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Life at the Meridian: The Subjectivity of Ethics in the Works of Albert Camus and  
Friedrich Nietzsche

In the vibrant threshold of ideas and senses that is our world, life can frequently be paralyzed by dichotomy. This is, *or* that is. People often divide into various camps based on a certain unifying dogma, seeking objective faith in a specific institution, religion, or doctrine. A fairly prevalent conception that polarizes people is the belief or nonbelief in the existence of a god. While belief or nonbelief is not a problem within itself, it is a dangerous thing to readily accept dichotomies such as the Pascalian “God is, or God is not”<sup>1</sup> declaration without first contemplating the plethora of shades that could exist in-between or outside of these ends. Both Friedrich Nietzsche and Albert Camus worked ardently to expand and exhaust these traditional limits, flipping many classical ideas about ethics and morals on their heads. Before entering the treacherous depths of existential subjectivity, however, it is important to ask: can ethics can be unbound from its traditional rootedness in religious systems? If so, what contributions did Nietzsche make to liberate value from the shackles of Western morality? To what degree is Camus one of the “new philosophers” Nietzsche calls for in *On the Genealogy of Morals*?

In an attempt to demonstrate that ethics can and do exist vividly in the realm of the non-religious, this paper will begin by illustrating the metaphysical door Nietzsche opens through his use of aphorisms in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and his investigation of the history of Western

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<sup>1</sup> Pascal – *Pensées* – page 153

values in *On the Genealogy of Morals*. In these nihilistic inquiries Nietzsche collects and sorts values, razes traditional morals of the religious to the ground, and constructs a worldview based on an overman's (Übermensch) "will to power." While Nietzsche is opening a necessary and legitimate door, in reality this mindset is akin to Ivan Karamazov's "everything is permitted"<sup>2</sup> declaration that allows all actions, even those as extreme as murder. At this point Albert Camus responds to Nietzsche in his books *The Stranger*, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and *The Rebel* by re-imagining the deserted space beyond Nietzsche's door. By actively rejecting any type of unifying principle, be it nihilism, religion, or objective conclusions about the world, Camus advocates for an individualistic and ultimately subjective mode of thought. Within this imagined space one is fundamentally free but proportionally lonely and responsible for one's actions. Void of eternal hope and set free from traditional values, an individual is filled with the opportunity for creativity and constructs a universe for oneself.

In his works *On the Genealogy of Morals* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Friedrich Nietzsche contemplates the danger of accepting traditional Western values that have been passed down as accepted Truths. In *On the Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche begins by calling for a "critique of moral values, the value of...values themselves must first be called into question" (20). Morality, which is often synonymous with the "good," "just," and "correct" is inverted and sought after by Nietzsche as a "consequence, as a symptom, as mask, as tartufferie, as illness, as misunderstanding...as poison" (20). Nietzsche starts by tracing where the ideas of "good and evil" and "good and bad" derive from. He proposes that it was "the noble, powerful, high-stationed and high-minded...[who] established themselves and their actions as good...[and] first seized the right to create values and to coin names for values" (26). The "pathos of distance" (26)

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<sup>2</sup> Dostoevsky – *The Brothers Karamazov* page 263

between these nobles and their opposites, or plebeians, thus formed the contrast between what is “good” and what is “bad.” A fundamental weariness of objectivity is laced in with these words; Nietzsche does not believe that Truths exist by themselves but that those in power created values under the guise of Truth. Even from the beginning of his inquiry, Nietzsche derails the connotation of values by questioning the often accepted infrastructure. One is forced to ask: are values “good” within themselves or are they constructions by those in power to maintain said power? In this way Nietzsche commences collecting and sorting values, nudging a door open to a subjective land where he will soon attempt to raze religious values to the ground.

