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Absurd Creation: An Existentialist View of Art?

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ABSTRACT: What are we to make of works of art whose apparent point is to convince us of the meaninglessness and absurdity of human existence? I examine, in this paper, the attempt of Albert Camus to provide philosophical justification of art in the face of the supposed fact of absurdity and note its failure as such with specific reference to Sartre's criticism. Despite other superficial similarities, I contrast Camus's concept of the absurd with that of his 'existentialist' colleagues, including Sartre, and suggest that the latter concept is more philosophically viable. I conclude that existential phenomenology consequently provides a more promising philosophical justification for artistic creation in the light of the more viable conception of absurdity.

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Examples of what is sometimes labelled 'existentialist' art (taken to imply particular emphasis on the absurdity of, and alienation involved in, human existence) have been produced by, among others, Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett and Albert Camus. In the case of Sartre, his striking description of Roquentin's experience before the chestnut root apparently encourages such a perspective:

I no longer remembered that it was a root. Words had disappeared, and with them the meaning of things, the methods of using them, the feeble landmarks which men have traced on their surface.¹

Many will be familiar with the similar way of interpreting Samuel Beckett's *oeuvre*. When we read in *Waiting for Godot*, for example, a prescient satire on the play's own critical reception,

¹ Sartre (1965), 182.

“Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful!” that, we think charitably, is part of the point.² It is this kind of reading of Beckett’s work that leads his English publisher, John Calder, to take his major philosophical theme to be the absurdity and meaninglessness of human existence and the ultimate pointlessness of the actions and practices which contribute to it.³ The opening words of Camus’s famous anti-hero, Meursault, introduce us, finally, to the absurd world of his best-known novel: “Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don’t know.”⁴

In a chapter of his most formally philosophical work, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, entitled ‘Absurd Creation’, Camus attempts to reconcile the practice of aesthetic creation with the fact of life’s absurdity. Camus’s claim that human life is absurd implies an interpretative distinction, observed by Sartre, between two very different meanings of the term ‘absurd’: between its sense as the condition of human existence (which, following Sartre, I call ‘Primary Absurdity’) and as the lucid awareness which some people obtain of this condition and which, for Camus, takes the form of alienation.⁵ This distinction should be taken to indicate not two concepts of the absurd (one as abstractly independent of the human mind, the other as experienced by it) but rather a differentiation between two intimately related aspects of the same concept since Camus’s philosophical outlook does not leave much room for concepts that do *not* undergo some kind of human apprehension or indicate some dimension of human experience.⁶ He readily admits that it is impossible for us to think outside the human terms of our mental categories and even goes so far as to say “There can be no absurd outside the human mind.”⁷ But, though we are all as a matter of fact in the state of Primary Absurdity, it is theoretically and practically possible for us to ignore the facts to the point where the experience of this absurdity is, if not non-existent, then at least thoroughly repressed and its true implications are ignored. And it is from just this repression, from this attempt to deny Primary Absurdity by ignoring or repressing the experience of it, that the concept of Primary Absurdity derives a meaning and is thus made a plausible candidate for human apprehension: “The absurd has meaning only in so far as it is not agreed to.”⁸

Thus, as we shall see in more detail later on, Camus’s literary aim is to articulate Primary Absurdity by way of articulations of its experience such that much of his writing on the subject consists in descriptions of the experience of absurdity which, he thinks, takes the form of alienation.⁹ Throughout *The Outsider*, for instance, we read descriptions of the experience of objects as alien, resistant to human grasp and to the meaning-imposing influence with which the human subject incessantly and vaingloriously assails them. Things, as it were, overflow human apprehension, evaluation and meaning. Such meaningful apprehension of the world by human beings is not effected, for Camus, any more by scientific inquiry than it is by everyday

2 Beckett (1952), 41.

3 Calder (2001), 3.

4 Camus (2000), 9.

5 Sartre (1943), 24.

6 As I am about to remark in the next paragraph, things, by contrast, most certainly do resist such apprehension in Camus’s opinion.

7 Camus (2005), 29.

8 *Ibid.*, 30.

