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# The Burden of Knowing: Camus, Qohelet, and the Limitations of Human Reason

Justin K. Morgan

*Liberty University*, [jkmorgan2@liberty.edu](mailto:jkmorgan2@liberty.edu)

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# The Burden of Knowing: Camus, Qohelet, and the Limitations of Human Reason

## **Abstract**

In one of the most influential works of the twentieth century, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus writes this: “This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. This world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction.” Here, Camus addresses what he believes to be one of the main sources of the absurd: the limitations of human reason. He claims that his inability to fully understand human reality creates a gap between his existence and its meaning, and, in effect, renders the whole of human experience as absurd. Because Camus makes these conclusions from a purely atheistic position, it would seem that his notion of the absurd is incompatible with a theistic understanding of the human condition. Interestingly, however, the main speaker of the ancient Hebrew wisdom book *Ecclesiastes*, Qohelet, also concludes that the limits of human knowledge give life a sense of absurdity. Although Camus (an atheist) and Qohelet (a theist) begin with different assumptions regarding the existence of God—the very Being who gives meaning and clarity to his creation—their similar conclusions reveal an unlikely compatibility between atheistic and theistic attitudes towards the human predicament. While Camus and Qohelet recognize that the world cannot be explained by human reasoning, and is therefore absurd, they each conclude that uncertainty and human limitations may prompt a certain liberation and solace that allows them to move beyond the absurd. This curious parallel between Camus’s modern existential attitudes in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and the ancient Hebraic wisdom of *Ecclesiastes* show that the awareness of the limitation of human reason may compel man to live authentically and passionately despite the seeming unreasonableness of his life.

## **Keywords**

Albert Camus, Ecclesiastes, Absurd, Qohelet

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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## INTRODUCTION

In one of the most influential works of the twentieth century, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus writes this: “This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. This world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction.”<sup>1</sup> Here, Camus addresses what he believes to be one of the main sources of the absurd: the limitations of human reason. He claims that his inability to fully understand human reality creates a gap between his existence and its meaning, and, in effect, renders the whole of human experience as *absurd*. Because Camus makes these conclusions from a purely atheistic position, it would seem that his notion of the absurd is incompatible with a theistic understanding of the human condition. Interestingly, however, the main speaker of the ancient Hebrew wisdom book *Ecclesiastes*, Qohelet, also concludes that the limits of human knowledge give life a sense of absurdity. Although Camus (an atheist) and Qohelet (a theist) begin with different assumptions regarding the existence of God—the very Being who potentially gives meaning and clarity to his creation—their similar conclusions reveal an unlikely compatibility between atheistic and theistic attitudes towards the human predicament. While Camus and Qohelet recognize that the world cannot be explained by human reasoning, and is therefore absurd, they each conclude that uncertainty and human limitations may prompt a certain liberation and solace that allows them to move beyond the absurd. This curious parallel between Camus’ modern existential attitudes in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and the ancient Hebraic wisdom of *Ecclesiastes* show that the *awareness* of the limitation of human reason may compel man to live authentically and passionately despite the seeming unreasonableness of his life.

## CAMUS’ PHILOSOPHY OF THE ABSURD

Camus begins *The Myth of Sisyphus* with the following unnerving statements:

There is but one truly philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer.<sup>2</sup>

It is clear from these opening lines that Camus is interested in the most crucial of questions: the question of human existence, the meaning-of-life itself. He later stresses that “the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions,”<sup>3</sup> and before any

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage, 1960), 19.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

sensitive human being determines *how* to live, he must decide whether he *should* live in the first place; he must determine if living is “worth the trouble.”<sup>4</sup>

In raising these questions, Camus addresses one of the central predicaments of the modern man: the absurd. “The absurd,” he writes, “is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.”<sup>5</sup> The absurd is not found in man or in a godless universe, but in their *coexistence*, in the tension between two polarized realities: the reality that man demands the world to make sense, and the reality that the world is irrational. The absurd is, essentially, the final product of an unmet expectation, an upset possibility, an unfulfilled desire—man demands that there be meaning in life, clarity and purpose in this world, but the universe is silent and indifferent to his demands.