After questioning the value of “good” versus “bad,” Nietzsche continues to isolate “good” versus “evil.” He says that the conception of evil cultivated when the “priestly mode of valuation [branched]...off from the knightly-aristocratic and then developed into its opposite” (33). They did this by “invert[ing] the aristocratic value-equation (good = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy = beloved of God)...saying ‘the wretched alone are the good; the poor, impotent, lowly alone are the good...and you, the powerful and noble, are on the contrary the evil, the cruel...the godless to all eternity; and you shall be in all eternity the unblessed, accursed, and damned!’” (34). The previously marginalized plebeians in the noble caste system created a system of values so that *they* could both gain power, and maintain it. According to Nietzsche only then, in the priestly caste, did “man become an interesting animal...only here did the human soul in a higher sense acquire depth and become evil” (33). Here Nietzsche takes a traditional sentiment, a beatitude<sup>3</sup> from the Christian Bible, and questions its authority. He argues that the gentle, poor, pious, and weak are not innately “good” and that the rich, noble, powerful,

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:2 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

and strong are not “evil;” these valuations have been assigned by the priestly caste who crave power. This reasoning undermines religion and Christianity as the primary authority on Western morality and truth, thereby opening a space for new valuations.

In Part II of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche divulges in a rather intricate tracing of values where he explores terms such as “bad conscience,” “guilt,” and “justice;” however, a thorough retelling of his entire investigation is not necessary for this paper. Nietzsche is influential to the extent to which he begins flipping classically accepted values on their heads, reevaluating deeply-rooted institutions. The crux of this type of thinking, or Nietzsche’s methodology, comes when the religious and specifically Christian mindset is analyzed. Jesus of Nazareth, “the incarnate gospel of love...a ‘Redeemer’ who brought blessedness and victory to the poor” is first brought into the light as Nietzsche asks if he was not “seduction in its most uncanny and irresistible form” (35). Nietzsche posits that Jesus is a “part of the secret black art of truly *grand* politics of revenge” when the image of “God on the cross” is there “*for the salvation of man*” (35). As opposed to seeing Jesus, the supposed son of God, dying on the cross as the eternal sacrifice of love, Nietzsche argues that it is actually an act of ultimate revenge to subjugate the masses. The herd that forms waits for “the victory of God, of the *just* God, over the godless” (48). There is a certain degree of vengefulness here; heaven is promised to the believers while hell awaits those who refuse to join the “herd.” Nietzsche directly addresses Christians in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* when he says, “You who are virtuous still want to be paid! Do you want rewards for virtue, and heaven for earth, and the eternal for your today? And now you are angry with me because I teach that there is no reward and paymaster? And verily, I do not even teach that virtue is its own reward” (93). Here, a darker shade of the religious mindset is exposed. If the mob is “good” only out of fear of punishment and in anticipation of future bliss, is this

“goodness?” The value of value itself becomes debatable as Nietzsche slowly deconstructs existing systems based on “good” and “evil.” Nietzsche is highlighting that while one of faith may see Christianity as an institution of love, it can also be viewed as a cult of exclusivity and hate. Using this type of logic, Nietzsche razes traditional morals to the ground, interrogating existing institutions that were rarely questioned in this way before.

After systematically deconstructing traditional Western ideas about values, Nietzsche creates a desert of sorts, void of everything but a philosophy of nihilism, nothingness, and subjectivity. Speaking in aphorisms in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche begins to lyrically paint a new kind of philosopher to rule in this desert – the overman, or *Übermensch*. This work posits that “the overman is the meaning of the earth...[or rather] the overman shall be the meaning of the earth” (13). Nietzsche has hope that a new kind of godless man will emerge who will have a “will, not will to life but...will to power” (115). The overman when free and alone can master this will to power to the point where the “will” becomes creative; all will be in shambles “until the creative will says to it, ‘But thus I will it; thus shall I will it’” (141). It is now a thing of the past “to view nature as if it were a proof of the goodness and providence of a God; to interpret history to the glory of divine reason...as if everything were preordained, everything a sign” (*On the Genealogy of Morals* 161). The will to truth of the religious is replaced by the thrumming creative present and will to power of the overman. In a way, individualism is deified, filling the gap where the old notion of god was thrown out. Nietzsche, in the end, leaves both *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *On the Genealogy of Morals* rather open-ended, alluding to hopes of a “new philosopher” or overman to rule in the desert where the only subjective idea is this will to power. It is clear that Nietzsche’s thoughts are groundbreaking in that they deconstruct the

dominant narrative of Western morality in a very unique way. It remains to be seen, however, whether or not this philosophy is transferrable to reality or if it should be.

