.

²³⁶ Cruickshank, *Fin De Millenaire French Fiction*, 123; Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair*, 41.

unhappiness. For Houellebecq, individualism breeds alienation. As Carole Sweeney terms it, Houellebecq's society has undergone an 'ideological collapse'.²³⁷ The support structures of tradition have lost their strength— people live in isolation, largely without direction and guidance. To use Houellebecq's metaphor, society has been reduced to the most fundamental degree, and individuals are elementary particles deprived of all social bonds and inherent purpose. Betül Dilmac states that, 'at the end of this process of societal and interpersonal disintegration... man is seen as being left behind in solitude, as an individual being, a *particule élémentaire*'.²³⁸ And as Leonidas Donskis puts it, the reality of Houellebecq's fiction 'is the individual's total isolation accompanied by society's atomization and fragmentation'.²³⁹ With this emphasis on the destruction of social bonds and unifying ideals Houellebecq demonstrates how contemporary life has become characterised by solitude, helplessness, and futility.

Happiness is impossible for Houellebecq's characters, and this is usually due to their isolation. This is evident in the lives of the dual protagonists of *Atomised*, Janine's children Bruno and Michel. Slavoj Žižek observes that their stories exhibit the damaging repercussions of individualism: 'all their attempts at the pursuit of happiness, whether through marriage, the study of philosophy, or the consumption of pornography, merely lead to loneliness and frustration'.²⁴⁰ This loneliness and frustration manifests for Bruno in his pathological sex drive, which results in his internment in a mental health facility after he sexually assaults a schoolgirl. His frustrated sex addiction eventually leads to institutional isolation. An obsessive biochemist and emotional recluse, Michel's alienation is an innate aspect of his character. He is distant and reluctant to pursue romantic relationships, but after some time his childhood friend Annabelle manages to secure him in a relationship, realising her longstanding goal of maternity. She is diagnosed with terminal uterine cancer shortly after becoming pregnant, and is then forced to have an abortion and hysterectomy. Unable to conceive again and facing a painful death, Annabelle soon commits suicide. Shortly after, Michel leaves France to pursue his genetic research in a remote laboratory in Ireland where he also kills himself. Before leaving, and as he scatters Annabelle's ashes in the garden of her parent's house, Michel experiences something close to true emotion. As Houellebecq writes: 'He looked at the earth, the sun, the roses; the suppleness of the grass. It was incomprehensible... The sky seemed to be streaked with

²³⁷ Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair*, 46.

²³⁸ Dilmac, 'Houellebecq's *Fin De Siecle*: Crisis of Society, Crisis of the Novel.'

²³⁹ Bauman and Donskis, *Moral Blindness: The Loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity*, 197-98.

²⁴⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001), 40.

sunlight; he realised that he was crying.²⁴¹ Annabel's fate is brutal, but Michel's distance only permits the faintest acknowledgement of the tragedy. He realises this emotional attachment only when scattering her remains, clearly too late to return it. For Michel, happiness is only possible in retrospect and through loss. In the lives of both brothers it is possible to see Houellebecq's conception of social atomisation and its affect on personal life.

Such is the solitude of Houellebecq's contemporary world that many of his characters choose to end their own lives rather than face their own physical decline. Without families or spouses, or having become estranged from them, the characters have little to live for once their capacity for seeking pleasure is diminished. This is a common theme in Houellebecq's novels, a certain stigmatisation of ageing and disability.²⁴² The physical decline of ageing is accelerated for two characters in *Atomised*. Annabelle commits suicide when she learns that her body can no longer support children. Bruno's partner Christiane makes a similar decision when she becomes crippled by necrosis of the vertebrae. Agonised by the prospect of burdening Bruno, unable to satisfy him physically, and dreading the physical hardships of her future, she decides to commit suicide by throwing herself down the stairs. This is the new model for adult life in Houellebecq's novels, as he states: 'a time will come when the sum of pleasures that life has left to offer is outweighed by the sum of pain... This weighing up of pleasure and pain which, sooner or later, everyone is forced to make, leads logically, at a certain age, to suicide.'²⁴³ In Houellebecq's universe, where temporary physical pleasure is the highest thing in life, an inordinate amount of hardship is reason enough to cease one's own existence.

Houellebecq returns to this theme in *The Map and the Territory* (2010) when the father of the main character Jed decides to be euthanised after being diagnosed with rectal cancer and fitted with an artificial anus.²⁴⁴ The pain and humiliation turns out to be too much for him, and he seeks out an organisation in Zurich that provides the service he requires. Upon hearing the news that his father had left France for Switzerland, Jed also travels there to intervene. When the taxi mistakenly drops Jed off at a neighbouring brothel he has a perturbing realisation. The brothel is a large, elaborately decorated establishment with longer opening hours than the euthanasia group, but by comparison enjoys far less business. Noting this difference in business activity Jed speculates that the market value of death and suffering had surpassed that

²⁴¹ Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 346.

²⁴² Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, 25.

²⁴³ Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 297.

²⁴⁴ Michel Houellebecq, *The Map and the Territory*, trans. Gavin Bowd (London: Vintage, 2012), 137.

of sex and pleasure.²⁴⁵ It would appear that the sum of pleasures is dwindling in opposition to the sum of pain, and that an increasing number of people are seeking recourse in assisted suicide. Houellebecq is using another opportunity to make his point about a civilisation in decline, where people would prefer to die than to endure an unpleasurable life. This phenomenon is particularly grim when there is an ageing population.

A key aspect of *The Possibility of an Island* (2005) is the contradictory manner in which the society portrayed regards youth and ageing. The dominant ethos places utmost importance on youthful activities, beauty, and sex appeal.²⁴⁶ At the same time it is increasingly saddled with an ageing population. This is largely due to a decline in the birth rate, indicating that young people are no longer having children. The main character Daniel remarks that once a certain level of economic development is reached in any culture it begins to depopulate, as evidenced by the appearance of ‘child-free zones’ in recent residential developments.²⁴⁷ He observes that: ‘for the first time, young, educated people, in a good position on the socio-economic scale, declared publicly that they did not want children, that they felt no desire to put up with the bother and expense associated with bringing up offspring.’²⁴⁸ Most people prefer to avoid the responsibility entailed in caring for children in order to maximise pleasure time. Morrey notes this as the central contradiction that Houellebecq’s novel aims to expose—the inherent dead end that comes from the collective worship of youth.²⁴⁹ Houellebecq portrays a society that is obsessed with youth, yet is populated by older people who are increasingly distressed by their inability to live up to the idealisation of youth. It is a central paradox that recalls the paradox of the absurd—it is an unwinnable situation. With his observations and predictions about ageing Houellebecq further illustrates his opinion that the pursuit of pleasure can make life unbearable.

The abundance of sadness and frustration in Houellebecq’s work reinforces his opinion that contemporary life is meaningless, and that this is because something is missing. His characters despair because they lack the sense of purpose and meaning that comes from enduring emotional and spiritual bonds, or other ephemeral ideas that give life meaning. Camus also identified the problematic nature of life without aims. His project with *The Myth of Sisyphus* began with the question of whether it is possible to live without a purpose-giving

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 251-52.

²⁴⁶ Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, 129.

²⁴⁷ Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*, 53.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 53-54.

²⁴⁹ Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, 129.

meaning. For him, answering the question of suicide confirms the first question of philosophy, whether life is worth living.²⁵⁰ Houellebecq has similar sentiments, expressed in his third novel *Platform* (2001): ‘The absence of the will to live is, alas, not sufficient to make one want to die.’²⁵¹ With this sentence Houellebecq inverts Camus’s question, emptying it of assertion and decisiveness. Rather than posing a question to assess one’s existential values, Houellebecq’s statement assumes that the answer is negative, but precludes the radical response of ending one’s own life. For him, life is already meaningless, and if it must be lived it is lived reluctantly. This is crucially identified in the statement above in its unifying exclamation of ‘alas’.²⁵² Rather than a declaration of relief at the preclusion of suicide, Houellebecq’s phrasing conveys despair at the ineluctability of living. It expresses a view that is pessimistic, ruling out the possibility of happiness and fulfilment, that isolation and unhappiness are definitive aspects of existence.²⁵³ Houellebecq presents a universe where life is painful and meaningless, but his central characters generally prevail, trying to find meaning in their lives even though it is futile.

Escaping the Deadlock

Several of Houellebecq’s novels predict massive social changes in the near future. These changes either succeed in alleviating the hardships of contemporary life, or attempt to do so. Each of these narratives involves the adoption of some kind of system that involves a diminished sense of self and autonomy. Because he believes contemporary problems come from the sole pursuit of individual desire, Houellebecq’s solution is to rule it out. His various proposals for how this might occur achieve different levels of success. The first can be understood as an ambitious but doomed continuation of the humanist project in a cloned, perfected human species. The second is the widespread adoption of a relaxed but comprehensive version of sharia law, in effect a rejection of Enlightenment values. These narratives are like thought experiments where Houellebecq tests out various solutions to his social crisis, and in doing so he makes the association between his work and the absurd clearer. For Houellebecq, the easiest and most effective way to escape the crisis of contemporary life is to submit the intellect to religious observance.

²⁵⁰ Albert Camus, ‘The Myth of Sisyphus,’ in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Penguin, 2005), 1-2.

²⁵¹ Michel Houellebecq, *Platform*, trans. Frank Wynne (London: Vintage Books, 2003), 351.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ben Jeffery, *Anti-Matter: Michel Houellebecq and Depressive Realism* (Winchester, U.K.: Zero Books, 2011), 8.

Two of Houellebecq's best-known books, *Atomised* and *The Possibility of an Island*, feature narrators from a genetically engineered, cloned version of the human species. The defining attribute of these new species is their lack of individuality, affect, and desire, and this is designed to allow them to lead peaceful, happy lives.²⁵⁴ Houellebecq introduces this idea in *Atomised*, when a new species is created as the eventual result of Michel's experiments with the human genome. In a brief epilogue it is revealed that the narrator is a member of this new species, and it quickly summarises the series of events after Djerzinski's death that led to its development.²⁵⁵ Its creators touted this new life form as proof that 'humanity should be honoured to be "the first species in the universe which had developed the conditions for its successor."'”²⁵⁶ This pronouncement is prophetic, as the new self-cloning species eventually survives the human race, which slowly dwindles away in small populations.²⁵⁷ Key to this rather abrupt twist in the novel's premise is its air of calm and relief. After the tumultuous personal lives of the two main characters come to an end, a soothing voice relates a peaceful apocalypse. As the narrator observes, 'It has been interesting to note the meekness, the resignation, perhaps even the relief of humans at their own passing away.'²⁵⁸ This relief is afforded by this new version of humanity's capacity to live in harmony and without fear. As the narrator states: 'Men consider us to be happy; it is certainly true that we have succeeded in overcoming the monstrous egotism, cruelty and anger which they could not; we live very different lives.'²⁵⁹

Houellebecq returns to this theme in *The Possibility of an Island*. It is narrated in part by the twenty-fourth copy of the central character's clone, referred to as Daniel24, who is replaced halfway through the novel by Daniel25. This version of the reinvention of humanity differs in tone and nature to that in *Atomised*. In this plot a team of microbiologists posing as a cult develops the new species. The affluent are able to purchase the right to be reincarnated as clones, and thus transition into what they perceive as immortality by committing suicide when living is no longer desirable. Again the defining characteristic of these beings is their lack of the characteristics of individual consciousness.²⁶⁰ This is engineered into the genetic makeup of each clone, and is designed to permit its happiness.