In his description of the absurd, Camus suggests that one of the main sources of the absurd is the limitation of human reason, and, perhaps more specifically, the *expectation* for human reason to provide clarity and cohesion to make sense of the world and human experiences. Camus, however, asserts that both uncertainty and unintelligibility make man question his meaning and purpose in life, and, therefore render human existence nonsensical: “Everything,” he finally says, “contributes to the spreading of confusion;”<sup>6</sup> the lack of knowledge prohibits man from grasping the meaning of things, if there is any meaning to be grasped at all, and the limits of human reason, in turn, make the world irrational. In addition to the notion that man’s reason and ability to grasp reality is limited, Camus’ equally expresses his desire and longing to understand the nature of his world: man “feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason;” man longs for meaning and purpose, but he “stands face to face with the irrational;” he longs for reason, but “[t]his world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said...what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart.”<sup>7</sup> He expresses the disappointment he feels when this longing is not satisfied: “I want everything to be explained to me or nothing. And the reason is impotent when it hears this cry from the heart. The mind aroused by this insistence seeks and finds nothing but contradictions and nonsense. What I fail to understand is nonsense.”<sup>8</sup> One of the most important passages concerning Camus’ attitude toward the limits of human reason needs to be quoted in its entirety:

What I know, what is certain, what I cannot deny, what I cannot reject—this is what counts. I can negate everything of that part of me that lives on vague nostalgias, except this desire for unity, this longing to solve, this need for clarity and cohesion. I can refute everything in the world surround me that offends or enraptures me, except this chaos, this sovereign chance, and this divine equivalence with springs from anarchy. I do not know if this world has

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 27.

a meaning which transcends it. But I do know that, if such a meaning exists, I do not know it and that it is impossible me just now to know it.<sup>9</sup>

Camus even admits that the “feeling of absurdity” itself is “elusive,”<sup>10</sup> and thus this “feeling of absurdity” makes man an “alien” and “stranger” to himself, to his fellow men, and to the world.<sup>11</sup> Essentially, as he confronts the absurd, man becomes fully aware of both his condition and fate: he is born (without his permission) into a world (of which he does not approve) with no inherent meaning or purpose (though he desires them) and he is condemned to struggle through an ephemeral existence of anxiety and suffering that only guarantees a grave. Man realizes that he is neither home nor homebound, but *homeless* in both life and death, forever lost in a universe of no inherent meaning or truth. Human existence, Camus concludes, is nothing more than a meaningless and momentary “field of being.”<sup>12</sup>

It is both this consciousness of and confrontation with the absurd that compel Camus—or any honest person for that matter—to determine whether or not life is worth living at all. The tension and discrepancy between desire and reality, and that hopeless longing for an irrational world to be rational, lead Camus to face the problem of suicide: “Does the absurd dictate death?”<sup>13</sup> Should man continue living in an inherently meaningless universe? “This problem,” Camus asserts, “must be given priority over others, outside all methods of thought and all exercises of the disinterested mind.”<sup>14</sup> The answer to this question, for Camus, is both simple and complex; the problem, he says, “may seem both simple and insoluble.”<sup>15</sup> In the preface to *The Myth of Sisyphus*,<sup>16</sup> Camus states clearly that he will address the “problem of suicide...without the aid of eternal values.”<sup>17</sup> His conclusion: “The answer, underlying and appearing through the paradoxes which cover it, is this: even if one does not believe in God, suicide is not legitimate.”<sup>18</sup> Camus responds to the problem of the absurd without the need of God, but instead with a description of his ideal man—the absurd man. He argues that despite the evils, uncertainties, and absurdities of a godless universe, the absurd man can still accept and live in a world without ultimate purpose. The absurd man may valiantly evade the illegitimate act of suicide by embracing the struggle of life and choosing to live an authentic and passionate life. Suicide, to Camus, is dishonest and a cowardly rejection of freedom; it is confession and surrender, and if a man kills himself he can no longer honestly

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>12</sup> William Barrett, *Irrational Man* (New York: Anchor, 1990), 220.

<sup>13</sup> Camus, *Myth* 9.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>16</sup> This preface first appeared in Justin O’Brien’s English translation in 1955, fifteen years after Camus wrote *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., v.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., v.

confront the absurd, and therefore he is overcome by fate itself.<sup>19</sup>

### CONNECTING CAMUS AND QOHELET

In light of the above points, there is no doubt that atheism is at the foundation of Camus' thought; in fact, Camus acknowledges that the very absence of God makes life both incoherent and meaningless: "Up to now man derived his coherence from his Creator. But from the moment that he consecrates his rupture with Him, he finds himself delivered over to the fleeting moment, the passing days, and to wasted sensibility."<sup>20</sup> The rejection of a God-Creator; the disbelief in the afterlife; the loss of hope and eternal values; the view that life is meaningless and human action is futile—these claims describe the world of a man without God. Camus devoted much of his literary work to critiquing religion, namely the claims of Christianity, and many of his works contain anti-religious undertones. *The Rebel* and *The Plague*, for example, focus on the incomprehensible fact that useless evil and suffering exist in a god-governed world, and that Christianity itself cannot fight against injustice without fighting against the very God who allows it. The absurd heroes of *The Stranger*, *The Plague*, and *Caligula* are unapologetic atheists who both reject Christianity and judge its values and doctrines as useless and contradictory. Yet even though Camus denies the existence of God, eternal values, and an afterlife, he asserts that the absurd man can embrace the meaninglessness of life and still find fulfillment in his existence. To a theist, who receives his meaning from God, this response may not entirely make sense.