In his essay on metaphysical rebellion called *The Rebel*, Albert Camus delivers a lucid analysis of Nietzsche by holding his philosophy up to scrutiny by the unforgiving eyes of logic and history. First, it must be acknowledged that Nietzsche has undergone quite a bit of criticism, especially by his religious contemporaries. A common misconception surrounding Nietzsche is this idea that he wants to “kill God” when he says that “God is dead.” Camus points out, however, “contrary to the opinion of certain Christian critics, Nietzsche did not form a project to kill God. He found Him dead in the soul of his contemporaries” (68). As previously explored, Nietzsche is not concerned with this figure of “God” or traditional values but instead replaces “God” with this hope for the coming of the overman with a will to power. Camus, as opposed to certain religious critics, holds Nietzsche in deep reverence; however, it will be seen that he fundamentally disagrees with Nietzsche’s conclusions. In this way, Camus provides a unique insight into the world of Nietzsche, scrutinizing without the bias of religion, analyzing with creativity, and exploring with a genuine will to understand what repercussions Nietzschean thought has had on the individual and the world.

Camus’ criticism of Nietzsche begins on a strictly ideological level when he unravels to what extent pure nihilism is an appeal for unity and if it necessitates madness in the individual. To begin, Camus says,

“One hundred and fifty years of metaphysical rebellion and of nihilism have witnessed the persistent reappearance, under different guises, of the same ravaged countenance: the face of human protest. All of them, decrying the human condition and its Creator, have affirmed the solitude of man and the nonexistence of any kind of morality...As rivals of

the Creator, they have inescapably been led to the point of reconstructing creation according to their own concepts...But Sade and the romantics, Karamazov or Nietzsche only entered the world of death because they wanted to discover the true life. So that by a process of inversion, it is the desperate appeal for order that rings through this insane universe...In the eyes of the rebel, what is missing from the misery of the world, as well as from its moments of happiness, is some principle by which they can be explained...He is seeking, without knowing it, a moral philosophy or a religion...Therefore, if the rebel blasphemes, it is in the hope of finding a new god.” (100-101)

Here, Camus is insinuating that Nietzsche is a rebel who no longer allows himself the belief in “God” to make sense of the world but still secretly desires unity or an overarching concept to explain everything, good and bad. In a way, old religions are now replaced with a new pseudo-religion where the only value is hope for a future overman with an acute will to power. Although Nietzsche’s desire for a unifying principle is not a discrediting factor within itself, Camus posits that these new ideas are not a *creation* of new values but rather just a *negation* of old values. Instead of God and hope for a future of heavenly bliss, Nietzsche holds up an ideal of individualistic power and a philosophical future based not on the *good*<sup>4</sup> but its absence. Camus is subtly suggesting that Nietzsche’s ideas are, in reality, contingent upon these old systems of thought. In this way, Camus has merely redefined or re-casted Nietzsche’s philosophy in a unique light, describing it as a desire for clarity with “new” overarching values as opposed to radical creationism. It remains to be seen what the real *issue* is that emerges from this type of negation.

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<sup>4</sup> Refers to the classical value of “the good” as found in Plato’s *Republic*

Camus poignantly highlights the dangers of a Nietzschean nihilistic philosophy when internalized by the individual in his discussion of Ivan Karamazov from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. According to Camus, "Ivan incarnates the refusal of salvation. Faith leads to immortal life. But faith presumes the acceptance of the mystery and of evil, and resignation to injustice...He throws in his lot with the damned and, for their sake, rejects eternity" (56). Essentially, Ivan wants justification for the unjustifiable; he yearns for a principle that will explain why there is suffering in the world and cannot fathom how a "good" God could possibly exist in a world with such tragedy. From this rejection of God's system Ivan concludes with the principle that "'everything is permitted,' [and here] the history of contemporary nihilism really begins" (57). The problem with this mindset is that "the unity of the world, which was not achieved with God, will henceforth be attempted in defiance of God," and in this way "Ivan offers us only the tortured face of the rebel plunged in the abyss, incapable of action, torn between the idea of his own innocence and the desire to kill...With him the rebellion of reason culminates in madness" (61). It seems that the new *value* that both Ivan and Nietzsche create for themselves comes from a place of spite for this allusive "God." This motive of resentment, this value of permitting all, this desire for power, and this search for a future overman does not *cause* madness. Nevertheless, there is a correlation between living at this high pitch of indignation and madness. To summarize, although the most compelling criticism that Camus has of Nietzsche has yet to be explained, for now it will suffice to say that even on an individual level, nihilism is a dangerous, isolating, and hazardous path to take.