²⁵⁴ Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair*, 153.

²⁵⁵ Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 378.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Idem.

²⁵⁸ Idem.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 378-79.

²⁶⁰ Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, 138.

Houellebecq's use of these science fiction plotlines is complex. In *Atomised* the development of a new species is used to propose a possible solution to the problems caused by the blind pursuit of personal freedom. Its part in the novel is brief, and it is described as a utopia. This narrative seems to articulate his dismissal of humanist values by proposing a situation where humanity can only be redeemed by eliminating individuality. Houellebecq depicts the greater proportion of future society reaching a tacit agreement that humanity must not be sustained, completely negating humanist values of self-improvement. He isolates the self-interest that fuels these aims as the very cause for their failure, and thus the solution is to remove will from the human species to permit happiness.²⁶¹ Houellebecq's intent here might be to stipulate that the logical result of humanism is the termination of the species, that it subverts itself, as both narratives gesture at this situation.

Another way to understand Houellebecq's fictional reinvention of the human species is that it represents an evolution in the humanist project, a perfection of humanity as engineered by humans themselves. Houellebecq seems to anticipate this reading because when he revisits the theme in *The Possibility of an Island*, his vision of the future is far more dystopic. The novel ends with the clones gradually leaving their compounds, which cancels their replication and discontinues their species. Daniel senses his own lack of affect after reading the embittered but passionate life story of his human ancestor, cementing his suspicions that something is missing in his nature. He leaves to find what is absent but only encounters the savage remnants of human civilisation. With this narrative Houellebecq seems to suggest that, even if the aspirations of humanism were carried to these kinds of extremes, they would still subvert themselves in the end.

Douglas Morrey asserts that all aspects of Houellebecq's oeuvre indicate his commitment to a broader definition of the posthuman.²⁶² Morrey's use of this term aims to highlight Houellebecq's rejection of humanism. He argues that the novelist's focus on the most barbaric aspects of contemporary society, coupled with his tendency for extended asides of sociological, historical and economic analysis, plays down the significance of the individual protagonists and emphasises the animalistic side of human behaviour.²⁶³ This is evident in the epilogue of *Atomised* where the personal struggles of the central characters are bookended by a depiction of the apocalypse, and also in the portrayal of brutally reductive sexual economics.

²⁶¹ Houellebecq often cites the influence of Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy, and it is quite apparent when he discusses the denial of the will.

²⁶² Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, 10.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

Thus Morrey attributes to Houellebecq a sensitivity to ideas of the posthuman that play down the exceptionality of human intelligence and self-determination, a central assertion of ‘the old humanism’ still persistent in many fields of discourse.²⁶⁴ He thus introduces a reading of Houellebecq’s work that can be aligned with N. Katherine Hayles’ notion of humans as ‘information processing machines’ akin to computer systems, opposing the humanist assertion of individual autonomy and the belief that rational thought is exclusive to humanity.²⁶⁵ Houellebecq’s ideas also invite comparison with what Jean-Marie Schaeffer has called ‘the end of the human exception’.²⁶⁶ This is the acknowledgement that humans are the result of evolution and as such are not separable from other life forms and systems, opposing humanist notions of autonomy.²⁶⁷ While logical, this idea undermines so many aspects of human culture and practices that its true realisation would be devastating, rendering animals the same rights as humans (thus destabilising culture and industry) or worse, allowing humans to be treated as animals. But as Cary Wolfe notes, this view allows for a more modest view of humanity alongside other species. For him, posthumanism means ‘an increase in the vigilance, responsibility, and humility that accompany living in a world so newly, and differently, inhabited.’²⁶⁸ This conception of posthumanism plays down the significance and exceptionality of human intelligence and liberty, encourages modesty and acknowledges the need for a renewed sense of duty. By aligning Houellebecq’s work with posthuman and posthumanist discourse Morrey confirms the author’s rejection of humanist ideals, however the conclusions of these discourses are problematic.

Houellebecq’s proposition of a cloned society echoes Camus’s discussion of the implications of the absurd, and reaches similar conclusions. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus raises the possibility of suicide as a response to the meaninglessness of life. For him the absurd is an unsolvable conflict between human reason and the world. He argues that while this conflict is ‘settled’ by suicide, it is not solved, because killing oneself negates one side of the conflict. It is an annulment rather than a solution. Houellebecq’s science fiction narrative is a similar solution to his social crisis. He identifies that personal alienation is due to the selfishness allowed by ideals of individual freedom and gratification, which have been

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 9.

²⁶⁵ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 246; Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, 9.

²⁶⁶ In Morrey, Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, 151.

²⁶⁷ Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xv.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 47.

exacerbated by the market. He proposes a solution to this, and the many other problems that are caused by it, by the elimination of individuality. Not only does Houellebecq propose the self-destruction of the human race, but also the removal of human attributes in its successor—his solution to human problems is the end of humanity. Like Camus’s discussion of suicide, Houellebecq’s solution eliminates one of the terms of the conflict. Camus was not satisfied with suicide because his aim was to argue the possibility of living with meaninglessness. Houellebecq also rejects his solution with its failure in *The Possibility of an Island*. He seems similarly humanist, as ultimately his fictional proposition of the end of humanity becomes derailed. Like Camus, Houellebecq is not satisfied with ending human life to escape its problems. But he is interested in escape. His characters consistently seek it, usually in sex, but this time in suicide disguised as immortality.²⁶⁹ In his more recent work this escape is religion.

In *Submission* Houellebecq maintains his critique of contemporary society, but poses a different escape from its problems. Despite Islam’s centrality to the plot it is not the novel’s subject. Rather, it is the relief with which the Western population of the not-too-distant future turn to religion in order to make their lives easier and more peaceful. Its subject is the failure of individualism, and the social value of a decreased sense of self-interest. Houellebecq’s protagonist is again depressed and lonely. François is a mid-level literature professor whose occasional romantic engagements with students are brief, but who cannot return the genuine affections of his casual girlfriend. He sees prostitutes, but this only adds to his loneliness. He views contemporary society as shallow and pretentious, but he can’t explain why. As Mark Lilla states, ‘François is shipwrecked in the present. He doesn’t understand why his students are so eager to get rich, or why journalists and politicians are so hollow, or why everyone, like him, is so alone.’²⁷⁰ Meanwhile the presidential election is imminent, and the conservatives have the upper hand. The three other major parties then form a coalition in order to gain the majority and nominate the leader of the new, moderate, and fairly popular Muslim Brotherhood as their candidate. They win, and France elects its first Islamic president.

The parties divide up their government portfolios and the Muslim Brotherhood decides only to manage education. Soon all teachers, including François, are forced into premature retirement on full pensions. Muslim teachers replace them but François is encouraged to return on the condition that he converts to Islam. He eventually does this with some reluctance, and an unsuccessful attempt to engage with Christianity, but his reasons have

²⁶⁹ Lilla, ‘Slouching toward Mecca,’ 43.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

little to do with faith in Allah. In this version of Islam, men are permitted multiple wives for sex, procreation, and affection, and the wives assume each of these successive roles as they age. They have many children who are well nurtured and have lots of siblings for company. The men are always sexually satisfied, the women never fear abandonment, and everyone feels loved.²⁷¹ François is wooed by this prospect, partly for the possibility of choosing his wives, but mostly because he is lonely, estranged from his parents, and fantasises over what Lilla describes as a ‘family romance’.²⁷² This new social model is established with the help of attractive family subsidies that entice women to leave the workplace and have children. The new job vacancies that result cause a decline in unemployment, and youth crime declines due to improving socio-economic conditions and the discipline of Islamic education. France’s social problems practically disappear overnight. With *Submission* Houellebecq depicts religion as the panacea for all the crises of contemporary existence that were introduced by humanism, and exacerbated by individualism and capitalism.

In *Submission* Houellebecq directly addresses a thread that runs through much of his work. As evidenced by his characters’ desperate attempts at escape and fulfilment, there is a persistent sense that something is missing in contemporary society.²⁷³ All of his protagonists are lonely and isolated, but they occasionally fall in love. Due to misfortune or personal fault this experience is always temporary, fragile, and often traumatic, but nevertheless Houellebecq treats love as transformational. It elevates his characters from misanthropic cynicism to a state of almost spiritual transcendence.²⁷⁴ Douglas Morrey points out that this tendency is in keeping with an ancient Judeo-Christian tradition that celebrates selfless love, and the salvation that it brings.²⁷⁵ Love is endowed with redemptive capacities because it negates self-importance. In his novels, this is described in unlikely contexts. In *Platform* Michel finds love in the sordid world of sex tourism, in *Atomised* Bruno and Christiane celebrate their love with group sex in BDSM clubs. As Nelly Kaprielian points out, this juxtaposition is intended to reveal what is missing in contemporary life.²⁷⁶ *Submission* therefore continues this trend in Houellebecq’s work where happiness can only be found in self-denial.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 42.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, 141.

²⁷⁴ Houellebecq, *Platform*, 162; Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, 145.

²⁷⁵ Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, 145.

²⁷⁶ Nelly Kaprielian in *ibid.*, 145-46.

Despite Houellebecq's repeated emphasis on the benefits of self-abnegation, his work does not emphasise a specific need to return to religion. He admires faith for its capacity to give life a sense of meaning, but is nevertheless unable to commit to it. In a series of letters published in *Public Enemies* (2008) he states his repeated efforts to engage with Christianity. While living in Paris he would frequent mass on Sundays and become entranced by the ritual. As he states, 'certain words entered me, and I received them into my heart. And for five to ten minutes every Sunday, I believed in God'.²⁷⁷ Although these experiences were brief and infrequent, they inspired in him the desire to be baptised, but when he attempted to follow the preparations for the ritual he soon lost interest.²⁷⁸ Nevertheless Houellebecq notes how religious faith unites, giving individuals and groups a formidable sense of purpose. As he writes, 'it is a principle of a spiritual nature, the most difficult thing in the world to defeat (something that is perhaps, strictly speaking, invincible).'²⁷⁹ The absurd means the acknowledgement that life lacks this purpose, and it is the identification of this lack that inspires Houellebecq's pessimistic view of contemporary life. For him the absence of belief leads directly to despair. He states that 'a world with no God, with no spirituality, with nothing, is enough to make anyone freak out completely'.²⁸⁰ Houellebecq presents a world in crisis, and this is the result of the inability to replace religious meaning with a suitable alternative. He acknowledges that this view cannot be supported empirically, but that it is central to his understanding of contemporary society. He writes: 'Obviously, it is impossible for me to establish that for society to cut itself off from the religious is tantamount to suicide; it is simply an intuition, but a persistent intuition.'²⁸¹ It is this belief that leads Houellebecq to the idea that a return to the religious is inevitable.²⁸² This notion undoubtedly led him to write *Submission*, a novel that predicts this return, but also demonstrates its social and personal benefits. Even though *Submission* summarises his attitudes quite succinctly, it is important to remember that it is a satire, like most of his works.²⁸³ While it is clear that Houellebecq in some ways values the

²⁷⁷ Michel Houellebecq, *Public Enemies*, trans. Frank Wynne (London: Atlantic Books, 2011), 138.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 109.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 139.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 161.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Adam Gopnik, 'The Next Thing,' *The New Yorker*, 26 January, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/26/next-thing>.

meaning that religion provides to individual existence, it is his reluctance to commit to faith that cements the relationship between his ideas and the absurd.