9 It is arguable that his philosophical work does mainly the reverse and explains alienation in terms of the condition of absurdity which gives rise to it. I shall return to Sartre’s view of the relation of Camus’s literature to his philosophy in Section 3.

experience. He writes: “I realize that if through science I can seize phenomena and enumerate them, I cannot for all that apprehend the world. Were I to trace its entire relief with my finger, I should not know any more.”¹⁰ Primary Absurdity is experienced as the alienation of subject from object, of man from the world. The absurd, as Camus defines it, is a ‘divorce’ or ‘confrontation’ between two elements; it lies neither ‘in man’ nor ‘in the world’ but rather “in their presence together. For the moment it is the only bond uniting them.”¹¹ It is a given, for Camus, that there is no meaning beyond the human world, since we can only think in human terms, but that that world is itself no less unintelligible. It is this point of view, that “[t]o an absurd mind reason is useless and there is nothing beyond reason”,¹² that leads him to conclude that the experience of absurdity in alienation, which he extensively articulates in his novels, is the epitome of human experience. Indeed, it could not be otherwise:

If I were a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this life would have meaning or rather this problem would not arise, for I should belong to this world. I should *be* this world to which I am now opposed by my whole consciousness.¹³

2.

From such a perspective, the practice of artistic creation, as the product of an absurd human activity among all the rest, can be understood in two possible ways. The first is as an act of rebellion, a pre-emptive defence against the alienation which would otherwise result from humanity’s absurd condition. The human condition is absurd in that it is riven by the ‘cleavage’ between mind and nature, between humanity’s aspirations towards unity and eternity and the multiplicity of the world and human finitude.¹⁴ In artistic creation, man becomes a ‘fabricator of universes’, in which “sealed worlds [...] man can reign and have knowledge at last.”¹⁵ A novel, for instance, “implies a sort of rejection of reality” in that it presents a world in which, unlike the absurd world of reality, its characters *can and do* meaningfully engage with the world and with each other and are not plagued by the perpetual experience of alienation; in the world of the novel, for instance, lovers *can* truly possess one another.¹⁶ Art may thus be conceived as a rebellion against Primary Absurdity, in other words, as a rebellion against reality. But on the other hand, Camus tells us, “No art can completely reject reality”;¹⁷ there is a sense in which the characters in novels do “speak our language, have our weaknesses and our strengths. Their universe is neither more beautiful nor more enlightening than ours.”¹⁸ Thus the world of the work of art is less a rejection *tout court* than a ‘rectification’ of the real world, in which substitute universe we can escape our alienation. We can do so because, in that fictional universe, the Primary Absurdity

10 Camus (2005), 19.

11 Ibid., 29.

12 Ibid., 34.

13 Ibid., 50.

14 Sartre (1943), 25.

15 Camus (2000a), 221.

16 Ibid., 226-9.

17 Ibid., 233.

18 Ibid., 229.

which, in the real world, gives rise to such alienation does not obtain. Camus invokes this view as the only defensible way of accounting for many examples which he cites from the history of the novel but it is clearly problematic.¹⁹ The philosophical position tries to pull apart the two aspects of the concept of absurdity and, as a result, the practice of art for which it provides justification is unsustainable. Such practice theoretically accepts Primary Absurdity in the real world but denies that this inevitably results in alienation since artistic practice consists in the creation of fictional worlds, into which we may escape, in which there is no Primary Absurdity. But, for Camus, as we saw, Primary Absurdity and alienation are not *two* concepts but inseparable aspects of the *same* concept. It is this which, given the Primary Absurdity of the *real* world (where, after all, the creation of works of art takes place), renders the artistic flight into an imaginary world, in the end, unsustainable. Temporary solace may be available to us while we are immersed in the fictional world of a novel but we will repeatedly come up against the real world's Primary Absurdity not only because it is in the real world that we always *actually* live but also because it is on this world that the fictional world of the novel depends in more than one way.²⁰ Thus, the attempt, characteristic of this first view of art, to pull apart Primary Absurdity and alienation is illicit; and it is for this reason that, although he thinks that only this view of art could possibly justify most of the history of literature in the light of his notion of absurdity, Camus thinks it indefensible.