Camus' most effective investigation of Nietzsche comes when he traces nihilism throughout various rebellions in history, demonstrating the disastrous and bloody effects that this philosophy can have in reality. The first example that Camus gives involves Russian terrorism in



the late 1800's when a man named Kravchinsky created a pamphlet called *Death for Death* (165). Although not directly stated, this pamphlet advocated the death of leaders around the world in order to arbitrarily defend the population's "human rights." What followed were the attempts on the lives of various European leaders, from the Emperor of Germany in 1878 to the Grand Duke of Sergei in 1905. Camus describes this movement as "nihilism, intimately involved with a frustrated religious movement...[that] culminate[d] in terrorism. In the universe of total negation, these young disciples tr[ie]d, with bombs, and revolvers...to escape from contradiction and to create the values they lack" (165). The mindset of these young Russian terrorists is eerily similar to Nietzsche's philosophy, in that one begins by destroying accepted systems in order to create one's own values in a *coup de' etat*, or will to power. It is interesting that on a deeper level these men sacrificed present lives for the hope of a better future, and a more just future. For the Russian terrorists "these men of the future remained, in the absence of supreme values, their last recourse...the future is the only transcendental value for men without God" (166). Justice in the future, the deification of man *in the future* became the overarching value for these godless rebels. These revolutionists lived in an "everything is permitted" state, murder and suicide included, in an abstract hope that there would be a future with supreme men and godless values. This "ends justifies the means" mentality is fatal, especially when hope for an abstract future is paid for by the lives of living men. Already it can be seen that Nietzschean nihilism, when transferred to reality, can lead to the tangible death of individuals; the "will to power" begins to smell of blood.

Camus continues his discussion of terrorism by separating it into two branches: irrational terror and rational terror. He describes the "state" as a "logical conclusion of inordinate technical and philosophical ambitions, foreign to the true spirit of rebellion" which came about "after the city of God had been razed to the ground...[and] was founded on terror" (177). The primary

example of an irrational state of terror is Hitler's regime where "one leader, one people, signifi[ed] one master and millions of slaves" (182). An interesting insight that Camus provides about this regime is that "Hitler, though he could have stopped the war before the point of total disaster, really wanted universal suicide and the material and political destruction of the German nation" (185). This nihilistic revolution was deeply rooted in a "passion for nothingness" (185) and Hitler irrationally desired the death of all for the glory of one. Typically, the Nazi state has been understood as an apparatus of hate directed toward the Jewish people; the end goal of Nazism being the Jewish people's complete annihilation. Although this is true, Camus takes Hitler's motives to their logical end, which would be the death of all, not just the Jewish people. In a way, Hitler embodied the ideals of a Nietzschean overman and irrationally craved the destruction of all to make room for the creation and glorification of an individual. Although Nietzsche's "will to power" idea does not necessitate a Hitlerian regime, it does not forbid it, which is a problem to say the least. The transfer of this "will to power" philosophy from the realm of ideas to the realm of the senses can result in mass murder and genocide.

To conclude his comparison between Nietzschean nihilism and reality, Camus discusses the various types of sanctioned state terror that underlie socialism and fascism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Camus proposes that socialism originates from a "criticism of religion" which leads to "this doctrine that man is for man the supreme being. From this angle, socialism is therefore an enterprise for the deification of man and has assumed some of the characteristics of traditional religions" (192). Socialism, influenced by nihilism, deifies man instead of god and replaces the value of heaven with the value of and hope for "utopia" (208). The problem arises, however, when "the only values are those which serve this particular future [or Utopia]" (208). This "particular future" is subjective and can be based on an individual's will to power, leaving the