But it is exactly this response, this *will to live* in the face of the absurd, that makes the atheist Camus curiously similar to the theist Qohelet<sup>21</sup> in the Old Testament book *Ecclesiastes*. Richard Akeroyd notes that there is a "striking similarity between the thoughts of Sisyphus about the absurdity of life and the words of Solomon concerning vanity in *Ecclesiastes*. Both conclude that, from man's standpoint at least, life is a closed cycle with no evident purpose...; but both also agree that there is contentment to be found in living."<sup>22</sup> What is peculiar about this similarity is that, unlike the modern atheistic framework of Camus' writings, ancient Hebraic wisdom literature emerged from a pre-modern culture rooted in the belief in God. However, although *Ecclesiastes* was written approximately 935

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>20</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bonar (New York: Vintage, 1960), 51.

<sup>21</sup> There is much debate over the exact authorship of *Ecclesiastes*. Many scholars attribute Solomonic authorship while others argue for either an unknown writer before or after Solomon simply known as Qohelet. Due to the ambiguity of and general disagreements on authorship, scholars and commentators often use the Hebrew *qohelet* as used in the original text, which literally means "public speaker," "gatherer" or "debater," but translates as "preacher" or "teacher" in most English translations. For the purpose of this paper, exact authorship or an in-depth biographical study is not a primary concern, thus I will use "Qohelet."

<sup>22</sup> Richard H. Akeroyd, *The Spiritual Quest of Albert Camus* (Tuscaloosa, AL: Portals, 1976), 25.

B.C.,<sup>23</sup> nearly three millennia before the modern period, its themes and tones sound curiously modern; the main speaker, Qohelet, wrestles with human predicaments that would later define Western man of the twentieth century: alienation, anxiety, and doubt caused by confrontation with the absurdity of suffering and death.<sup>24</sup> Despite his belief in God, Qohelet outlines the despair and uncertainty that he has experienced throughout his life “under the sun,” the same feelings of absurdity Camus expresses in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

An important parallel between these two works lies in the meaning and usage of the word “absurd” itself. In his notable work *Qohelet and his Contradictions*, Michael V. Fox translates the Hebrew *hebel* (meaningless or vanity) as synonymous to Camus’ “absurd.” Fox argues that both Qohelet and Camus describe the world and the human predicament in a similar way. Fox defines both *hebel* and “absurd” as “a disparity between two phenomena that are supposed to be joined by a link of harmony or causality but are actually disjunct or even conflicting.”<sup>25</sup> The phrase “supposed to be” in Fox’s definition suggests that the absurd is the result of a disappointment or an unmet expectation; life is absurd because life is not as it is “supposed to be.” Interestingly, both the absurd man—an atheist—and Qohelet—a theist—realize this unmet expectation. In “The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet,” Fox argues that the discrepancy Qohelet discovers between his expectations and reality is the same feeling of absurdity for Sisyphus. Fox also links this feeling of absurdity to the limitations of human reason. Both Camus’ “absurd” and Qohelet’s *hebel*, he explains, are “an affront to reason, in the broad sense of the human faculty that looks for order in the world about us. The quality of absurdity does not inhere in a being, act, or event in and of itself (though these may be called ‘absurd’), but rather in the tension between a certain reality and a framework of expectations.”<sup>26</sup> Fox also explains that “to call something ‘absurd’ is to claim a certain understanding of its nature: it is *contrary to reason*.”<sup>27</sup>

On a separate but similar note, Northrop Frye makes the important point that Qohelet uses *hebel* metaphorically, as a “metaphorical kernel of fog, mist, vapor, or breath.”<sup>28</sup> Frye concludes that while Qohelet figuratively describes all of human experience as a mist or vapor, he literally means that all things are “full of

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<sup>23</sup> Many Bible historians disagree on the exact date of the authorship. Some scholars argue for a date as late as 935 B.C.E. while others argue for a date as early as 175 to 150 B.C.E. I personally take the view of an early ninth century B.C.E. date. But, like the authorship, the exact date of the text is not a primary concern for the purpose of this paper.

<sup>24</sup> Donald A. Crosby notes that “the Book of Ecclesiastes predates by over two thousand years the emergence of the ‘modern mind’ (119). Tremper Longman III describes Qohelet as sounding “incredibly modern. He express[es] the uncertainty and anxiety of our own age” (xiii); he “sounds so modern because he so vividly captures the despair of a world without God. The difference, though, is that the modern world believes that God does not exist; Qohelet believed that God existed but questioned his love and concern” (40).

<sup>25</sup> Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, (Decatur, GA: Almond, 1989), 31.