Houellebecq's desire, but ultimate inability, to convert to Christianity is crucial to how his thought relates to the absurd. In *Submission* François specialises in the work of J.K. Huysmans, a novelist who converted to Catholicism in mid-life. Houellebecq originally intended the novel's protagonist to follow a similar course. First titled *La Conversion*, it was to follow a man's struggle to embrace Catholicism as an alternative to the many disappointments of atheistic life.²⁸⁴ This intended plot mirrors both Huysmans' and his own experiences, but the autobiographical quality of the novel is retained even after Houellebecq opted to base it around Islam instead of Christianity. François shares a similar desire for the spiritual, and even experiences a strange sensation that he confuses with faith in front of a historic Christian statue—much like Houellebecq's trips to Sunday mass. He fails when he tries to repeat the occurrence, and eventually attributes the experience to hypoglycaemia. François's eventual conversion to Islam does not come from divine intuition, but rather by deduction. His decision is based purely on his loneliness, his observations of the social benefits of religion, and also the appeal of sexual gratification without competition. The situation seems to be similar for Houellebecq. While his work consistently decries the social implications of the decline of religion, he is reluctant to embrace it himself. In *Public Enemies* (2008) he calls himself an atheist, but his choice of words is crucial: "The only thing is, the only problem is, I still don't believe in God."²⁸⁵ Houellebecq's problem is that he knows the value of religion in giving life purpose, but he also knows that faith is irrational, and implausible in the contemporary world. He knows the fallacy of faith, but he is drawn to it as a possible alternative to the existential despair of a purely rational approach to life.

This longing for but inability to accept religion links all three discussions of the absurd. Kierkegaard's entire oeuvre is devoted to being able to accept the assertions of dogma. His conviction is fuelled by doubt, and this doubt implies the absurd. Camus attempts to establish a purpose of life to replace that of an abandoned religion. His absurd is the longing for meaning in faithless existence. He deemed a return to religion as philosophical suicide, the submission of the intellect to belief in the impossible. Houellebecq's absurd is similar to Camus's, but it comes much later, once the belief in human capacity has been exhausted. He is attracted to religion, but solely for pragmatic reasons. His work identifies the need for faith,

²⁸⁴ Lilla, 'Slouching toward Mecca,' 42.

²⁸⁵ Houellebecq, *Public Enemies*, 139.

but not divinity or transcendence. Rather, it is the sense of relief that can be found in the surrender of autonomy and the independence of the intellect, the ease of life when its path is set rather than stumbled upon. This surrender of the intellect is suggested by his change of title from *La Conversion* to *Submission*, which removes any association with the sacred. In Houellebecq's work God is forever absent and mute.²⁸⁶ Houellebecq's return to religion is not the return of God, it is the return of humility and cooperation, and the meaning that it creates. It is the wish for community in an atomised society. Thus Houellebecq's absurd is the same as Camus's and Kierkegaard's, because it involves the acknowledgement that it is impossible to determine our purpose ourselves.

The absurd comes from having values that contradict one's setting, and while this is certainly the case for Houellebecq, his values seem to have a more inherent paradox. For all of Houellebecq's vitriol against the repercussions of liberal humanism, his nostalgia for a lost meaning in life is essentially humanistic.²⁸⁷ His augmentation and annihilation of the human species in some of his texts, and the turn to religion in others, is less focused on transcendence and more on the alleviation of human suffering. Morrey also notes Houellebecq's contradictory humanism by pointing out that perhaps his frequent turns to religion betray the difficulty in abandoning the notion of human exceptionality, which is rooted in Christian thinking.²⁸⁸ But it is doubtful that this is what truly motivates Houellebecq's tentative endorsement of religion since he, as Morrey also notes, seems to place the most value on the aspects of faith that encourage self-abnegation.²⁸⁹ Houellebecq turns to religion as a kind of antidote to the selfish consumerism that he thinks is destroying society. This crystallises in *Submission* but Morrey notes the same ideas in *The Possibility of an Island*, published nearly a decade beforehand. As he states:

One of the most powerful insights of *La Possibilité d'une île* is the implication that the kind of social changes required in order to avert the demographic and climatological emergencies that could prove destructive to our species over the coming century cannot be brought about through liberal democracy since it is liberal democracy that has shaped the behaviours responsible for these threatening calamities... If we are to

²⁸⁶ Lilla, 'Slouching toward Mecca,' 43.

²⁸⁷ Adele King, 'Michel Houellebecq: La Possibilité D'une Ile,' *World Literature Today* 80, no. 5 (2006).

²⁸⁸ Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, 151.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

avoid the kind of collective suicide that Houellebecq repeatedly envisions in his fiction, it may well require a solution with the organisational structure and the force of conviction of a religion.²⁹⁰

Houellebecq does not call for a return to religion because he thinks that contemporary society needs to embrace the spiritual, nor is his nostalgia conservative. Rather, he turns to religion out of desperation, because it provides a more or less successful model for communal living.

Of the many labels that Houellebecq has received, none do justice to the entirety of his output and the multiple positions he takes within it. Among other things, he is accused of being a cynic, nihilist, misanthrope, reactionary, pessimist, misogynist, racist, and homophobe.²⁹¹ These labels try to pin down a discrete agenda relating to a single prejudice or pathology, ignoring the fact that when considered in their entirety Houellebecq's criticisms target everyone—and are motivated by a will for all to be better off. A more fitting description comes from someone who has spent a lot of time with him. Louise Wardle directed and produced a documentary series on Houellebecq early in his career, and offers this insight to his personality and the motivation of his work. As she states: 'He is a very sweet, tiny, angry man—and he's horrified by what he sees but can't stop seeing it, carries on watching, and writes it down.'²⁹² The quality of this description has to do with its simplicity. Rather than trying to classify Houellebecq's position, Wardle instead describes his condition. Houellebecq's work depicts a deadlock of contemporary subjectivity that is very similar to the absurd, and he amplifies it to make it more apparent—and if it seems horrible, that is because he is horrified by it. Simply put, his work depicts the world as he sees it.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Christopher de Bellaigue, 'Soumission by Michel Houellebecq Review – France in 2022,' *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/feb/06/soumission-michel-houellebecq-review-france-islamic-rule-charlie-hebdo>; Emily Eakin, 'Le Provocateur,' *The New York Times Magazine*, <http://partners.nytimes.com/library/magazine/home/20000910mag-houellebecq.html>; Jerry Varsava, 'Utopian Yearnings, Dystopian Thoughts: Houellebecq's "the Elementary Particles" and the Problem of Scientific Communitarianism,' *College Literature* 32, no. 4 (2005): 160; Geordie Williamson, 'Houellebecq Kicks against the Thrill of Absolute Pessimism,' *The Australian*, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/books/houellebecq-kicks-against-the-thrill-of-absolute-pessimism/story-e6frg8nf-1226177520614>.

²⁹² Louise Wardle in Ed Stourton, *Michel Houellebecq*, podcast audio, Profile 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b068lst2>.

Chapter Four: Bruce Nauman

Bruce Nauman does not just make art about the absurd, he also takes an absurdist approach to making art. There is a pervasive sense of philosophical uncertainty and frustration in his work, but he also integrates this attitude with his process. Nauman's approach is solitary, he does not identify with any school or movement but prefers a rigorously independent methodology. He believes that art has no extant purpose, and that in order to work he must continually define that purpose—an approach that involves considerable struggle. As a result, he often records his obsessive and pointless activity in the studio and presents it as the proof of his process as well as the final work. These works both symbolise and document the frustrations of the absurd, however their motivation is more immediate. Nauman's frustration is not with the lack of meaning in human life, but the difficulty in understanding our role and agency in it. His work articulates his struggle to define the nature of art and the role of the artist after modernism, and in later work, to make sense of the behaviours that shape human existence. Due to these similarities, many commentators have analysed the relationship between his work and the absurd—its emphasis on repetition, confusion, and anonymity, as well as its affinity with the work of Samuel Beckett. This chapter examines this relationship and these analyses to better understand how Nauman's work engages the absurd. Its purpose is to illuminate a further example of the relevance of the absurd to both art and the human experience beyond modernism.

Acting in Isolation

Because he takes his isolation and uncertainty as a starting point, Nauman's work operates upon a principle of autonomy.²⁹³ There is little if any consistency to his style, and as a result it cannot be ascribed to a distinct movement.²⁹⁴ Nauman's art does not share the straightforwardness of Pop Art, or the ardour of Abstract Expressionism, yet he developed his practice in a period dominated by them.²⁹⁵ For a young artist to display such aesthetic ambivalence is fitting given that the time was characterised by doubts around the purpose of

²⁹³ Eugen Blume, *Bruce Nauman* (Cologne: Dumont, 2010), 27.

²⁹⁴ David Galenston, *Conceptual Revolutions in Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 152.

²⁹⁵ Robert Storr, 'Flashing the Light in the Shadow of Doubt,' in *Bruce Nauman*, ed. Robert C. Morgan (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 155.

art and the role of artists.²⁹⁶ These doubts were coupled with Nauman's own sense of displacement caused by his move from Wisconsin to Los Angeles, which seems to have affected his perception of the nature of art. During his master's studies at the University of California, Nauman used materials such as un-sanded fibreglass and burlap coated in latex to construct indistinct forms that would often be heaped into a corner or strewn along the floor of a studio or gallery.²⁹⁷ Noting this ambivalence to standard materials and modes of presentation, Peter Plagens evocatively describes Nauman's attitude to art as 'mud on top of quicksand, hovering over an abyss'.²⁹⁸ It is also important that this period had its share of divisive sentiments—on one hand there was optimism at the development of first-hand space exploration, and on the other the fear of possible nuclear annihilation.²⁹⁹ From the outset Nauman's art practice was shadowed by uncertainty and isolation.