The second way in which art can be understood given Camus's notion of absurdity (and in fact is understood by Camus) derives from the second aspect of absurdity, from the human experience of it in alienation in so far as this is thought of as being intimately related to, and caused by, Primary Absurdity. Art, on this second understanding, may itself only be understood as an 'absurd phenomenon'.²¹ Science may uselessly explain the world but our 'sensation' of it always remains, equally useless and perpetually outrunning such explanation. It is in terms of this sensation of the absurd, in terms of alienation, that the place of art must be understood. Art, Camus tells us, "makes the mind get out of itself and places it in opposition to others, not for it to get lost but to show it clearly the blind path that all have entered upon."²² On the artist's death, her *oeuvre* can be understood only as a collection of failures which repeat and articulate the artist's, and everyone else's, own absurd, alienated condition. Since we "always end up by having the appearance of our truths", it is the explicit awareness of life's absurdity alone which authorizes what Camus calls the 'excess' of artistic creation.²³ That creation, conversely, consummates the utter absurdity of any individual human life and of human existence as a whole. The absurd creator (and, for Camus, there is no other kind) is committed not only to the exigency of aesthetic creation but also to the negation of its value. The artist's single role, which Camus's own literary work, perhaps admirably, reflects, is to compound and consummate the absurdity of human existence by describing the alienation in which the experience of that existence consists. As Camus rather

19 Ibid., 229-232.

20 I have in mind here more than just a logical dependence (we obviously cannot engage in the act of experiencing a work of art outside the confines of the real world). The possibility that the characters in a novel can be significant to us depends on a certain degree of resemblance between their world and ours, whatever their differences. "No art can completely reject reality" (Camus (2000a), 233).

21 Camus (2005), 92.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 91.

beautifully summarizes the artist's vocation, "He must give the void its colours."²⁴

3.

This second (and Camus's own) account of art has the advantage of perfectly describing his own literary output which, no doubt, very effectively articulates the sense of inevitable alienation in which, for him, the accurate experience of Primary Absurdity consists. But it is not entirely convincing. Firstly, does not Camus's view fail to account for the real reasons why people do, in fact, value and seek to experience works of art, his own included? The manifold interpretations of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (according to which, for example, Godot is taken to represent God and the play interpreted as a religious allegory or where the class differences between Vladimir and Estragon and Pozzo indicate Marxist concerns) testify that people go to see the play in order to find meaning, not the lack of it. On Camus's own account, there could be no reason for me to recommend *The Outsider* to a friend: the fact that there is no reason for doing anything (the book's apparent message) cannot count as a reason for doing something. If I do recommend the book, I am more likely to think that something in it will resonate with my friend's state of mind and, perhaps, reassure her that she is not alone in feeling disconnected from the world. My hope, in short, is that she will find a kind of (perhaps rather bleak) *meaning* in it. This fact connects up with the sense that *The Outsider* constitutes less an accurate representation of normal human experience than of certain of its mentally 'abnormal' modes. The anticipated response to this kind of counter-argument is also problematic. If I *really* believed in life's absurdity in Camus's sense, the rational response would indeed be silence or suicide but, on the very basis of the absurd, it is precisely the *irrational* response, equally absurd, that Camus advocates. It is absurd enough, as he concedes, to go on living (in Hopkins's double negative, to "not choose not to be")²⁵ but it is doubly absurd to engage in the creation of works of art since, as Camus tells us, "Creating is living doubly."²⁶ Paradox and contradiction, then, are all part of the game. The refusal of Camus's would-be philosophical opponent to agree that life is absurd just adds to his own case that it is. But if paradox and contradiction are the beginning and end of his philosophy, as this line of (supposed) argument implies, then there's nothing in it that can sustain serious philosophical discussion between him and someone with a different philosophical perspective. If he is writing for those who share his point of view, then he is preaching to the converted and, if he is not, then he has no hope of converting them. Good philosophical argument traditionally employs clarity of thought wherever possible in order to reach a cogent position that might, at least possibly, win round an opponent. Though clarity and logical cogency may turn out to have limits, the contradiction which follows from Camus's conception of his central notion of absurdity can be no *basis* for philosophical argument and implies that a philosophical opponent could, at best, be convinced by the rhetorical flair with which he presents his views. If "there is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide,"²⁷ then it is a problem without the possibility of

24 *Ibid.*, 111.