<sup>26</sup> Fox, “The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105. 3 (September 1986), 409, emphasis mine.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 413, emphasis mine.

<sup>28</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: the Bible and Literature* (Toronto: APC, 1982), 123).

emptiness,”<sup>29</sup> including the benefits and purposes of gaining knowledge and seeking wisdom. Frye links this metaphor of fog to the notion of emptiness and thus concludes that Qohelet sees life as a mystery and something to find a way through, “and that the way of wisdom is the way out.”<sup>30</sup> This, however, as I shall point out, is exactly what makes life “absurd” for Qohelet and Camus; the very solution to the riddle of life—the very hope that man might make sense of the world through wisdom, reason, knowledge—is in itself essentially futile, for human reason and knowledge do not, as Camus and Qohelet discover, finally help man grasp the fullness of reality.

As I have been suggesting thus far, human reason by itself, according to Camus, cannot explain or interpret the absurdities of the world: “Reason may describe nature but cannot explain it...To the man who will not forget his confrontation with the absurd, ‘reason is vain and there is nothing beyond reason.’”<sup>31</sup> Camus and his philosophy of the absurd, therefore, are “interested in pointing to the inadequacy of reason,”<sup>32</sup> and like Camus, Qohelet is a skeptic of human reason and seriously doubts the purpose or advantage of seeking concrete knowledge in an abstract world. In 8.16-17, he addresses man’s inability to grasp the workings of God when he says, “When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one’s eyes see sleep, then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.”<sup>33</sup> He states in 3.10-12, “I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that *he cannot find out what God has done* from the beginning to the end” (emphasis mine). In one passage in particular, Qohelet not only expresses his frustration with the fact that the knowledge and wisdom he has acquired—that is, what he has seen, observed, and experienced—cannot solve the problems that he faces, but also the fact that this is the way in which God has willed it. In 1.13-15, he states:

And I applied in my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.

Here, it is not just the nature of the world or the human condition that is absurd to

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>31</sup> Barnes, 166.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>33</sup> Here and hereafter, scripture verses are quoted from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version: Containing the Old and New Testaments* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002).



Qohelet, but the very acts of God himself. Fox notes that Qohelet describes “God’s will” as “not merely mysterious and inscrutable,” but “a violation of reason.”<sup>34</sup> Qohelet realizes that man is unable to understand the full nature of things or predict the future, and this fact is an “affront to his reason,” his desires, and his expectations.

Qohelet also addresses the limits of human reason through a series of rhetorical questions. The Hebrew phrase *mi yodea*, translated as the rhetorical question “who knows?”, occurs four times throughout the book, expressing a skeptical and negative view of knowledge and human capabilities. In 2.19 Qohelet asks, “And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool?” In 3.21 he asks, “Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?” In 8.7 he states, “For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be?” In 6.12 he connects this epistemological skepticism with the meaninglessness of life through his use of the word “shadow”: “For who knows what is good for a man during *his* lifetime, *during* the few years of his futile life? He will spend them like a shadow. For who can tell a man what will be after him under the sun?” The word “shadow” here emphasizes the “frailty of human beings,” “brevity of human life,” and “ephemerality.”<sup>35</sup> If man is but a shadow or dark passing existence “under the sun,” then his life does not give him the efficient time he needs in order to know how he should live. This is the same realization Camus expresses when he speaks of the *uncertainty* of the future yet the *certainty* that “there is no afterlife.”<sup>36</sup> For Qohelet, the existence of a superior God juxtaposed to the existence of depraved human beings does not immediately unify life but makes life more complex and mysterious. Humans live entrapped in the earthly realm, left to deal with its problems and evils: “Life with its difficulties and vicissitudes as a result of the Fall is a puzzle that finite man cannot figure out and it frustrates [him] in his search for meaning and purpose. In his attempt to master life, Qohelet eventually realizes with defeated expectations that he cannot understand God’s scheme of things.”<sup>37</sup> Like Qohelet, Camus concludes that “nothing is clear, all is chaos, that all man has is his lucidity and his definite knowledge of the walls surround him.”<sup>38</sup> What Qohelet and Camus are *certain* of is their *uncertainty*; what they *do know* is that they *do not know*. Yet despite their ignorance and uncertainty, they both feel a similar longing to rise up and see what lies on the “other side of the curtain,” to discover what is “behind the universe,” all the while realizing that the mind of man is *crippled* and cannot find these things out. Man’s ignorance of the meaning of his life, as well as his ignorance of his own present duties and future destiny, renders his existence as absurd—he is utterly directionless and feels disconnected from his world and creator.

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<sup>34</sup> Fox, “The Meaning” 425.

<sup>35</sup> Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmam, 1998), 178.

<sup>36</sup> Camus, *Myth* 58.