Since Nauman's early career seemed to be characterised by doubt, it seems fitting that doubt would come to inform much of his work. As he admits without irony, the single motivating question of his practice is 'why anybody continues to make art'.³⁰⁰ This frank line resonates with Camus's opening to *The Myth of Sisyphus*, because it is just as arresting. Camus's question asks us to define what makes life worth living besides false hope, and Nauman's asks why he bothers to do something that has no ostensible purpose or definition. The lack of an inherent objective to life and art begs the question as to what one should do. Nauman's answer occurred to him one day in his studio, when he could not decide what to do next. As he states: 'If I was an artist and I was in the studio, then whatever I was doing in the studio must be art... At this point art became more of an activity and less of a product.'³⁰¹ This declaration has become axiomatic, both for Nauman and for the critical reception of his work, but it is important not to take it out of context. This motivating principle occurred to him shortly after leaving graduate school, while alone in his newly rented studio, experiencing sudden isolation

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 156.

²⁹⁷ Grace Glueck, 'The Antithesis of Minimalism's Cool Geometry: Fleshy Rubber,' *The New York Times*, 13 February, 1998, <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/02/13/arts/art-review-the-antithesis-of-minimalism-s-cool-geometry-fleshy-rubber.html>.

²⁹⁸ Peter Plagens, *Bruce Nauman: The True Artist* (London: Phaidon, 2014), 46.

²⁹⁹ Blume, *Bruce Nauman*, 14.

³⁰⁰ Brenda Richardson, *Bruce Nauman: Neons* (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, 1982), 22.

³⁰¹ Russell Keziere and Ian Wallace, 'Bruce Nauman Interviewed,' in *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words*, ed. Janet Kraynak (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2005), 194.

from the incubator of the educational institution.³⁰² He had realised that there was no order for him to follow, and that if he reduced the artistic act to its core, it became, simply, the artist acting. Nauman had come to the rather existential realisation that his ability to make art was only contingent on himself being an artist.

Nauman's ideas about the role of the artist resulted in an important series of works between 1967 and 1968. He noticed that most of his studio time was spent pacing around drinking coffee, so he decided to film it since that was what he, the artist, was doing.³⁰³ Choosing his own body as a medium came from the kind of plain logic and simplicity of means that have come to define Nauman's work. Initially, he could not afford the materials to make sculptures and paintings, which forced him to question his motives. As he states: 'There was nothing in the studio because I didn't have much money for materials. So I was forced to examine myself and what I was doing there.'³⁰⁴ For Nauman, having art materials in his studio determined what art he would make. If he had paints and canvas then he would have to make paintings, but he had no desire to make art in a form that could be anticipated.³⁰⁵ If he was to operate by the assumption that his role and his location designated his output, then he should have as close to an empty room as possible. He then decided to rid the space of superfluous materials, leaving nothing but his own body in the space, and as a result the subject and form of his work came to be himself. Freed from the limitations of standard materials, he was able to focus on his own ontic materiality.³⁰⁶

These discoveries formed the basis for numerous performance works that Nauman recorded on film and later video. Works such as *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*, *Playing A Note on the Violin While I Walk Around the Studio*, and *Bouncing Two Balls Between the Floor and Ceiling with Changing Rhythms* (all 1967-68) (fig. 1-3) feature the artist engaging in the eponymous tasks for the duration of the film. Nauman's arbitrary selection of these tasks and presentation of them as works of art at first seems frivolous, but his dedication to their performance is total.³⁰⁷ To him this activity is vital and meaningful, and this urgency

³⁰² Neil Benezra, 'Surveying Nauman,' in *Bruce Nauman*, ed. Robert C. Morgan (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 122.

³⁰³ Coosje Van Bruggen, *Bruce Nauman* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), 226.

³⁰⁴ Willoughby Sharp, 'Nauman Interview,' in *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words*, ed. Janet Kraynak (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2005), 118.

³⁰⁵ Plagens, *Bruce Nauman*, 25-26.

³⁰⁶ Anne Wagner, 'Nauman's Body of Sculpture,' *October* 120 (2007): 55.

³⁰⁷ Paul Schimmel, 'Pay Attention,' in *Bruce Nauman*, ed. Joan Simon (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1994), 72; Van Bruggen, *Bruce Nauman*, 18.

comes from the conditions that led to his decision to record it. At a loss as to what to do, unable to identify with the dominant artistic tendencies of the time, and materially limited due to impecunity, Nauman found himself pacing around his studio trying to determine the nature of art and his role as an artist. These are gestures of tedium, boredom, and frustration—the procrastinations of someone who cannot decide what to do next. Having reached the conclusion that his activity as an artist in the studio must therefore be art, he realised that his aimless pacing was also art. Thus, Nauman decided that the only way to act in a futile situation was to record it.

Similar conditions led me to make an early series of performance video works. I felt insignificant and frustrated by the status quo, but also hypocritical because I could not help but be part of it. I wanted to act but felt that I could not, so I decided to replicate my situation in short allegorical video loops. The first of these is Man with Umbrella (2005) (fig. 10) in which I stand waist deep in a pool of water, holding an umbrella to ward off the falling rain. The umbrella, a signifier of protection from water, has become useless because my body is already immersed in water. But I stand there regardless, stuck in the situation. A feeling of futility stimulated me to present futility in my art. In a recent work, What Have You (2015) (fig. 11), I am pictured in the centre of a brightly coloured background, twiddling my thumbs. The action is exaggerated by a whirling sound effect and changing camera angles that crop in on the hands. With each edit the background colour changes and the whirling sound increases in volume, creating excitement and a sense of expectation that is disappointed by the activity.

Nauman's decision to work outside conventional definitions of artistic labour meant his practice would involve considerable effort. As he explains of his early career: 'When I was at art school, I thought art was something I would learn how to do, and then I would just do it. At a certain point I realised that it wasn't going to work like that. Basically, I would have to start over every day and figure out what art was going to be.'³⁰⁸ Nauman's method required him to begin afresh with each work, to abandon the progress, distinctions, and definitions established with great effort by his predecessors, and to an extent, his previous works.³⁰⁹ It is a process that Plagens describes as *ex nihilo*, because for Nauman every work comes from nothing.³¹⁰ Although this phrasing seems misleading given that Nauman often uses the same

³⁰⁸ Bruce Nauman, in Plagens, *Bruce Nauman*, 25.

³⁰⁹ Peter Plagens, 'Bruce Nauman,' *Newsweek*, no. 22 (2009)

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*

materials and subject matter in different works, Plagens' choice of words emphasises his autonomous approach.³¹¹ In Nauman's view art is not a skill that can be learned or an idea that can be taught. Rather, art is a solitary and arduous activity based on endless questioning.

It is possible to see similarities between Nauman's process and the way that key writers suggest we deal with the absurd. His emphasis on constant struggle is similar to Kierkegaard's idea that faith is a continual struggle to surmount the absurd. Camus's absurdist worldview also emphasises constant effort and autonomy, the need to embrace life's lack of inherent purpose in order to define our own meaning. He asserts that this attitude is necessary in order to thrive in a meaningless existence. Nauman's view of himself as a solitary agent can also be likened with Samuel Beckett's portrayal of life in his plays and novels, particularly his inclination to describe it as isolating and perplexing. As Plagens notes, their works share the 'recognition that you are born alone, die alone, and in between are absolutely mystified by the idea of being there.'³¹² Nauman's idea of art and approach to making it are very similar to the attitudes to life of significant writers on the absurd. Thus, his solitary struggle to define himself and his work every day in the studio can be understood as his version of absurdist existence.³¹³

Pointless Activity

Nauman's early performance videos intentionally frustrate the viewer's expectations of metaphor and narrative.³¹⁴ His activities seem arbitrarily chosen, and are done for no apparent reason. The videos have no other purpose than to document his activity, leading nowhere except to bring him to a state of gradual fatigue, but he never stops or collapses. Before any outcome is reached, the footage cuts out and promptly restarts. Nauman has performed for the entire duration of the media, either ten minutes for film or sixty if it is a video. This formal decision makes his action appear endless: it resumes and continues and thus denies a possible narrative resolution or satisfying outcome. As he states, his prolonged engagement in pointless tasks is designed to elicit tension in the viewer: 'My problem was to make tapes that go on and on, with no beginning or end. I wanted the tension of waiting for something to happen, and

³¹¹ Benezra, 'Surveying Nauman,' 124.

³¹² Plagens, *Bruce Nauman*, 106.

³¹³ *Ibid.*

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

then you should get drawn into the rhythm of the thing.³¹⁵ Nauman wants to create a sense of expectation, but he also wants this expectation to become dulled by familiarity. In effect, he prepares the viewer for nothing to happen. The sustained and rhythmic action of these performances gradually allows for the possibility of error and exhaustion, but little more is offered by way of a climax or conclusion.³¹⁶ Key to the work is the fact that no result is achieved. The viewer endures this repetitive fruitless action, slowly becoming accustomed to, or entranced by, its cyclical nature because little alternative is offered—one has the choice to endure or to leave, and nothing else. In a sense, recording these actions has a similar function to the objects in a *vanitas* painting, reminding the viewer that ultimately nothing is of consequence.

Not only do Nauman's videos force the viewer to engage in an extended performance that does not evolve into anything else, they also feature elaborate but useless actions. The works almost exclusively feature the artist expending undue energy on tasks of questionable utility, including a laboriously slow and intricate style of walking a course that ends where he began.³¹⁷ *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* (fig. 1) gets him nowhere, nevertheless his actions are intense and deliberate. For Nauman, this pointless exertion is important to the work, as he states: 'It's a tedious complicated process to gain even a yard.'³¹⁸ It is not the utility of his action that is important; all that interests Nauman is the fact that it is being performed. The tedium of his task reflects the anxiety and boredom that led him to perform it. These actions have no meaning other than the fact that they are, due to his role and location, art. His tasks are at once cut off from their usual purpose and assigned another—in this sense they exist in a void.

Nauman's interest in pointless activity continues his work's relationship with the absurd, if not directly, through the work of Samuel Beckett. In an interview with Jane Livingston in 1972 he cites a well-known and laboriously descriptive passage from Beckett's *Molloy* (1951), where the protagonist exchanges stones between the pockets of his overcoat and his mouth in a complicated pattern.³¹⁹ Nauman's appreciation of this activity is its superfluity,

³¹⁵ Bruce Nauman, in Ingrid Schaffner, 'Circling Oblivion: Bruce Nauman through Samuel Beckett,' in *Bruce Nauman*, ed. Robert C. Morgan (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 167.

³¹⁶ Susan Cross, *Bruce Nauman: Theatres of Experience* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 14.

³¹⁷ Schaffner, 'Circling Oblivion: Bruce Nauman through Samuel Beckett,' 167.

³¹⁸ Bruce Nauman in *ibid.*

³¹⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, trans. Samuel Beckett (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 69-75. This scene is also memorably quoted in the opening pages of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*.

as he states: 'It's elaborate without any point.'³²⁰ This is also Beckett's intent, as he frequently immerses the reader in repetitive and uncomfortable sequences of pointless acts.³²¹ These moments of immersion in pointless activity can be interpreted as metaphors for absurdity. If life is meaningless then everything we do is pointless, and Nauman and Beckett repeat this through pointless activity in their art. According to one of the most authoritative writers on the subject, Martin Esslin, the tendency to turn philosophical ideas into images is characteristic of the theatre of the absurd. Instead of presenting the concept of the absurd in the form of a lucid and reasonable argument, dramatists like Beckett prefer to recreate absurdity in the form and content of their plays. In Esslin's words, 'the Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being—that is, in terms of concrete stage images.'³²² If Beckett's presentation of superfluous and useless activity can be seen to mimic the conditions of the absurd, then Nauman's emulation of this activity does so as well.