masses vulnerable to marginalization. Although hope for a better future of supposed equality is not a terrible prospect, this idea is incomprehensible on a number of levels. Camus argues that this type of logic, though it pretends to be revolutionary, is actually a “pseudo-revolutionary mystification...[where] all freedom must be crushed in order to conquer the empire, and one day the empire will be the equivalent of freedom. And so the way to unity passes through totality” (233). Socialism, following the same train of thought that Nietzsche presents, sacrifices the present for the hope of a utopian future. This “rational terror” is less extreme than “irrational terror” in that it is not as linked to murder; however, it is tied to subjection. There is irony here in that “man takes refuge in the permanence of the party in the same way that he formerly prostrated himself before the altar. That is why the era which dares to claim that it is the most rebellious that has ever existed only offers a choice of various types of conformity. The real passion of the twentieth century is servitude” (234). Unity, the desire for overarching values in a very confusing existence, seems to hide in various costumes. According to Camus, the end result of socialism and religion is the same: the subjection of people under unifying values to explain the universe. Nietzschean nihilism, when transferred to reality, also appears to follow a similar formula. Although nihilism does not necessitate classic equality like socialism, it still attempts to sort and collect values, glorifying the individual through a permeating value. In this, it is not a leap to say that Nietzsche’s historical analysis of the death of god and his view of values created by an *ubermensch* who acts out of a sheer will to power influenced leaders like Hitler. Although nihilism is not responsible for the actions of these leaders, it can be said that this pool of thought has a close relationship with madness, murder, and genocide. We are left with abstract ideals and tangible deaths.

At this point, Camus has critiqued Nietzsche, highlighting the flaws of nihilism on an individual, social, and historical level. However, regardless of possible concrete consequences of nihilism, Nietzsche's groundbreaking contribution to philosophy and existentialism remains. His probing in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *On the Genealogy of Morals* put the trajectory of traditional morals under a large amount of scrutiny, figuratively opening up a door to a new land without hope, without god, and without morals. Even though Camus evidently sees the deadly flaws in this vision, he does not disregard Nietzsche; instead, he begins to re-imagine a space beyond this door in *The Stranger*, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and *The Rebel*. Through these works it will be demonstrated how Camus attempts to bring clarity to the questions asked at the beginning of this paper: Does existence necessarily involve a dichotomy? Does an individual have to be hyper-religious or hyper-nihilistic? Piecing together a new mindset about existence essentially different from that of Nietzsche's, we will see how Camus forms a tension filled vision in the dust of a wasteland; a progression from absurdity to rebellion alive in the incandescent present.

Camus begins his inquiry into the void with his short novel *The Stranger* which tells the tale of an unassuming Frenchman named Mersault who commits murder for no particular reason besides the fact that the sun was uncomfortably hot on that day. This book acts as a way to demonstrate what Camus coins the *absurd*, or a person's general dizziness when confronted with themselves and the world aside from a few moments of arbitrary connectedness with others and nature. Mersault is presented as an apathetic, almost emotionless character who does not shed a tear when his mother dies and once stated that "the sound (of other people) was like the muffled jabber of parakeets" (5). While the *absurd* is a difficult concept to define, it is represented well in the relationship between Mersault and his love interest, Marie. The day after his mother dies, Mersault describes a pleasant swim with Marie when he says, "It was nice...I had the whole sky

in my eyes and it was blue and gold. On the back of my neck I could feel Marie's heart beating softly. We lay on the float for a long time, half asleep" (20). Camus uses simple, plain language here to exemplify that there is no *value* or *meaning* behind this moment, but that it is "nice" and more importantly random. Later on, Mersault describes a time when Marie asked if he loved her; he says, "I told her it didn't mean anything but that I didn't think so" (35). The *absurd* in its most raw state is this exact sensation of disenchantment, of having "good" moments with others in the world but not attributing any permanent meaning to these feelings. Here, Camus starts to question whether or not there *is* an innate connection between external events and internal feelings, or if it is an institutionalized ethic.

The climax of *The Stranger* comes when Mersault kills an Arab man on the beach after shooting him five times in the chest. During his trial Mersault cannot give any reason for killing the man besides the fact that the sun was too hot that day and that something like a "thick drunkenness" (57) spilled all over his body in that moment. By the end of the trial, when he is found guilty and condemned to death, Mersault says, "I...lived my life one way and I could just as well have lived it another, I had done this and I hadn't done that....And so?...Nothing, nothing mattered" (121). There is a sense that Mersault is a passive bystander to his own life; he does not understand other people's conception that there is a correlation between feelings, events, and actions. Additionally, he does not seem to be conscious of his situation. Things happen to Mersault, or do not happen, but there does not appear to be an internal recognition of either. At one point, during his trial, Mersault thinks, "everything is happening without my participation. My fate [is] being decided without anyone so much as asking my opinion" (98). Consciousness is an active state, and Mersault remains passive. Through his passive mindset, Mersault is neither in control of his external body or internal thoughts.