<sup>37</sup> Robert McCabe, “The Message of Ecclesiastes,” *DBSJ* 1 (Spring 1996), 92.

<sup>38</sup> Camus, *Myth* 27.

Throughout *Ecclesiastes*, Qohelet complains about the same problems and anxieties caused by the same uncertainty and a lack of knowledge that Camus addresses in length. One Old Testament scholar explains that Qohelet “denies that it is possible to know what is *good* in life” and “rejects the possibility of knowing the absolute good over against the relative good.”<sup>39</sup> This uncertainty is a problem for man for two reasons. First, without the knowledge of goodness, how can man *be* good without *knowing* what is good? Secondly, even if he were to have the knowledge of goodness, how would he know that this is what he *should* pursue? That man feels directionless in a world he cannot already fully comprehend is a twofold absurdity. Interestingly, however, Qohelet suggests that more knowledge and certainty would only increase his experience of the absurd and thus create in him more alienation and angst. He says in 1.18, “For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.” Here, it seems that as a man grows more knowledgeable of the world, more aware of his existence and the condition of his reality, there is more dissatisfaction and *mental agony*. But it is here that we may begin to see how the limits of human reason become liberating and practical. This important notion, however, I will address later.

What seems to upset Qohelet’s expectations the most, or what is perhaps to him the most staggering “affront to reason,” is that both the wise man and the fool experience the same destiny, the same troubles; though one obtains knowledge and the other resides in the dark, both experience the same inadequacies of their mortal and finite conditions. In 2.14-17 Qohelet states:

The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. Then I said in my heart, ‘What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?’...How the wise dies just like the fool! O I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

Qohelet’s search for truth and meaning is utterly pointless because his fate is the same as the fool’s. Because Qohelet, despite his wisdom, exists on the same level as the irrational man, he concludes that even knowledge and the certainty of things are ultimately meaningless; wisdom and knowledge serve no ultimate purpose or offer no true benefit. In a similar vein, Qohelet is dumbfounded “that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous.”<sup>40</sup> Here is the ever-problematic question, “why do bad things happen to good people?” This reversal of consequence and expectation is a complete irrationality, an absolute contradiction to reason. The absurdity of existence for Qohelet seems to come from the fact that the very God of all reason creates human experiences that neither

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<sup>39</sup> Longman, 178.

<sup>40</sup> 8.17.

make sense nor consist of the conclusions that reason leads us to expect.

#### TRANSCENDING THE ABSURD THROUGH THE HEBRAIC TRADITION

But how do Camus and Qohelet reconcile their will to live passionately with the absurd and their longing for clarity? How do they transcend the limitations of human reason and the logical consequences of the absurd—that life is meaningless—and still conclude that life should still be lived? If reason can describe nature but cannot explain the apparent absurdities of human experience, how can a mere awareness of the absurd lead one to embrace existence? Is the affirmation of life a legitimate possibility for the limited and alienated individual? Camus and Qohelet have certainly discovered a path through the maze of confusion. Furthermore, they have conjured enough commitment to their earthly lives in order to embrace its brokenness. To begin to understand their responses, we must look deeply into the foundations and origins of their philosophical thought. Though Camus’s philosophical heritage is clearly in the Greco-Roman-Western tradition, he is influenced by the Hebraic tradition via Christianity. In fact, it is very helpful to understand Camus’ conclusions as a thinker in the Hebraic tradition. Matthew Arnold and William Barrett’s classic and insightful analyses of Hebraism and Hellenism illuminate the parallels between Camus and Qohelet.

In his classic set of critical essays, *Culture and Anarchy*, Matthew Arnold defines Hebraism and Hellenism as two major forces that have shaped Western culture. Throughout the history of Western man, these two traditions have been the most fundamental paradigms through which one attempts to overcome the barriers, limitations, and finitude of his condition. They are, explains Arnold, essentially “spiritual disciplines” through which man seeks authentic existence and harmony with himself, whose final aim is “man’s perfection or salvation.”<sup>41</sup> Though these traditions move toward a common end, their means and values differ greatly. The Hellenist discovers authentic existence specifically through abstraction, reason, and knowledge.<sup>42</sup> He praises understanding, the act of “knowing” (specifically knowing the grounds, meaning, and purpose for right acting) and “clear intelligence.”<sup>43</sup> The Hebraic tradition, on the other hand, seeks to avoid abstractions and focuses instead on a concrete way of living. It consists of an “energy driving at practice,” a “paramount sense of the obligation of duty, self-control, and work, this earnestness in going manfully with the best light we have, as one force.”<sup>44</sup> For the Hebrew, authentic existence arises out of the “exercise of will,” in his passionate, practical, and productive living.<sup>45</sup>

It is precisely in this distinction between the man of *passion* and the man of

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<sup>41</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, Ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge, UK: UP of Cambridge. 2002), 127.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>45</sup> Stefan Collini, Introduction, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, Ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge, UK: UP of Cambridge. 2002), xx.