It is worth noting the emphasis that Beckett and Nauman place on these pointless actions. In *Molloy*, the protagonist obsesses over the different patterns by which he could transfer the stones between his pockets in order to suck each of the sixteen stones in succession. When he develops a new pattern that achieves this he describes the revelation as resounding like a passage of Isaiah or Jeremiah.³²³ For Molloy, the pointless and pedantic task is of almost religious significance. It seems that Beckett's character regards the most superfluous things as worthy of obsessing over since everything is meaningless. In his earlier novel *Murphy* (1938), the hero obsesses over the possible sequences by which he can eat the five assorted biscuits that he has for lunch. He eventually calculates that if he does not eat his favourite kind last, then the number of sequences multiplies from twenty-four to a hundred and twenty. Murphy is so overwhelmed by this possibility that he falls to the ground, unable to eat until he can learn to overcome his preference for one particular biscuit.³²⁴ Beckett's hero is obsessed with trivialities, attaching a vital importance to matters that would seem insignificant to most. Similar reasoning applies to the intent with which Nauman performs his pointless tasks in the

See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Helen Lane, and Mark Seem (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 3.

³²⁰ Bruce Nauman in Schaffner, 'Circling Oblivion: Bruce Nauman through Samuel Beckett,' 167.

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 25.

³²³ Beckett, *Molloy*, 71.

³²⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 62.

studio. If art is only the act of the artist, then even the most pointless acts are important, worthy of close examination.

In another work from 2015, Something from Nothing (fig. 12), I perform a rhythmic routine of finger clicking and clapping that mimics the finale to Rossini's William Tell Overture. An enduring piece of music and subject to frequent pastiche in popular culture, it suggests movement, agency, and purpose (most commonly that of the cavalry). The action occurred to me when I was waiting for a bus and realised that I regularly did it to fill time. Like What Have You (fig. 11), of the same series, I aimed to make it as exciting as possible by using multiple camera angles and brightly coloured backgrounds. These alternate with each edit, cut to syncopate with the clicked beat. The effect of the video is mesmerising, yet it depicts nothing more than a gesture of boredom. This work is similar to Nauman's because it emphasises complicated yet pointless physical actions, although it differs in that its aim is not the viewer's initial discomfort but instead their immediate entertainment.

Many commentators link the work of Nauman and Beckett, and quite a few of these focus on their common representations of pointless activity. Beckett is explicitly mentioned in the title of Nauman's 1968 performance video *Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)* (fig. 4), a work where he paces around his studio in an extremely complicated, slow, and deliberate manner. Constance Lewallen notes that Nauman based the work on passages in Beckett's writing that detail tedious, repetitive, and apparently pointless gestures.³²⁵ For example, in Act II of *Waiting for Godot* (1953), Vladimir, Estragon, and Lucky exchange hats in an elaborate and lengthy sequence of actions.³²⁶ Neal Benezra asserts that Nauman's reference to *Molloy* is proof that Beckett's work influenced him, and that this is particularly evident in his obsessive actions.³²⁷ When explaining why this behaviour interests him, Nauman voices a concern that is shared by both Beckett and Camus: "They're all human activities, no matter how limited, strange, or pointless, they're worthy of being examined carefully."³²⁸ In Nauman's view, the fact that an act is pointless does not exclude it from being explored in works of art, but quite the opposite. Like Beckett, his choice of pointless actions is quite deliberate because they exemplify his

³²⁵ Constance Lewallen, 'A Rose Has No Teeth,' in *A Rose Has No Teeth*, ed. Constance M. Lewallen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 89.

³²⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 2011), 62.

³²⁷ Benezra, 'Surveying Nauman,' 124.

³²⁸ Bruce Nauman in Van Bruggen, *Bruce Nauman*, 18.

condition and his activity. What seems worthless and meaningless is actually a scrupulous examination of his existence.³²⁹

Repetition

Perhaps due to its metaphoric potential, the concept of repetition has a strong theoretical lineage. Nietzsche's concept of eternal recurrence describes the possibility that all time repeats indefinitely, and he uses it throughout his authorship to discuss different attitudes to life—whether this repetition would be conceived as a 'curse' or a 'blessing'.³³⁰ Kierkegaard uses repetition to emphasise that the most pleasurable experiences in life are never planned. Any attempt to repeat such an experience ensures it will never live up to one's expectations, precisely because they expect it to. For Kierkegaard in *Either/Or*, Don Juan is the embodiment of this irony. Don Juan is afraid that repeating the act of love with the same woman will become boring, so he continually seeks new women to love. However Kierkegaard asserts that Don Juan's activity is still repetitious because he is always seeking new women, again and again.³³¹ What these uses of repetition have in common is the sense of entrapment that it creates, making a condition that stymies any ethical progression. As such, it is fitting that repetition is also a compelling means by which absurdity is conveyed in literature and art.

As with the interminable and arduous repetition that Sisyphus has to endure, and the centrality of this frustration to Camus's ideas, Nauman's works feature him and his performers trapped in endless loops of pointless activity. His studio works like *Slow Angle Walk* (fig. 4) create this sense of entrapment through repetition.³³² Nauman walks around and around his studio while repeating the awkward gait. His intention is not advancement but rather the performance of the act itself. Schaffner points out that 'what keeps time throughout these prolonged performances is repetition. The opposite of progress, repetition literally keeps time from passing. One is stuck in the moment.'³³³ Movement and progression are denied by repetition, and the progression of time is delayed, creating a tension that is never resolved.³³⁴

³²⁹ Blume, *Bruce Nauman*, 27.

³³⁰ Heiko Schulz and Harmut Rosenau, 'Aesthetic Nihilism: The Dialectic of Repetition and Nonrepetition in Nietzsche and Kierkegaard,' *The European Legacy*, 2, no. 4 (1997): 628.

³³¹ Niels Eriksen, *Kierkegaard's Category of Repetition* (New York: Wlateral de Gruyter, 2000), 23-24.

³³² Wagner, 'Nauman's Body of Sculpture,' 64.

³³³ Schaffner, 'Circling Oblivion: Bruce Nauman through Samuel Beckett,' 168.

³³⁴ Schimmel, 'Pay Attention,' 73.

Nauman's self-enforced activities create a sense of entrapment, an effect that is also achieved by Beckett's repetitious plots and dialogues.³³⁵ For example, the repetition of anticipation and disappointment in *Waiting for Godot* is a major reason why it the play seems to represent the absurd. The two acts are two sequential days in which almost identical events take place. This repetition dulls narrative progression, making the characters seem stuck in their situation.³³⁶ When the second act begins the audience expects new progress in the story, but when the events of the first act seem to repeat this expectation is frustrated.³³⁷ This repetition is acknowledged in the text, which opens the second act with the description, 'next day. Same time. Same place...' The audience's frustration is also echoed in the first line of dialogue, when Vladimir acknowledges Estragon with a curt 'you again!'³³⁸ Their situation has not changed and it continues until the end, when nothing happens—the play is a non-event.³³⁹ Vladimir and Estragon keep their appointment with Godot, who never arrives. The play relates an unfulfilled promise that repeats, and as such the audience is presented with a series of repetitious events that lead nowhere. In Nauman's works, the beginning and end of the recording do not imply a beginning or end to his activity, nor any kind of resolution. Similarly, in *Waiting for Godot* the beginning and end of the act does not signal a beginning or end to the situation, but repeat to create a suspended, irresolvable state.³⁴⁰ This sense of permanent restriction is characteristic of Beckett's work, and adds much to its resonance with the absurd. His final line in *The Unnameable* (1953) summarises this condition well: 'I can't go on, I'll go on.'³⁴¹

Nauman's use of repetition perhaps climaxes with his 1987 installation, *Clown Torture* (fig. 5). This is a six-channel video installation consisting of sixty-minute videotapes, with all but one featuring the same three video reels split up to fulfil the duration.³⁴² The videos all feature clowns engaging in different tasks: one recites a repetitious limerick, one enacts a

³³⁵ Robert R. Riley, 'Bruce Nauman's Philosophical and Material Explorations in Film and Video,' in *A Rose Has No Teeth*, ed. Constance M. Lewallen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 182.

³³⁶ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 46.

³³⁷ Kathryn Chiong, 'Nauman's Beckett Walk,' *October* 86 (1998): 72.

³³⁸ Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 47, 48.

³³⁹ Chiong, 'Nauman's Beckett Walk,' 72.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁴¹ Samuel Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, the Unnamable*, trans. Samuel Beckett (London: John Calder, 1994), 418.

³⁴² This description pertains to the installation of *Clown Torture* at The Art Institute of Chicago. Other installations may differ.

childish tantrum by jumping on the spot yelling ‘No! No! No!’, one pretends to be antagonised by having his feet tickled, one sits on a toilet, one struggles to hold a fish bowl against the ceiling with a broomstick, and one walks through a doorway causing a bucket of water perched above it to douse him. According to the installation’s specifications all are to be played at once, making the work visually and aurally chaotic. Nauman’s decision to use clowns seems largely based on their anonymity, allowing the viewer to focus on their tasks rather than the actors performing them.³⁴³ Each clown repeats its designated task until the video loops, and then begins again as the video resumes on a different screen. Again Nauman employs repetition to create a sense of the clown’s confinement.³⁴⁴ As Peter Schjedahl points out, the clowns are trapped in no-win situations: ‘These clowns are telling the same circular stories, getting bopped by the same water bucket, and monotonously screaming “no! no! no!” as you read this. They do so for eternity.’³⁴⁵ They are caught in repetition, their pointless action made eternal by the cycle of the video loop.

In my early performance vignettes (fig. 10, 14) I employ an editing technique in order to make the performed action seem to last forever, denying the outcome of the performed task. To achieve this effect a single video clip is arranged in a video editor to first play forward and then repeat, but in reverse. By playing the second identical clip in reverse, the action recorded in it is returned to the first frame, making the sequence a perfect loop. These two clips are then duplicated multiple times so that the originally small amount of footage lasts hours. In recent videos (fig. 11, 12), I use multiple camera angles to achieve a similar effect. Three cameras record the same action at the same time, and the footage is edited so that each camera angle is used in sequence, thus repeating the same action from three different angles. Although it is the same footage seen in each angle, it seems new because the angle changes, and makes the pointless activity featured in the videos seem to last forever. Like Nauman and Beckett, my intention is also to emphasise a lack of progress, to frustrate the viewer’s expectation of narrative, and to encourage a sense of the performer’s entrapment.

³⁴³ Joan Simon, ‘Breaking the Silence: An Interview with Bruce Nauman,’ in *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman’s Words*, ed. Janet Kraynak (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2005), 335. These issues are discussed in greater detail in a subsequent section of this chapter dealing with his use of costume.