25 See G. M. Hopkins, *Carrion Comfort*, l. 4 in Reeves (ed.) (1953), 64.

26 *Ibid.*, 91.

27 *Ibid.*, 1.

serious discussion, let alone solution. It is perhaps for this reason that Camus himself is said to have boasted that he had no interest in philosophy.²⁸ His position fails to justify philosophically artistic creation for the (on its own terms, very good) reason that art, along with everything else, is absurd anyway; it is ‘absurd creation’.

Secondly, Sartre’s criticism of both Camus’s conception of absurdity and his view of art may help to bring into focus the comparison of Camus with his ‘existentialist’ colleagues which I make in the next section in connexion with the concept of meaning. Sartre quotes a passage in *The Myth of Sisyphus* in which Camus is apparently articulating his notion of absurdity by way of a specific experience of alienation:

A man is talking on the telephone. We cannot hear him behind the glass partition, but we see his senseless mimicry. We wonder why he is alive? [sic].²⁹

Sartre argues that this passage reveals Camus’s unfounded bias towards the inference from this experience to Primary Absurdity (the ultimate absurdity and meaninglessness of human existence) rather than to life’s ultimate meaning and significance. Further analysis, he thinks, reveals that, when it is properly interpreted, the experience described does in fact imply the latter view that human action and human life are inescapably significant. The man’s gesturing, Sartre argues,

...is really only *relatively* absurd, because it is part of an incomplete circuit. Listen in on an extension, however, and the circuit is completed; human activity recovers its meaning. Therefore, one would have, in all honesty, to admit that there are only relative absurdities and only in relation to “absolute rationalities.”³⁰

Sartre views Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus* as a translation into philosophical terms of his novel *The Outsider* and, on this basis, extends the argument to Camus’s literary work.³¹ He suggests that just as the experience of the man behind glass is taken as a specific experience of Primary Absurdity (“Is there really anything sillier than a man behind a glass window?”),³² so, in *The Outsider*, Camus inserts, as it were, a glass partition between the reader and his characters. The mind of the novel’s anti-hero is, like glass, “so constructed as to be transparent to things and opaque to meanings”; as with the man on the telephone, “Glass seems to let everything through. It stops only one thing: the meaning of his gestures.”³³ Sartre supports this extension of the argument with the example, persistent in Camus’s novel, of analysis as an instrument of humour. Camus describes situations and events in *The Outsider* which would normally be experienced as especially emotionally charged (the death of the protagonist’s mother, for example, or the funeral) in as neutrally factual terms as possible, omitting to acknowledge the values and meanings for which, in the reader’s

28 Cooper (1999), 9.

29 Sartre (1943), 36 cf. Camus (2005), 13.

30 Sartre (1943), 36. ‘Rationalities’, it should be stressed, is not meant in a narrow, logical sense. Sartre is claiming that absurdity can only be claimed relative to the broader framework of human life’s significance.

31 Sartre (1943), 29.

32 *Ibid.*, 36.

33 *Ibid.*

mind, the factual description of the situation cries out. Sartre suggests that this creates a sense of absurd humour just as if one described a rugby match in the following terms:

I saw adults in shorts fighting and throwing themselves on the ground in order to send a leather ball between a pair of wooden posts.³⁴

It is Sartre's view that this use of analysis, such as we see in Camus's novel, shows up the necessary relation of 'relative absurdities' to 'absolute rationalities' for which he argued in the case of the man behind the glass; in both cases, the experience is of an incomplete circuit. As Sartre summarizes, Camus "slyly pretends to be reconstituting raw experience and because he slyly eliminates all the significant links which are also part of the experience",³⁵ Camus has not realized what is, for Sartre, the 'fact' about the nature of experience established by contemporary philosophy "that meanings are also part of the immediate data".³⁶

4.