*reason* that the modern Camus parallels the ancient Qohelet. In *Irrational Man*, Barrett argues that modern existential thought finds its roots in the Hebraic tradition. He traces the origins and developments of existentialism by examining the central distinction between Hellenism and Hebraism: the difference between *knowing* and *doing*. Barrett notes that the Hebraic man is “concerned with practice, the Greek with knowledge. Right conduct is the ultimate concern of the Hebrew, right thinking that of the Greek.”<sup>46</sup> The biblical Hebraic man, figures such as Abraham, Job, the psalmists, and Qohelet, does not rely on human reason in order to discover the meaning and essence of life—that which transcends the human world. Instead, the Hebrew realizes the inadequacy of his reason and his inability to know fully the ways of God. He chooses to exist in that inadequacy in order to accept his limitations and lack of knowledge. “The Hebrew,” Barrett explains, “proceeds not by way of reason but by the confrontation of the whole man ... in the fullness and violence of his passion with the unknowable and overwhelming God.”<sup>47</sup> The key word here that helps us connect the modern Camus to the ancient Hebrew writer is “confrontation.” Through a confrontation with their limited condition and the absurd, Camus and Qohelet experience a true moment of enlightenment, an honest interaction with reality. Thus, it is through this *confrontation*—the *struggle* of life itself—that man may know who he is in the world. What once darkened the mind of man enlightens him. Qohelet’s authentic confrontation with reality is echoed centuries later in Camus’ modern world. Robert Royal convincingly argues in “The Other Camus,” that the “radical confrontation with the absurd was an absolute necessity in the 20th century, but only as a first step toward a fuller vision of human meaning and value.”<sup>48</sup>

Arnold and Barrett’s description of the Hebraic tradition explains Qohelet’s ironic reaction to the vanity of his life and Camus’ life-affirming response to the absurd. Each thinker seeks salvation from his alienation. Camus seeks a means to evade suicide and find the strength to live a meaningless life. Qohelet longs for a sense of value in his daily toil and seeks answers for the contradictions and injustices he witnesses. Once they have realized their limitations and that life works against their reason, they must seek a legitimate means to exist. They must choose a mode of being-in-the-world. For the Hebrew, his emphasis on right practice and passionate living is born of his inadequate thinking. He cannot see things as they really are through reason; he overcomes alienation rather through the blood and bones of his physical life, through anger, confusion, and fear, and through his fervent bond with the Being whom he can never entirely, intellectually know. This kind of knowledge a man has only through living, not reasoning, and even in the end he cannot always say what exactly it is that he knows.<sup>49</sup>

These notions of the Hebraic man also translate into Camus’ attitude toward the modern predicament. He ultimately rejects the Hellenistic path of knowing as a

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<sup>46</sup> Barrett, 70.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 73.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Royal, “The Other Camus.” *The Wilson Quarterly* 19.4 (Autumn 1995), 56.

<sup>49</sup> Barrett, 79.

way of being-in-the-world, and thus becomes a man of *action*—a man of *doing*. Camus once remarked: “I am not a philosopher, because I don’t believe in reason enough to believe in a system. What interests me is knowing how we must behave.”<sup>50</sup> Although much of Western philosophy has been an attempt to “make everything clear,” Camus considers it “logically impossible to construct an absolute and exclusive view of reality.”<sup>51</sup> However, this logical impossibility does not lead to a nihilistic denial of reality or a philosophy of despair, but rather a positive freedom that allows man to recognize and embrace a realistic view of life; a view that necessitates action and participation in order to authenticate human existence. Though he realizes the limits of the mind, Camus concludes that man should not limit his body and negate life through passivity; he understands that although he does not find meaning and clarity, “[t]he mind, when it reaches its limits, must make a judgment and choose its conclusions.”<sup>52</sup> Action consequentially follows as limitation gives man occasion to exert his will; to eject himself from the stagnant domain of reflective abstraction. Instead he creates a concrete world in which he may live and move and breathe. Camus finds that the constant and conscious awareness that he cannot grasp the fullness of reality does not imprison him, but liberates him from the burden of knowing.