³⁴⁴ Robert Morgan, ‘Bruce Nauman: An Introductory Survey,’ in *Bruce Nauman*, ed. Robert C. Morgan (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 11.

³⁴⁵ Peter Schjedahl, ‘The Trouble with Nauman,’ in *Bruce Nauman*, ed. Robert C. Morgan (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 101.

Several writers make strong allusions to the purgatory-like feeling of absurdity when discussing the repetitious nature of *Clown Torture* (fig. 5). Storr observes that the clowns enact ‘scenes of absurd powerlessness, constipated indecisiveness, and hopelessly repetitious confusion.’³⁴⁶ His use of the term alludes to the work’s Sisyphean quality—unable to escape the situation, the clowns must repeat their acts forever. Robert Morgan also comments on this sense of entrapment, and offers the reading that it functions as a metaphor for the absurd: ‘the clown represents internal frustration as he is caught between conflict and resolution or, in more general terms, between experience and his inability to understand.’³⁴⁷ Here Morgan likens the clown’s situation to the state of absurdity. He identifies this as a state of suspended narrative, the tension between conflict and resolution.³⁴⁸ Arthur Danto also analyses *Clown Torture* in a way that suggests the absurd. He remarks that the clowns’ repetitious ordeals can be likened to human life. Their failure and confusion is never resolved, but repeated and suspended: ‘If they allegorise the human condition, as can be argued, human life is the same thing over and over, and we never learn.’³⁴⁹ Thus, a common appraisal of *Clown Torture* is that it is a vivid visual representation of absurdity, and this is achieved most significantly through repetition.

Situations that do not Make Sense

Nauman’s works can often be difficult to interpret, as though he aims to present situations that cannot be understood. Robert Silfkin refers to this as the artist’s ‘apparent semantic undecidability’, his refusal to provide a clear message to his work.³⁵⁰ Nauman too has mentioned that he aims to complicate meaning in his works by providing misleading, or incompatible content in order to frustrate the viewer’s reading. In the artist’s words, he is interested in the ‘tension of giving and taking away, of giving a certain amount of information and setting some kind of expectations and then not allowing them to be fulfilled, at least not in the sense that you expect... giving two kinds of information that don’t line up.’³⁵¹ Nauman therefore sets up a situation where the constituent parts of his works allude to a potential

³⁴⁶ Storr, ‘Flashing the Light in the Shadow of Doubt,’ 159-60.

³⁴⁷ Morgan, ‘Bruce Nauman,’ 11.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁴⁹ Arthur Danto, ‘Bruce Nauman,’ in *Bruce Nauman*, ed. Robert C. Morgan (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 150-51.

³⁵⁰ Robert Silfkin, ‘Now Man’s Bound to Fail, More,’ *October* 135 (2011): 59.

³⁵¹ Michele de Angelus, ‘Interview with Bruce Nauman,’ in *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman’s Words*, ed. Janet Kraynak (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2005), 272.

meaning that is ultimately unavailable to the viewer. He does this by deliberately making his works enigmatic, by removing the necessary information that would allow the viewer to make sense of it. In this manner, Nauman's work imitates the condition of absurd—where meaning is sought but is impossible to discern. The viewer looks for a final and inherent meaning which is unavailable, and this is because they lack the resources to piece it together. Nauman's works remind the viewer that existence is inherently problematic and uncertain.³⁵²

The works that Nauman made in the 1990s are exemplary of his aim to conflate the viewer's attempt to read them. His installation *Shit in Your Hat/Head on a Chair* (1990) (fig. 6) features a cast model of a human head affixed to a chair, suspended in the centre of the room, with a video projected onto the wall behind it. The video depicts a mime performing the spoken commands of an unseen man—his orders are both nonsensical and personally degrading, but the mime obeys diligently. His voice commands things like, 'Sit on your hat, your hands on your head. Shit in your hat. Show me your hat. Put your hat on your head.'³⁵³ The work is disconcerting, as there is no apparent association between the head on the hanging chair, the mime or the voice, yet all are installed together as though there is. As Morgan observes: 'There is no resolution available. There is nothing to justify the action that stands before us... this absence of resolution [is] suggestive of the absurd.'³⁵⁴ Nauman creates a scene that prevents the viewer from ascertaining its meaning. It is the way that the work operates that is reminiscent of the absurd—rather than constructing an allegory in its content, it is the structure of the piece that is similar to the condition of absurdity. For Morgan, this more functional similarity makes Nauman's absurd 'systemic'—it is only when the work is contemplated in its entirety that this meaning becomes available, which is that its meaning is unavailable.³⁵⁵ In this manner, the lack of resolution implied by the absurd is not demonstrated or depicted, as in Nauman's early performance videos (fig. 1-4). Here the absurd is mimicked in the way the work is comprehended by the viewer. The viewer looks for meaning in what they are experiencing, but this meaning is unavailable to them.

Where possible I also aim to generate meaning with the form of my work as well as its content. The dull or minor activities of the task-based works are over-emphasised by the way they are produced (fig. 10-12,

³⁵² Schjedahl, 'The Trouble with Nauman,' 107.

³⁵³ Jean-Charles Massera, 'Dance with the Law,' in *Bruce Nauman*, ed. Robert C. Morgan (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 174.

³⁵⁴ Morgan, 'Bruce Nauman,' 8.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

14). *Not only are the activities pointless, the way they are emphasised makes them seem more so. Thus, the form of the work adds as much to its meaning as its content. This is seen in the Dr Nobody series (2013-16) (fig. 13), which mimics the online videos of activist groups by copying their costume and using similar voice alteration in order to deliver a message. However, these elements of the videos are contradicted by my speeches, which relate minor observations, petty annoyances, and inane theories. The triviality of their content is exaggerated by the viewer's expectation of weighty or arresting content. In other words, the combination of the form and content allows for their meaning to be understood.*

In another work Nauman presents the viewer with a more literal paradox. Discussing one of the artist's sculptures, *A rose has no teeth* (1966) (fig. 7), Morgan notes how its construction of a logical contradiction suggests the absurd.³⁵⁶ The work is a curved rectangular plaque bearing the same phrase as its title—it is curved because Nauman initially installed it on a tree but later removed it.³⁵⁷ For Morgan, the vagueness of the assertion on the plaque is reminiscent of the absurd—it is an unsolvable problem that emphasises a lack of meaning.³⁵⁸ Nauman borrowed the phrase from Ludwig Wittgenstein, who used it to illustrate that our understanding of language is based on assumed knowledge, and that our relation to language is from an internal loop. The phrase is only nonsensical if one knows that a rose has no teeth because it has no mouth, otherwise it would be assumed to be true.³⁵⁹ However Nauman's interest in the phrase is much more simple, he uses it because it does not make sense.³⁶⁰ As with *Shit in Your Hat* (fig. 6), Nauman's proposition of an unsolvable problem presents the absurd. For Morgan, the opacity of the sentence mimics the impossibility of understanding existence. Again Nauman's work presents a problem with no solution, and this is the work's ultimate meaning.

If Nauman makes works that are only meaningful because they do not have an observable meaning, then the possibility arises that they are actually just meaningless. This problem is raised by Theodor Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970). Here Adorno considers the

³⁵⁶ Despite the fact that the argument focuses on Nauman's video performance works, Morgan's comments here are helpful to illustrate this point.

³⁵⁷ Benezra, 'Surveying Nauman,' 121.

³⁵⁸ Morgan, 'Bruce Nauman,' 9.

³⁵⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), 221.

³⁶⁰ Elizabeth Baker and Joe Raffaele, 'The Way-out West, Interviews with Four San Francisco Artists,' in *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words*, ed. Janet Kraynak (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2005), 107.

apparent meaninglessness of Beckett's work in a manner that can be applied to Nauman's.³⁶¹ Importantly, he makes a distinction between meaninglessness addressed by works of art, and works of art that are meaningless. It is the same definition that separates the philosophical absurd and the absurd in a literal, vernacular sense. As he writes: 'Beckett's plays are absurd not because of the absence of any meaning, for then they would be simply irrelevant, but because they put meaning on trial.'³⁶² Beckett's characters are hopeless, their discourse and their actions amount to very little, and instead of an engaging plot the audience is presented with a repetition of banal days—yet this rigorous negation does not mean that the work is meaningless, because this is what the play is about. Beckett's work has meaning because its subject is meaninglessness, and this is achieved through its form as well as its content. As Adorno puts it, Beckett's works 'gain their content through the negation of meaning.'³⁶³ Thus, it can be argued that the negation of meaning in works of art is the same as the affirmation of meaning, both are acts of communication and therefore meaningful.³⁶⁴ Using Adorno's commentary it is possible to see how Nauman's works function in much the same way. By his denial of an overt, decipherable message Nauman forces the viewer to conclude that the work is meaningless, and this is how he communicates the concept of meaninglessness.

My work also emphasises meaninglessness through its insistence on negation, which can be read as an expression of extreme pessimism. The futile acts depicted in my works are negations of useful ones, and their eventual resolution, even through failure or fatigue, is intentionally denied, as in the prolonged strain against rope attached to the ground in Earthmover (2007) (fig. 14). The presentation of my works often elicits frustration and disappointment, the attraction of bright colours and sound effects is opposed by the repetitive banality of my tasks, like the thumb-twiddling in What Have You (fig. 11). Similarly, Dr Nobody's (fig. 13) aggressive appearance is in direct contrast to the platitudes he expresses. The emphasis on communication created by the mask, which encourages inhibition by concealing identity, and the subtitles, a method of ensuring that nothing is misunderstood, are undermined by the inanity of his confused theories, and his embarrassed hesitation to divulge them. This characteristic insistence on negation seems nihilistic, but I do not consider myself a nihilist. I am attracted to the absurd because it seems accurate to my condition, and even if this is taken as my sole compulsion it has inherent meaning in the same way as Beckett's and Nauman's work.

³⁶¹ Blume, *Bruce Nauman*, 27.

³⁶² Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Huellot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002), 153.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, 154.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

Costume, Role, and Universality

It is quite common for writers and artists to describe absurdity as ubiquitous, because the same conditions that contribute to the absurd on a personal level apply to everyone.³⁶⁵ In Nauman's video practice there is a noticeable move from works that he performs in to works that use actors. By removing himself from the work he makes the actions performed in his videos, as well as their concepts, more universal. Even in the early works (fig. 1-4) where Nauman himself performs, he aims to appear as neutral as possible. While these performances deal with his own experiences and ideas, his aim is to communicate these in a more universal manner. He treats his body more as a tool than a site of personality and subjectivity. In his own words, his performances were exercises in 'making an examination of yourself and also making a generalisation beyond yourself.'³⁶⁶ The detached manner in which Nauman performs is how he achieves this generalisation. He performs his tasks in an expressionless, quiet, and casual manner that places focus on the act more than the artist.³⁶⁷

I use costume to differentiate between myself and my performance personas. In task-based works (fig. 10-12, 13) I wear a common business suit and tie to symbolise civilisation in general, or at least the West. Thus my actions become symbolic for a kind of collective agency. In the Dr Nobody series (fig. 13), I use costume and post production to obscure my identity as much as possible, but while it makes me anonymous, these devices have the curious effect of making my personality more prominent. This is because the costume has connotations of a certain type of behaviour that Dr Nobody does not exhibit, thus making his more conspicuous. Nevertheless, the purpose of this costume is still to make him more relatable, precisely because he does not live up to it. His problems and complaints are everyday and common, even if they seem pathetic in context.