At his point Mersault has been presented as a murderer without an acute consciousness of his situation. It could be said that Camus is promoting arbitrary murder or general alienation through the passive character of Mersault. Against this view, we will argue that in *The Stranger*, Camus undertakes a project to identify exactly what the *absurd* would look like if it were embodied within a person. The *absurd*, which is a permeating aspect of the human experience according to Camus, is amplified in the story of Mersault as to conceptualize the *absurd* before integrating it into ideas about consciousness and rebellion. The essence of Mersault functions as a building block, undermining accepted ideas about the correlation between an individual's external and internal worlds and isolating the *absurd* as an entity.

In his next work *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus articulates what the absurd is and is not by exploring what freedom can be found in the absurd, lucidly discussing suicide and examining mythological Sisyphus as an absurd hero. At this point in his *oeuvre*, following his attempt to establish the desert beyond Nietzsche's door, Camus has only shown us the face of a disillusioned murderer Mersault. In this anti-hero the *absurd* is raw and unhindered by previously held values like human empathy or the sacredness of the created world. Camus progresses beyond Mersault when he paints a picture of absurdity in *Myth of Sisyphus*, saying, "At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of these trees that this very minute lose the illusory meaning with which we had clothed them... The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia... that denseness and that strangeness of the world is absurd" (14). There is a sense here that the absurd defines a human's innate connection with the world and with nature, but that there is no rational explanation behind or following this association. For Camus "beauty" is not a good or bad thing but rather an external fact that catalyzes a human's experience of internal weariness. Humans

want to understand their condition and crave value; however, this is where the absurd is cradled, “born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (28). An absurd man says, “I don’t know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it” (51). Absurdity involves a position of resignation in the pursuit of value, in which a person trades the belief in an overarching moral and metaphysical unity for the harsh experience of living in tension. In a way absurdity is both the sickness and the cure: the freedom for man without god in the world and the binding of man to a perpetual tension between freedom and subjugation without purpose. The absurd is not a religion, a valuation, or a code system. It is “a way of thinking. But the point is to live” (65). Already it can be seen that Camus’ desert is different than Nietzsche’s in that it does not attempt to unify, but uproot and rearrange. Nietzsche has a vision of the kingdom of the overman *in the future* while Camus is primarily concerned with the multifaceted present. It remains to be seen whether or not Camus is presenting a novel mode of thought or whether, like Nietzsche, his philosophy of the absurd opens up an “everything is permitted” space for murder like Mersault or even large scale genocide.

Before evaluating Camus any further it is important to address concerns that an existence void of value would necessitate suicide. Although Nietzsche and Camus both uproot commonly accepted values, Nietzsche presents new values and hope to replace outdated ones. In a way, Nietzsche provides even a nihilist with a “reason” to live, even if this reason is hope in a future established through the exercise of will to power. Camus, on the other hand, provides no such reason. Thus a valid question arises from Camus’ proposed mindset: in a world void of hope for god or a future kingdom of men, what is the point of living? What stops one from committing suicide? Camus ardently advocates against suicide, saying that “killing yourself amounts to

confessing. It is confessing that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it” (5).

Absurdity is not concerned with finding a meaning for life, because although one *may* exist, it is not up to the absurd person to reduce life to such a point. This “confession” is a giving in, a giving up, and a refusal to live in the permeating tension of absurdity. Furthermore, Camus says, “people have played on words and pretended to believe that refusing to grant a meaning to life necessarily leads to declaring that it is not worth living...one kills oneself because life is not worth living, that is certainly a truth – yet an unfruitful one because it is a truism. But does that insult to existence, that flat denial in which it is plunged come from the fact that it has not meaning?” (8). In this Camus adjusts the lens through which life is typically viewed, arguing that living and having a purpose for living are two fairly unrelated clauses and do not depend on one another. One marginalizes life and cuts oneself off from many aspects of life when this value of *purpose* reigns supreme. The absurd is only alive when one is doing just that, living. One keeps the absurd alive by “contemplating it...Suicide, like the leap, is acceptance at its extreme...In its way, suicide settles the absurd. It engulfs the absurd in the same death” (54). The absurd is alive in an individual’s contemplation of it; suicide not only leads to the death of a person but also finalizes the absurd by cutting off the tension in one direction. This difficult tension and struggle of an individual in the present moment requires that the person remain *alive*. In this Camus successfully argues against suicide while simultaneously evading ascribing any one overarching value to life. An absurd life is lived in the desert, void of hope for heaven or a future of man, unconcerned with anything but present rebellion where “the real effort is to stay there...to examine closely the odd vegetation of those distant regions” (10) without settling all questions through an act of suicide.