Perhaps on the basis of superficial similarities with some of the writings of philosophers like Sartre, Camus is sometimes described as an 'existentialist'. But, apart from the very major difference just described, there are other similar and related reasons for challenging the application of the label to Camus. David Cooper challenges the application of this label on the basis of its implication not of a 'mood' or 'vocabulary', which Camus may well share with some of Sartre's work, but of a relatively systematic philosophy in the issues of which Camus boasted that he was uninterested.³⁷ Though Sartre may share the language of absurdity with Camus (and its experience as the alienation described in *Nausea*, we have seen, is consistent with Camus's understanding), Camus's sense of absurdity, Cooper argues, was not the mature Sartre's central philosophical concern, nor that of his fellow existential phenomenologists.³⁸ Camus sees human beings as inescapably divorced from the world and the radical chasm between subject and object unbridgeable. It is in this state of affairs, and in the sense of alienation to which it inevitably leads, that Camus locates absurdity – in the fact that we cannot but perpetually try to constitute a meaningful human world. However, the insurmountable rift between subject and object entails that this attempt is doomed to failure and that human beings are condemned, like Sisyphus, to try to do the impossible without end. But, by contrast, the existential phenomenologists see it as their role precisely to *overcome* this sense of alienation and to dissolve the wrong-headed and damaging dualisms which lead to it, not least that of subject and object. Their vision, as we saw with Sartre in the previous section, is of a world in which human beings are inescapably and meaningfully *engaged* and from which they are, logically, inseparable. Such a vision lies behind Heidegger's 'Being-in-the-world', Sartre's 'engagement' and Merleau-Ponty's striking claim that "the world is

³⁴ Ibid., 37.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Cooper (1999), 8-9.

³⁸ Ibid., 140-1.

nothing but ‘world-as-meaning’.³⁹ Thus, as Cooper suggests, ‘absurdity’ in the mature Sartre’s philosophical works can be understood to have its source in his designation of the ‘For-itself’ (roughly, human consciousness) as freedom, the freedom which causes there to be a world for it. Such freedom, for Sartre, is both necessary and undetermined in that it has no basis external to the freedom of the For-itself.⁴⁰ Thus, for certain existentialists, absurdity lies not, as for Camus, in the *lack* of meaningful engagement between man and world but rather in the tension between the seriousness with which we *cannot but be engaged* with the world (by way of our human values and meanings “without which nothing could appear more worth doing than anything else”) and their lack of external justification (in an objective system of rationality, for example).⁴¹

Thus, from this more rigorously philosophical perspective, the existential phenomenologists advocate a more viable version of the relationship between art and absurdity. Art evokes absurdity not in the sense of the alienation of human beings from world but in the sense of the groundlessness of their radical engagement. Art therefore mirrors, in two main ways, the structure of the ‘perception’ in which, for Heidegger, Sartre and especially Merleau-Ponty, that engagement consists. Firstly, it mirrors the meaningful immediacy of our perceptual engagement with the world which is implied by the dissolution of the subject-object dualism. In everyday experience, Heidegger tells us, “What we first hear is never noises or complexes of sounds, but the creaking wagon, the motor cycle. We hear the column on the march, the north wind, the woodpecker tapping, the fire crackling.”⁴² So in the work of art, Sartre argues, we experience not ‘signs’ which refer us to things by a subsequent mental act of interpretation but ‘things’ *already* imbued with meanings.⁴³ In Tintoretto’s painting of Golgotha, anguish is not detachable from the yellow sky and Cézanne’s green apples are inseparable from their “tart gaiety”.⁴⁴ In the experience of art we are made aware not of our alienation from things, their propensity to outrun our powers of apprehension in a kind of meaningless abundance but of the immediacy with which we are constantly and meaningfully involved with them. It was only by slyly downplaying this immediate engagement by presenting us with incomplete circuits of significance that Camus was able to convince us otherwise. Secondly, as in everyday experience, these aesthetic ‘things’ are experienced against a meaningful background of other things and in relationships of meaning to them. As Merleau-Ponty describes his first visit to Paris, his perception of the city was not a flow of perceptions of distinct objects (nor the law which might govern such a flow) but rather of these apparently distinct perceptions standing out against the ‘city’s whole being’.⁴⁵ In the analogous case of art, a “work of art is something we perceive” since “its nature is to be seen or heard and no attempt to define or analyse it...can ever stand in place of the direct perceptual experience”.⁴⁶ It is for this reason that it does not just represent the world, it “is a world of its own” against which emerge the ‘things’ with which it presents us.⁴⁷ It is just this thought which lies behind the