Apart from his early performances Nauman rarely features in his video works, choosing instead to employ actors (fig. 5, 6, 9). By using other people Nauman completely removes any association with his personality, but in certain works (fig. 5) he takes this further by dressing his actors as clowns, and thus removes any association with their personality as well. As mentioned earlier, what interests Nauman about the figure of the clown is its

³⁶⁵ This statement is not intended to be a generalisation, but to acknowledge that these writers and artists consider the human mind as incapable of understanding the meaning of its own existence. To them the absurd applies to everyone.

³⁶⁶ Cross, *Theatres of Experience*, 9.

³⁶⁷ Plagens, *Bruce Nauman*, 26.

anonymity, its reference to humanity in general.³⁶⁸ The clown's costume makes it seem less like an individual person, and more like a character, a role that is transferrable and therefore not related to the person performing it. It is this aspect of clowns that makes them seem artificial, but it is this artificiality that makes them recognisable, because it is what makes them transferrable and common.³⁶⁹ Clowns are anonymous, and their familiarity enhances this anonymity—they are famous for being no one in particular. In the circus its only function is a comic interlude, where it is employed to fill time between acts. Clowns engage in idle play between the main events, achieving nothing, and thus represent the frivolity of human endeavour. Due to their role we expect them to partake in nonsensical and trivial dialogues, petty squabbles, and attempt ridiculous tasks, but at the same time they remind us of our own.³⁷⁰ As Schaffner notes: 'we are invited to experience through our identification with the clown and clownish nonsense not just a silly lack of sense, but the more subversive potential of things actually failing to make sense.'³⁷¹ The clown's world is an exaggerated version of the real one, which makes just as little sense, although less obviously. Because we can see ourselves in the figure of the clown, its nonsensical world symbolises ours.

Like Nauman, Ugo Rondinone also uses clowns for their symbolism, but to rather different ends. In his videos, sculptures, and performances, Rondinone flips our expectation that clowns should be lively and entertaining by depicting the opposite. One of the videos in his installation *Where Do We Go From Here?* (1996) (fig. 8) features a clown slumped against a white backdrop. As though exhausted or drunk, with its legs outstretched, the figure listlessly stares into the distance beyond the camera. The shot is taken from behind the soles of the clown's shoes, in a direct reference to the video in *Clown Torture* (fig. 5) where a clown pretends to be tickled. But rather than enacting comic antagonism, Rondinone's clown is apathetic—instead of artifice and spectacle, the clown represents banality and melancholia.³⁷² Where Nauman uses the clown to point out that our everyday lives are underscored by nonsense, Rondinone points out that this is accompanied by fatigue.³⁷³

³⁶⁸ Simon, 'Breaking the Silence,' 335.

³⁶⁹ Plagens, *Bruce Nauman*, 167.

³⁷⁰ Schaffner, 'Circling Oblivion: Bruce Nauman through Samuel Beckett,' 172.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*

³⁷² Christine Ross, *The Aesthetics of Disengagement: Contemporary Art and Depression* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 45.

³⁷³ Elizabeth Janus, 'Ugo Rondinone,' *Artforum International* 37, no. 3 (1998): 102.

Frustration

In a frequently quoted and uncharacteristically candid interview, Nauman explains that feelings of exasperation inspire many of his works. As he says to Joan Simon: ‘Anger and frustration are two very strong feelings of motivation for me. They get me into the studio, get me to do the work.’³⁷⁴ This anger and frustration is not entirely the product of his method, although it involves considerable struggle, nor is it the same frustration his viewers experience when they encounter seemingly pointless, repetitive, and incoherent artworks. Rather, Nauman’s frustration is at human nature. As he goes on to state: ‘My work comes out of being frustrated about the human condition. And about how people refuse to understand other people. And about how people can be cruel to each other. It’s not that I think I can change that, but it’s just a frustrating part of human history.’³⁷⁵ Nauman made these comments shortly after discussing his reading into accounts of torture in South and Central America, and how it affected his practice at the time. This was in the late 1970s, and while his sentiments seem specific to that point it is worth noting that many of his works are motivated by a frustration that comes from his inability to understand a particular problem. For example, his early work was informed by his struggle with the ambiguous notion of the work of art, and the role of the artist in making it. In Nauman’s work after 1980 this focus seems to shift to the problem of trying to understand human behaviour and the frustration that this involves.

It is a result of this frustration that Nauman’s work represents the absurd, because it is the product of his attempt to grasp something that resists understanding. Two of his works that best represent absurdity, *Clown Torture* and *Shit in Your Hat* (fig. 5 and 6), foreground purposeless and inexplicable activity. They present vivid visual metaphors for absurd human life, vain and unjustified, but their manner is more aggressive than his early studio performances. These works are driven by anger, the cause of which is the meaningless violence of which people are capable.³⁷⁶ For Nauman, what is absurd is the fact that humankind continues to oppress, exploit, torture, and murder itself despite our foreknowledge of the consequences. As Storr notes: ‘The repeated inability to learn from mistakes is a constant issue for Nauman; no design for betterment or punishment for failure changes the odds against

³⁷⁴ Bruce Nauman in Simon, ‘Breaking the Silence,’ 332.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 332-33.

³⁷⁶ Blume, *Bruce Nauman*, 9.

error. Pain is a poor teacher—or perhaps we are suffering’s dunces.³⁷⁷ Nauman’s art refers to the paradox of our simultaneous self-awareness and lack of self-control, it reminds us that while there is abundant proof of civilisation’s indiscretions they nevertheless continue to occur. His work is his reaction to the cruelty, intolerance, and stupidity he perceives in humans, and it shares the pointlessness, repetition and frustration that characterise absurdity.³⁷⁸

Although Nauman’s works seem to share a view that human nature is irrational and unpredictable, not all of them focus on violence and cruelty. For example, the subject of his 1991 video installation, *Anthro/Socio (Rinde Facing Camera)* (fig. 9), is the complexity of human thought and behaviour, and particularly how difficult they are to understand despite our best efforts. The work is not subtle in its address of the social sciences, which are mentioned in both the title and the work itself. Products of the Enlightenment, anthropology and sociology are means by which we try to understand our condition and the way that we live—they are exercises in empirical self-examination.³⁷⁹ But even though the practice of these disciplines is rigorous and structured, Nauman’s installation is a reminder that their subject is fundamentally unpredictable. Here the viewer is confronted with three large-scale video projections and three pairs of television monitors, each alternately placed upside down or right-way up and playing either one of two short videos. The screens show a close up of the head of performance artist Rinde Eckert as he gazes into the camera, bellowing the following phrases: ‘Feed Me/Eat Me/Anthropology’, ‘Help Me/Hurt Me/Sociology’, and ‘Feed Me/Help Me/Eat Me/Hurt Me’.³⁸⁰ Eckert’s vocals sound like Gregorian chants as he alternates between pitches, which make the combination of commands and pleas sound both anxious and powerful.³⁸¹ Since all of the monitors and projections are playing at once, they combine to make a complicated and disorienting mix of surety and insecurity. Through this complex and random layering of tone and message, and despite the conviction of the phrases and the way they are put forward, the work exemplifies the complexity of human behaviour and how difficult it is to account for.

Because *Anthro/Socio* seems to represent human experience so well, many consider it to be Nauman’s portrait of humanity, and one that does not omit its flaws. Arthur Danto

³⁷⁷ Storr, ‘Flashing the Light in the Shadow of Doubt,’ 160-61.

³⁷⁸ Plagens, *Bruce Nauman*, 167.

³⁷⁹ Robert Storr, ‘An Incantation for Our Time,’ in *Bruce Nauman*, ed. Joan Simon and Robert Storr (Paris: Cartier Foundation, 2015), 71.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

applauds the humanism of the work, finding it moving and tremendous.³⁸² For him the ringing voice of the installation seems like ‘the Voice of Humanity’.³⁸³ The work addresses many aspects of human experience at once, such as exasperation, rage, confusion, and anxiety. But while Danto sees the work as celebratory, Storr is more cautious. He writes that ‘a disabused humanism—rather than anti-humanism—is at the core of Nauman’s enterprise.’³⁸⁴ Storr acknowledges that Nauman’s work is far from idealistic, but neither is it dismissive of the human subject. When he makes a work like *Anthro/Socio*, which has the human experience as its sole focus, it necessarily involves inconsistencies. The multiple, simultaneous, and contradictory assertions made by a single man in *Anthro/Socio* refer to the uncertainty and inconsistency of our thought and behaviour. The disabused humanism that Storr refers to is Nauman’s apparent disillusionment with the idea that we can overcome our innate drives and desires, and the problems that these cause, just by studying ourselves.³⁸⁵ These aspects of our behaviour and thought are inextricable from human experience, and as such a fundamental quality of the human condition is that it cannot be fully explained.

Nauman is frustrated with human behaviour because it resists understanding, and he voices this frustration in his work. Similarly, his early work struggles with the uncertainty of artistic purpose after modernism. Like the meaning of life, these ideas are vague and shifting, and the attempt to define them with logic results in frustration and failure. This is why Nauman’s work is so vividly absurd, why many commentators have noticed this similarity, and why it has such an affinity with Beckett’s writing. Through his work, Nauman doubts our mastery of our faculties, such as communication, perception, and reason.³⁸⁶ Thus, he stresses our limitation. Nevertheless, in the same way that Camus insists we should keep the absurd alive with a constant struggle to defy it, Nauman remains committed to his project despite its futility.

³⁸² Danto, ‘Bruce Nauman,’ 148.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 149.

³⁸⁴ Storr, ‘Bodily Matrixed Motion,’ 117.

³⁸⁵ Storr, ‘An Incantation for Our Time,’ 73.

³⁸⁶ Storr, ‘Flashing the Light in the Shadow of Doubt,’ 156.

Conclusion

By the special examination of the work of four individuals this thesis has argued that the absurd is still relevant after modernism, despite its close association with humanist, existentialist, and modernist discourse. In doing so, it has aimed to enrich the concept by demonstrating its resonance with aspects of the contemporary, which, despite being more immediate, are still pressing concerns of humanity and are a central motivation for my practice. Across all the examples discussed, the absurd is characterised by the inability to understand existence and underscores its inherent meaninglessness, leaving the subject with a sense of futility and a lack of agency. The present study has demonstrated how these conditions reflect in the work of Søren Kierkegaard, Albert Camus, Michel Houellebecq, and Bruce Nauman. These figures were chosen for their suitability to the themes explored in the thesis and also their representation of a chronology from the inception of the concept through to the contemporary.