Camus advances beyond the idea of absurd Mersault when he introduces the figure of mythological Sisyphus, a man who was “condemned...to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight” because he had stolen the gods’ secrets (119). Through Sisyphus Camus presents the idea of an “absurd hero,” revealing a new aspect to his philosophy: consciousness. Initially, one might think that Sisyphus holds the worst possible fate, a fate of perpetual torture, meaningless repetition and no possibility of escape or transformation. Camus, however, focuses on the moment when Sisyphus finishes pushing the boulder to the top, stops, and watches the rock roll back down. This moment is described as “a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness... [Sisyphus] knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory” (121). Although Sisyphus’ body is imprisoned, his mind is free to wander. If he were unconscious, the torture would not be as amplified but neither would his internal freedom: this is the irony of absurdity. Sisyphus’ freedom comes from taking “god” out of the equation, making “fate a human matter, which must be settled among men...His [Sisyphus’] fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing” (123). In a way, Sisyphus epitomizes the struggle of the absurd individual in the world. There is no *reason* for living, yet one continues to push one’s rock up a mountain. Moments of conscious rebellion constitute an individual’s freedom as present attentiveness becomes all and emerges one fully in the absurd. Camus’ re-imagined land is pieced together slowly; an air of tension flows through the desert as a conscious individual remains still, tortured and gratified by the absurd.

After demonstrating the absurd in its raw state with Mersault and through a medium of consciousness with Sisyphus, Camus progresses even further in *The Rebel*, where he writes

about metaphysical rebellion and life at the meridian. At this point the question remains: does Camus' philosophy advocate for Ivan's position that "everything is permitted?" Is Camus proposing a newly envisioned land for an individual without god or is he just Nietzsche with a new mask? Camus gives a coherent response to these questions in his vision of an absurd rebel. This rebel, who "limits himself as a matter of principles...[and refuses] to be humiliated without asking that others should be. He will even accept pain provided his integrity is respected" (18). The image of the rebel is contrasted with "Ivan's drama...[that] arises from the fact that there is too much love without an object. This love finding no outlet and God being denied, it is then decided to lavish it on human beings as a generous act of complicity" (19). An absurd, metaphysical rebel does not allow grandiose feelings about humanity let him or her be tied in a web of madness; instead, the rebel remains in the present and brings humanity down to a realistic level. The rebel does not say "yes" that everything is permitted but rather "from the moment that the rebel finds his voice – even though he says 'no' – he begins to desire and judge" (14). Even though this "rebellion...[which is] apparently negative, since it creates nothing, is profoundly positive in that it reveals the part of man which must always be defended" (19). Here, Camus shifts the fundamental motivation behind rebellion. No longer is the existential, metaphysical rebel a begrudged former child of god who desires a unifying principle to explain the suffering of the world. Rather, the rebel embodies lucid indifference of the present tense – by identifying what is worthy in oneself and demanding that the world meet one where one is. Camus' paradigm shift in Nietzsche's desert presents rebellion as a new value, making everything a present struggle, a human affair, and introduces a way to live without god *or* nihilism.

In Camus' last discussion, or what he calls "life at the meridian," the problem of murder is finally addressed as a frontier beyond nihilism and the excesses of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The rebel

is against murder and injustice, but “if injustice is bad for the rebel, it is not because it contradicts an eternal idea of justice, but because it perpetuates the silent hostility that separates the oppressor from the oppressed” (283). There is no objective purpose behind the rebel’s fight against injustice, but rather there is this desire to keep the values of tension and rebellion alive, to acknowledge that no one should be the oppressor *or* the oppressed. In regards to murder Camus says that “the freedom to kill, is not compatible with the sense of rebellion. Rebellion is in no way the demand for total freedom. On the contrary, rebellion puts total freedom up for trial. It specifically attacks the unlimited power that authorizes a superior to violate the forbidden frontier” (284). As opposed to Nietzsche’s will to power and will to ultimate freedom of the individual, Camus recognizes that freedom itself is a value that must be questioned. Most likely, the ultimate freedom of one means the extreme oppression of another. A goal of the absurd rebel is keeping the *absurd* itself alive; suicide and murder both result in death, a frontier beyond present absurdity. And so, it appears that Camus is actually presenting *rebellion* within present tension as a new ethic, replacing Nietzsche’s *will to power* philosophy. The key difference between Camus’ rebel and Nietzsche’s overman is consciousness. An overman yearns for power over everything, and it has been demonstrated that this mindset can have drastic consequences in reality. The rebel, however, takes everything into consideration, has a “not everything is permitted mindset,” and actively works to live in tension. A rebel is from moment to moment creating his or her own rules for existence, attempting to avoid any sort of unifying moral that would justify them. Rebellion for the sake of rebellion, without knowing *why* or needing to – this is the essence of the conscious rebel.