39 Merleau-Ponty (2002), xii.

40 Cooper (1999), 142.

41 Ibid.

42 Heidegger (1962), 207.

43 Sartre (2001), 33.

44 Ibid., 2-3.

45 Merleau-Ponty (2002), 327-8.

46 Merleau-Ponty (2004), 95.

47 Ibid., 96.

striking claim of Sartre that “[e]ach painting, each book, is a recovery of the totality of being”,⁴⁸ and of Heidegger that the work of art “opens up a world”.⁴⁹

Perhaps in the dual role just intimated, as both a percept and as a mirror of the structure of perception, art makes us explicitly aware of that structure; it enables us to ‘catch ourselves’ engaging in the interpretative perception *via* which we are constantly engaged with the world and to which we are ordinarily oblivious in our everyday lives. In the experience of art, as Sartre puts it, perception “perceives itself as being constitutive of the object”.⁵⁰ This explicit awareness is of the undetermined freedom of human perception (the ‘For-itself’ or *pour-soi*) to constitute the world through its interpretative activity. As Sartre illustrates, “we are free to tie up one colour with another or with a third, to set up a relationship between the tree and the water or the tree and the sky, or the tree, the water and the sky.”⁵¹ But in everyday perception, we have always already chosen one network of meanings and not another, one *world* and not another. How could it be otherwise? We would not be the kind of beings we are if we were not committed to an interpretation of the world, were we not engaged with it. In the absence of a divine creator, human beings alone can be held responsible for the choice of the specific *way* in which they are engaged, at the expense of all other possible ways. The lack of external basis for such a choice, and its tension with the fact of its necessity, implies that my “freedom becomes caprice” – groundless and absurd.⁵² For the artist, rather than making the inference from this realisation to the idea that the resultant perception of the world is unreal, “the result is that I fix my dream, that I transpose it into canvas or in writing”.⁵³ The reader or viewer of such a work is made aware of this absurd tension between the fact that his engagement is essential to the existence of the world of the work of art (as Sartre puts it, the literary ‘object’ and the literary world last only so long as the act of reading lasts “Beyond that, there are only black marks on paper.”)⁵⁴ and the fact that this engagement has no basis beyond himself. One could object that in literature, for example, the author is guarantor of the true interpretation of the art-work (just as a divine creator would be in the case of the world) and that the reader’s freedom and responsibility can to that extent be delegated. But, if they exist at all, the author’s ‘real meaning’, like the purposes of God to man, are, in the last analysis, unfathomable to the reader. And if they *are* fathomable, and the literary work turns out to be a joint product of the author’s and the reader’s creativity, its world still has its source in *human* freedom.⁵⁵ Art reveals the tension, where ‘caprice’ and absurdity are located, between the necessity of human engagement and its lack of external grounds.

It is in this way that art, for the (Sartrean) existentialist, awakens human beings to the absurd:

48 Sartre (2001), 45.

49 Heidegger (1935), 169.

50 Sartre (2001), 43.

51 *Ibid.*, 39.

52 *Ibid.*

53 *Ibid.*

54 *Ibid.*, 29.

55 *Ibid.*, 40-2. It is important to note this point of divergence between Sartre and the ‘religious existentialists’. Sartre’s view of freedom’s absurdity is predicated on the non-existence of God and the related notion that (human) existence precedes essence. He is of Camus’s opinion that we cannot make sense of what is supposedly ‘beyond the human’ since we can only think in human terms. And if we can make sense of it, it will be sufficiently similar to the human world, in the relevant respects, as to make no difference.

not by affirming and revelling in their alienation from the world, as it did for Camus, but by overcoming it, partly by way of the dissolution of the dualisms which uphold such alienation. Both projects take seriously the notion of absurdity but it is clearly only the latter version of the concept which lends art any philosophical credibility. And whereas the latter project has its point of departure in the serious philosophical reflection which Camus proudly shunned, the former results more from the 'mood' or 'fashion' of the 'café existentialist' clad in a black polo-neck sweater,⁵⁶ perhaps best epitomized by his famous anti-hero.

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⁵⁶ For the notion of the 'café existentialist' see Cooper (1999), passim, especially, 2, 12, 96.