Despite Kierkegaard being the first philosopher to use the term 'absurd', the meaning of the term is not explicitly stated within his main texts. Therefore, a primary definition of the absurd necessitates a rather comprehensive approach, since the absurd has a pivotal role in his overall project. The absurd in his work describes the point at which the necessary conditions for faith are rejected by the objective mind, and faith becomes impossible. This definition is accurate to all instances of the term in Kierkegaard's work, whereas other commentaries on Kierkegaard's work argue that the irrational assertions of dogma (such as the incarnation, or the 'absolute paradox') are the same as the absurd. Due to the absurd, Kierkegaard argues that the only way that Christian faith can be achieved is to circumvent reason, to embrace the objective uncertainty of subjective existence in order to commit to a more existential type of faith. Kierkegaard asserts that this is the highest condition that one can achieve, but that it is also extremely difficult. In order to explain this, he uses several exemplars such as Knight of Faith and the biblical figure Abraham to emphasise the commitment and sacrifice that is necessary to achieve and sustain true faith. Kierkegaard also explains the importance of the absurd to faith with his idea of the spheres of existence. The lowest of these is the aesthetic, which is characterised by despair. This can either take the form of an unthinking way of life where the pleasures that drive it can easily be lost, or in the form of a more existential despair at the meaninglessness of existence. The highest sphere is the religious, and the absurd acts as a barrier between it and the aesthetic. Only a leap of faith can allow one to leave the aesthetic

sphere. Kierkegaard argues that if faith is not possible, due to the absurd, then life is always lived in the aesthetic sphere and therefore is always in despair.

Camus's definition of the absurd is essentially similar to Kierkegaard's, but differs in context. Both writers assert that the absurd is an obstacle to the meaning of life, and that it leads to despair. Kierkegaard uses this despair to justify faith, but in Camus's work it is used to explain the need for a sense of individual and collective agency. This philosophy evolves from his early to his later works. Camus's early work explores the various ways that one can live with this despair, which he calls absurdity. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* he begins with the problem of suicide, and deems that this is not an acceptable solution to the absurd because it evades the problem rather than solving it. He then outlines a number of ways that one can live with the absurd, but these all involve a more or less amoral, or nihilistic, sensibility. Because one does not attach significance to ethical codes or behavioural norms, this kind of approach to life is alienated. Camus explores these ideas in his novel, *The Outsider*. In his later work *The Rebel*, Camus develops his concept of metaphysical revolt. Because the absurd is oppression the only way to oppose it is through defiance. Since all humans desire justice against the absurd, the pursuit of collective justice can make our lives meaningful. This approach is foundational to Camus's later philosophy of Absurdism, and he portrays it allegorically in his novel *The Plague*, where the citizens of a town beset by an infectious disease work together to resist it.

Houellebecq's writing is used to situate the absurd in the contemporary. While it follows the same tradition as Camus, Houellebecq's work lacks any sense of heroism or ethic. Rather, his novels emphasise how the conditions of Western society make individual life prone to absurdity. These conditions have the same root causes as the absurd. After the decline of religion, the rise of Enlightenment values of individual reason and autonomy evolved into simple self-interest. This heightened form of individualism has led to the dissolution of social and familial bonds, and as a result people are alienated and lonely. Houellebecq's novel *Atomised* emphasises the detrimental effects of this phenomenon, particularly how self-interest exacerbates his characters' unhappiness and contributes to their view that life is meaningless. In Houellebecq's universe, contemporary society has become dominated by capitalism. Individuals treat one another much like exchange commodities, and the desire for beauty, wealth, and youth can never be adequately met. For Houellebecq, the attempt to remedy the crisis of contemporary Western society requires drastic changes to its structure, and even the human genome. However, his writing frequently emphasises how this is either doomed to

failure or highly unlikely. In the work of Houellebecq the absurd still involves the inability to find meaning in life, but its causes are more immediate and his conclusions are less optimistic.

The work of Nauman is another example of the absurd after modernism, and the exclusive case study of his practice was necessary due to its thorough engagement with the absurd as well as the affinity between his performance practice and the studio work. This affinity is not only philosophical. Both the studio work and Nauman's engage methodologies involving manipulation of video documentation, slapstick, endurance, and a prominent use of costume. There are further connections to be made between the use of masks in both practices, but given the strong tradition of scholarship in this area its discussion was omitted to avoid being too brief. Instead the chapter focused on the prominent absurdist attitudes in his oeuvre. Much like in the work of Houellebecq, Nauman's absurd comes from frustrations that are more immediate than the meaning of life, but still pertain to important problems of life. Early in his career he devoted himself to the problem of the role of the artist and the nature of art. His inability to solve it led him to decide that if art, and as a result the artist, has no purpose, then his role was to seek to define that purpose over and over. This concept is very similar to Camus's idea of revolt, because it involves a constant struggle to define meaning, and that the only meaning one can find is in the struggle itself. Due to the abundant themes of pointlessness, frustration, and use of repetition in his work, many commentators have compared it with the absurd as well as with Samuel Beckett's writing. Nauman's work cannot be ascribed with a desire for existential meaning in the same sense as Camus's, yet his practice has always been characterised by an attraction to the incomprehensible. In later works he turns his focus to the complexity and unpredictability of human behaviour and experience, creating installations that are equally difficult to account for. Through his work, Nauman emphasises the limitations of our capacity to define ourselves. He stresses this impossibility in a way that recalls the absurd, but induces astonishment rather than despair.

These four case studies have attempted to extract a central point: the acute perception of the absurdity of life comes from a sense of existential solitude, but it is by defining and defying this feeling that it is possible to live with it. Kierkegaard's work deals with his difficulty to connect with a system of belief that gives one a profound sense of belonging and meaning—and without which life is despair. Camus uses this lack of an inherent meaning to make the case for a new, shared ethic of responsibility and duty. For Houellebecq, it is precisely due to this absence of community and meaning that the world has become so miserable. He insists on the vapidness of life, nevertheless it is enshrined within a coherent work

of art. Similarly, Nauman's work takes his struggle to define his existence as both its motivating principle and subject. In this way he moves beyond his own contingency and makes work that is communicative, even celebratory. It is fitting that Kierkegaard deemed the aesthetic to be the meaningless dead end of life without religion, since it is the aesthetic that gives the absurd its redemption.

Images



Figure 1. Bruce Nauman, *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*, 1967-68, 16mm film transferred to video (black and white, silent), 10 min, Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix, New York.



Figure 2. Bruce Nauman, *Playing A Note on the Violin While I Walk Around the Studio*, 1967-68, 16mm film transferred to video (black and white, sound), 10 min, Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix, New York.

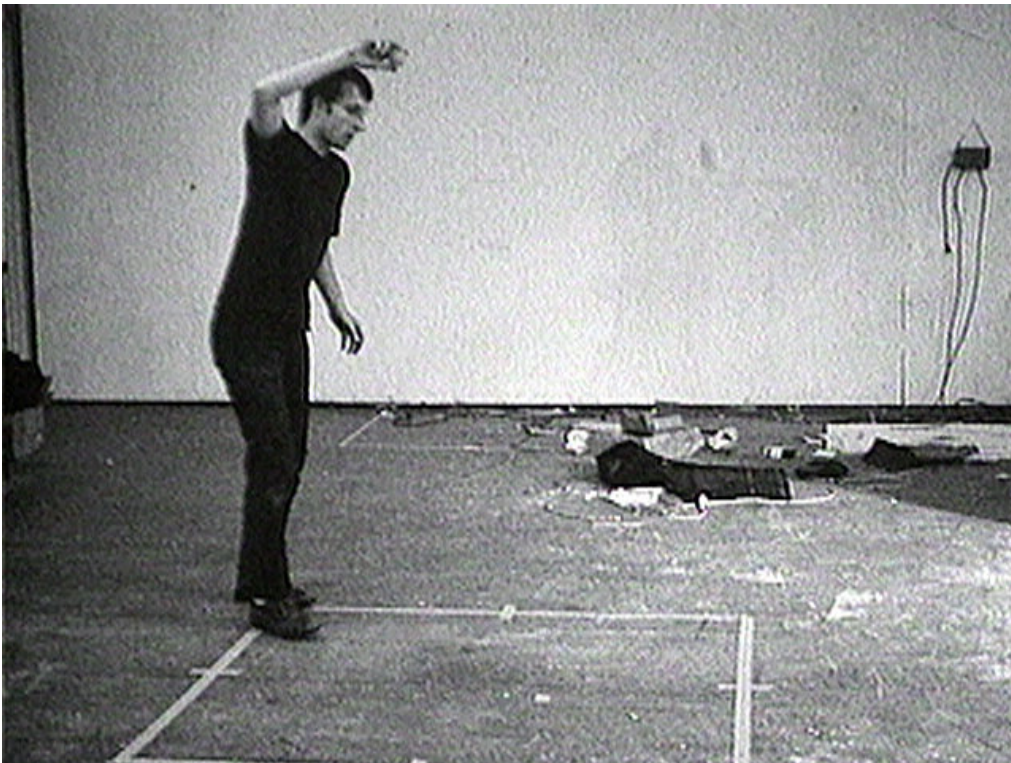


Figure 3. Bruce Nauman, *Bouncing Two Balls Between the Floor and Ceiling with Changing Rhythms*, 1967-68, 16mm film transferred to video (black and white, sound), 10 min, Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix, New York.



Figure 4. Bruce Nauman, *Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)*, 1968, Video (black and white, sound), 60 min, Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix, New York.



Figure 5. Bruce Nauman, *Clown Torture*, 1987, Six channel video (colour, sound, two projections, four monitors), 62 min (length of longest video), The Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 6. Bruce Nauman, *Shit in Your Hat/Head on a Chair*, 1990, Video projection, chair, wax head, screen and steel cable, Dimensions variable, Collection of Contemporary Art Fundació 'la Caixa', Barcelona.



Figure 7. Bruce Nauman, *A rose has no teeth*, 1966, Lead plaque, 19 x 20.4 x 5.6cm, Daros collection, Switzerland.



Figure 8. Ugo Rondinone, *Where Do We Go From Here?*, 1996, Four channel video (colour, sound), Various durations, Fond National d'art contemporain, Paris.



Figure 9. Bruce Nauman, *Anthro/Socio (Rinde Facing Camera)*, 1991, Six channel video (colour, sound), Various durations, Cartier Foundation, Paris.



Figure 10. Paul Mumme, *Man with Umbrella*, 2005, Standard definition video (colour, sound), Infinite loop, Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 11. Paul Mumme, *What Have You*, 2015, High definition video (colour, sound), Infinite loop, Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 12. Paul Mumme, *Something from Nothing*, 2015, High definition video (colour, sound), Infinite loop, Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 13. Paul Mumme, *Green Bags* (from the *Dr Nobody* series), 2013, Webcam video (colour, sound), 8:16 min, Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 14. Paul Mumme, *Earthmover*, 2007, High Definition Video (colour, sound), Infinite loop, Courtesy of the artist.

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