All of this implies that though Camus and Qohelet begin with the absurd or *hebel* as an all-encompassing fact of human reality, they do not end there. Camus once criticized anyone for “thinking that life is tragic because it is wretched,” and instead argued that the “realization that life is absurd cannot be an end in itself but only a beginning...It is not the discovery which is interesting...but the consequences and rules for actions which can be drawn from it.”<sup>53</sup> Camus is not so much concerned with what causes absurdity as he is with its effects; he focuses on how man should respond to it. He recognizes that his absurd condition “awakens consciousness and provokes what follows.”<sup>54</sup> He admits that the very certainty of his uncertainty unlocks the truth of his condition, that the “inability to understand becomes the existence that illuminates everything.”<sup>55</sup> Shandon L. Guthrie also points out that “[i]t’s our awareness of this predicament that results in the absurdity of life. But Camus’ story does not end there. He does want to emphasize that our awareness of this vicious cycle in itself prompts victory: ‘Being aware of one’s life, one’s revolt, one’s freedom, and to the maximum, is living, and to the maximum.’”<sup>56</sup> Although Sisyphus does not know the meaning of his “futile and

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<sup>50</sup> Oliver Todd, *Albert Camus: A Life*, trans. Benjamin Ivry (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 408.

<sup>51</sup> Robert C. Trundle, *Beyond Absurdity: The Philosophy of Albert Camus* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), 75.

<sup>52</sup> Camus, *Myth*, 27.

<sup>53</sup> qtd. in John Foley, *Albert Camus: From Absurd to Revolt* (Montreal: UP of McGill-Queen, 2008), 6.

<sup>54</sup> Camus, *Myth*, 11.

<sup>55</sup> Barrett, 73.

<sup>56</sup> Shandon L. Guthrie, “Atheism, Christianity, and the Meaning of Life.” Regis University, Denver, CO. (14 September 2008).

hopeless labor,”<sup>57</sup> he does know “the whole extent of his wretched condition,” and in this knowledge he is victorious.<sup>58</sup> He does not find his *reason* for living in the dim *reasoning* of his mind. Rather, in his awareness of the absurd and the limits of human reason, he becomes interested in what he *can* know. He knows that he exists and that the world exists. He knows he can act and live with passion.

Similarly, Qohelet grapples with a fallen world in which things “crooked cannot be made straight.”<sup>59</sup> But he does not accept this fact and turn toward despair. After asking the rhetorical question, “Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?” Qohelet immediately responds with a contented embrace of all that he has—his toil: “So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot.”<sup>60</sup> Here, Qohelet comes to terms with the human condition—his limitations and mortality—and in the awareness of his “lot” he finds a certain solace and liberation through which he is able to “rejoice in his work.” Aware of what he does not know, he turns to action, work—his daily existence. He simply goes on living without any resolve or answer to his questions. Qohelet contends that a mere spectatorial account of the world cannot provide a full explanation of human reality. He transforms from a man of *knowing* to a man of *doing*.

Similarly, Camus contends that the touchstone of human inquiry is not through cognitive powers but through the powers of personal experience and relationships. An emphasis on the powers of reason disparages the emotional, and even the spiritual dimension of human beings. He writes that “reasoning...leaves out altogether the most widespread spiritual attitude of our enlightened age.”<sup>61</sup> Here, Camus uncovers the positive implications buried beneath the alienation, nothingness, and absurdity that humans experience, and thus he defines his existence as a participator *in* the world rather than a spectator *of* the world—that is, he may truly understand himself through *acting* and *doing* rather than *thinking* and *knowing*. In the attempt to organize the universe and the projects of men, the Hellenist overlooks the limits of his system building. He does not notice how the sciences cannot humanize the universe or explain away its absurdities. Camus and Qohelet, however, recognize that authentic existence entails an honest participation in the world, a confrontation with the absurd, and a utilization of one’s freedom—namely, the choice to live. In his essay “Kohleth and Camus: Two Views of Achievement,” Matthew J. Schwartz explains that man’s very decision to live and work authenticates existence. For Qohelet and the absurd man, “[t]he world seems

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<sup>57</sup> Camus, *Myth*, 119.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>59</sup> 1.15.

<sup>60</sup> 3.21-22. Qohelet repeatedly reacts to *hebel* with the charge to find pleasure in life and to live life to its fullest. For example, he writes in 2.24, “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil;” in 3.12, “I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live;” in 8.15, “And I commend joy, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.”

<sup>61</sup> Camus, *Myth*, 29.

alien and threatening, and only by means of his heroic achievements can the hero become worthy to surpass or transcend these limitations.”<sup>62</sup>

What is true for both of these figures is that they cannot change their situation. What they can do is what Camus calls “revolt.” Revolt, the first of three positions consequent to a confrontation with the absurd (the other two are Freedom and Passion), is “not a refusal to accept the absurd but a decision to live keeping it constantly before one.”<sup>63</sup> In his revolt, the absurd man indirectly opposes the injustice and despair that the absurd gives him. He opposes these effects when he decides to keep living in spite of them. In other words, revolt is the “spirit of defiance in the face of the Absurd. More technically and less metaphorically, it is a spirit of opposition against any perceived unfairness, oppression, or indignity in the human condition.”<sup>64</sup> Moreover, revolt is a desire for the impossible: “it is Camus’ fundamental principle that man’s grandeur and possible happiness lie in his refusal to give up his desire for the impossible. If man is to save himself, he must never cease to revolt against the limits of his condition at the same time that he refuses to pretend that they are not there.”<sup>65</sup> Revolt, thus, is the honest awareness of human limits, and this is, in turn, an honest confrontation with the absurd, a refusal to defeat it or be defeated by it. For both Camus and Qohelet, it is the “the world that disappoints”<sup>66</sup> that compel them to “revolt” against their fate and choose life. It is in the consciousness of limited knowledge that they may truly live, and it is in *living* and *becoming*, rather than *thinking*, that they may transcend the absurdity of their existence.