And so we arrive at the final question: *how*, then, does this rebel live? Camus envisions a life for the rebel filled with moderation, which is “nothing but pure tension...it is in itself a

supplementary source of strength” (301). It is life at the meridian, in the gray area, which is not to be confused with a lukewarm state. One does not choose to believe in god, in nihilism, or in traditional ethics that would ease the tense unrest of daily existence. Rebellion is this “path of calculated culpability...it is perpetual struggle, and, sometimes, unparalleled joy when it reaches the heights of proud compassion” (297). One chooses perpetual struggle and tension so that one can have the right to own oneself, every aspect of oneself. With each degree of freedom there is a proportional amount of responsibility. Calculated culpability becomes this strategic consciousness and dazzling perception of the world that replaces “everything is permitted” with “not everything is permitted” void of specific instructions. One works out of a compassionate understanding such that one’s rebellion becomes a creative rebellion in sync with the struggles of humanity. At the end of it all the rebel must “learn to live and to die, and, in order to be a man, to refuse to be a god. At this meridian of thought, the rebel thus rejects divinity in order to share in the struggles and destiny of all men...lucid action, and the generosity of the man who understands” (306). Uneasy balance, life on a tightrope, existence on the ledge of a skyscraper: this is the vision that Camus imagines. This new land of nothingness and re-creation of Nietzsche’s frontier without traditional values or god allows a man without god to participate in empathy and responsibility without it all culminating in madness. Embracing contradiction, avoiding unity, and living life at the meridian – these are the actions of a rebel. In the end we get a picture of this rebel saturated in lucid indifference, creating in the midst of the desert, struggling in the fibers of tension between antinomies, and piecing together their own subjective universe of consciousness. Stale, thrumming nothingness is the atmosphere: the rebel nevertheless continues his or her creative work, and lives.

After a lengthy discussion of ephemeral creation and existential life through various works of Albert Camus and Friedrich Nietzsche, it is difficult to arrive at a definitive conclusion, especially regarding the fact that both of these philosophers would argue against absolutes and objectivity. The many groundbreaking ideas of Nietzsche have been evaluated and their weaknesses exposed. While Camus provides a much more palpable vision for an absurdist philosophy devoid of formal morality, one is still left with an aching feeling that overarching subjectivity is dangerous. It would not be a leap to say that human nature leans toward structure, toward rule following under a certain religion, state, or cult. Although this “herd” mentality has clearly led to much death and destruction, one is forced to wonder if absolute subjectivity in the hands of all would usher in sheer anarchy and nihilism. In this regard Camus is an extreme optimist, wanting power for all and none and believing that the absurd individual is capable of living in perpetual tension. On a concluding note, Camus says this at the end of *The Rebel*: “we shall remake the soul of our time... The bow bends; the wood complains. At the moment of supreme tension, there will leap into flight an unswerving arrow, a shaft that is inflexible and free” (306). Underlying Camus’ philosophy is this paradox: the creative, empathetic rebel yearns to live without any unifying principles, yet secretly desires a purpose. Camus *wants* to live without a religious or complete power-driven mindset, but still gets caught in a net of values. Here, Camus reveals that he does want this “unswerving arrow” to be set free through the tension; this image is absurd in itself, and does not quite conclude his thoughts but leaves something wanted and much unfinished. Camus, after all, is not Nietzsche and does ultimately want freedom, but is not quite sure how to arrive there. What is certain is that life is not an equation and it will not be solved. Taking this tension as one’s own, however, allows one to be free and inflexible, powerful and restricted, a lover and a hater. In this illusory mess an

individual does not find a purpose for living but a secret joy in realizing that there does not have to be one.

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