There is certainly a sense of uneasiness in both Qohelet and Camus’ writings. Barrett points out that this uneasiness is a central characteristic in the man who questions God and confronts his alienation: “deep within the Biblical man,” he writes, “lurks a certain *uneasiness*, which is not to be found in the conceptions of man given us by the great Greek philosophers. This *uneasiness* points toward another, and more central, region of human existence than the contrast between doing and knowing, morality and reason,” namely the importance for man to honestly confront his finitude and mortality.<sup>67</sup> Camus, like the biblical man, does not seek to resolve the tensions of his absurd existence. Instead, he finds his meaning in the uneasiness his finitude creates. He recognizes that these tensions are necessary for him to confront and survive the truth of his condition, and, by doing so, he may transcend the paradoxical nature of the human experience. Out of the uneasiness of the mind Camus turns to the actions of the body—the flesh and blood of experience—and focuses on living passionately rather than relying on his reason to explain life to him. Interestingly, the limitations of human reason do not

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<sup>62</sup> Matthew J. Schwartz, “Kohleth and Camus: Two Views of Achievement,” *Judaism* 35 (1986), 31.

<sup>63</sup> Barnes, 165.

<sup>64</sup> David Simpson, “Albert Camus,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (21 March 2005), n. pag.

<sup>65</sup> Barrett, 165.

<sup>66</sup> Camus, *Myth*, 37.

<sup>67</sup> Barrett, 71.

create more despair for man, but instead lead him to a better grasp of what he knows; his humanness and ability to embrace his life.

The mysteries that remain unknown to Qohelet compel him to find “enjoyment” in his toil, the life he does have “under that sun.” The uneasiness Sisyphus feels as he climbs his mountain awakens his consciousness and evokes in him a “silent joy.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, in the end, like Qohelet, Sisyphus chooses life and joins the Hebraic tradition by discovering the very meaning of his life in the struggle to survive his endless toil; he embraces his condition, rejects surrender, and embodies the “Hebraic concept of the man of faith who is passionately committed to his mortal being.”<sup>69</sup> Sisyphus and Qohelet can only find true serenity the moment they come to terms with their relationship with the unsolvable mysteries of the universe. As Camus tells us, Sisyphus “*is*, as much through his passions as through his torture.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, the very thing that makes life absurd—the limits of his reason—is what keeps man alive on earth. It is the very inadequacy of his reason, that which once tormented him, which eventually redeems him. The awareness of his absurd state, as well as his honest willingness to confront it, authenticates his existence: “The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, Camus famously concludes at the end of the essay that the “struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart.”<sup>72</sup> Qohelet and Camus find a way to transcend the absurd by embracing what they do know—their potentiality as human agents who can act, eat, drink, and enjoy their work despite their limitations. They recognize alienation as a kind of triggering mechanism that compels the individual to transcend his finitude. He is interested not so much in overcoming his alienation by making the absurd universe his human home, but by making his confrontation and revolt against the absurd (and the alienation it creates) a “controlling experience”<sup>73</sup> that transforms his “alienation to unity.”<sup>74</sup>

When Camus says, “But I do know that, if such a meaning exists, I do not know it and that it is impossible me just now to know it,”<sup>75</sup> he qualifies this statement by using “just now,” thus, leaving “the door open both to the possibility of there being such a meaning somewhere and this being possibly communicable to him at some time in the future through some faculty or medium of which he hitherto had no experience.”<sup>76</sup> His inability to know or understand the meaning of things at the present moment does not “rule out the possibility of his arriving at such an understanding one day in the future though some medium presently

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<sup>68</sup> Camus, *Myth*, 125.

<sup>69</sup> Barrett, 76.

<sup>70</sup> Camus, *Myth*, 120.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>73</sup> Abraham Sagi, *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, (New York: Rodopi, 2002),

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>75</sup> Camus, *Myth*, 38.

<sup>76</sup> Akeroyd, 8.



unimaginable to him.”<sup>77</sup> It therefore becomes man’s limited human reason that compels him to keep living, because it is in living that he may gain a knowledge he would not have known before.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 38.

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